function. As a result, it is hardly surprising that a new generation of motion picture artists would become interested in confronting this tendency toward the miniaturization of sensual experience, that Castaing-Taylor and his SEL filmmaker colleagues would dedicate themselves to the production of motion picture experiences that evoke the power and fascinations of the sensory world.

Nevertheless, Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel’s Leviathan (2012) is surprising—its immersion of its audience within the audio-visual surround created from the filmmakers’ experiences on fishing boats shipping out of New Bedford, Massachusetts, feels not only overwhelming, but quite new in the annals of modern theatrical cinema. While the film’s title seems to be a reference to the biblical leviathan (the film’s opening quotations from the Book of Job confirm the biblical reference), the leviathan in Leviathan is the film itself. Made to be shown on the big screen with surround sound, Leviathan swallows us—regurgitating us out of the theater at the end of 90 minutes, exhausted and happy to have lived through what is as close to a sensory trauma as any documentary in recent memory.

Of course, there are precedents for Leviathan. The nineteenth-century maritime paintings of Winslow Homer and J.M.W. Turner, for example, and on a different register, the action painting of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning: Castaing-Taylor-Paravel’s digital cameras-in-motion seem at least as close an approximation to the procedures of action painting as Stan Brakhage’s gestural 16mm filming of the late 1950s, which has often been compared with the action painters’ gestural brushwork. There are cinematic precedents as well, including Georges Franju’s Le Sang des bêtes (The Blood of the Beasts, 1949), as well as Stan Brakhage’s The Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes (1971), which is regularly shown to Sensory Ethnography Lab students, and Robert Gardner’s Forest of Bliss (1986).

What will most powerfully strike most viewers of Leviathan is the soundscape of the film, designed first by Ernst Karel, then re-engineered by Hollywood sound designer Jacob Richey (The Wrestler, Revolutionary Road). In Leviathan, as in most of the films to come out of the Sensory Ethnography Lab, sound comes before image and has sensory impact at least as powerful and complex as the imagery. In this case, the near-deafening noise of the fishing boat and of the processing of the fish and shellfish creates an aural “nest” within which human speech can rarely be made out. If the film’s spectacular imagery completes the experience of the film, it does not deflect attention from the sound. Even as we sometimes struggle to see what we’re seeing and to understand how it fits within the daily round of the fishing boats, we continue to struggle, as the filmmakers must have, to become accustomed to the din of the industrial process of harvesting the ocean.

The endless motion of the boat, buffeted by waves and wind, is continually visceral: severed fish heads float toward us, then away, toward us, then away; the view out the side of the boat reveals a nearly black ocean—much of Leviathan was shot
at night—that seems to move one way as boat and camera roll another and as the inevitable flock of seagulls floats above the fray, waiting for fish scraps to be washed overboard. Often, we are (literally) immersed in the film, as the camera (thanks to some modifications by Leonard Retel Helmrich) reveals what’s going on around the boat under the surface of the sea. Throughout Leviathan, the intense demands of the dangerous work being done on these boats—some of the most dangerous work on the planet—and the stamina and skill of the men who are dedicated to it are obvious. Throughout Leviathan we are experiencing not only the labor of the fishermen, but the labor of the filmmakers themselves, from inside their experience as we feel rocked to and fro, continually astonished that the theatrical experience of documentary cinema, even after more than a century, can still powerfully reinvigorate our awareness of the sensory world.

Earlier in this study, I described what I called the “occupational hazard” of personal documentary—the fact that as family dynamics change, a personal documentary filmmaker can find that what was once an admired and appreciated film has become a familial problem. Ethnographic filmmaking, too, has its occupational hazards. What may at one time have seemed obvious to ethnographic filmmakers: about a cultural group, that is, what they assumed was “true” or important according to their understanding of then-current anthropological research, has often been rendered misguided and false by subsequent research. Indeed, decisions that may have been made with the best intentions—for example, John Marshall's deciding for his first major film, The Hunters, to portray the !Kung San as an isolated communal band of hunters, noble and peaceful, a people with much to teach us—have often come to seem, even to the filmmakers themselves, a myopic romanticizing of history that ignored the broader realities of that moment. In a sense, a fictional film is freed from the need to be accurate, but a documentary, especially an ethnographic documentary (to be ethnographic) must be true to its subject—and yet this is virtually impossible because both the filmmakers and those depicted are in continual transformation (the presence of the filmmaking itself is evidence of this).

However, even if we were to agree that Marshall, Gardner, and Asch often didn’t “get it right” in anthropological terms, that they sometimes substituted their own romantic assumptions for what now seems reality, there seems little question that their initial motivations, at least those they were conscious of, were decent and humane, and that their willingness to devote themselves to observing and recording ways of life distant from their own, even if this meant putting themselves in harm’s way, and to make these ways of life familiar to others, is evidence of a deep commitment both to a broader understanding of human experience and to an expanded vision of what is possible for cinema. Further, their very failures to recognize that their envisioning of others was largely a projection of themselves allows their films to function for us in a new way—as emblems not of the Truth of other cultures, but of the complex realities of limited, fallible human beings working to understand each other. If ethnographic film has often been more about the filmmakers than their subjects, then ethnographic film becomes, if not another form of personal documentary, at least another form of personal expression. And the experiences of these films, like the experiences of any other form of personal expression, can continue to be fascinating and valuable—just in different ways within a new context.

The Sensory Ethnography Lab and the films coming out of it have built on the experiences of an earlier generation. Do the SEL filmmakers “get it right”? Inevitably, as time passes, we will learn more about the realities surrounding the experiences they document, realities that may, probably will, throw the apparent assumptions and implicit conclusions of their films into question. But this is inevitable for anyone searching for Truth or even just truth. The alternative, to not care about reality, is hardly to be preferred, and in any case, modern film history is deluged with big-budget fictional fantasies, made by men and women with little concern for anything but enhancing the financial bottom line by feeding viewers the most obvious and dangerous clichés about “us” and “them.” Whatever their failures, the SEL filmmakers working (as Marshall, Gardner, and Asch themselves did) to learn, as best they can, from their cinematic forebears’ successes and mistakes, and from their own, are at least willing to invest themselves in “getting it right” in their filmmaking, and often at considerable personal sacrifice. If they are doomed by the continuing transformations of culture and knowledge to fail, there is, as Faulkner might say, a “splendor” in their failures. And by taking account of these failures, they and we will learn from what they did achieve both as observers of human experience and as filmmakers.