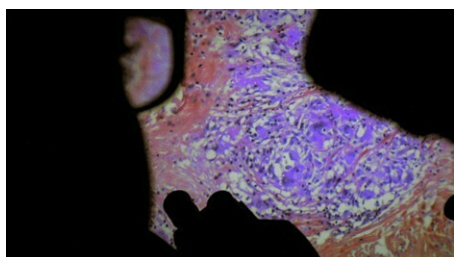


Bodies to Explore: 60th New York Film Festival

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Screened at the 2022 New York Film Festival, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* is a cinematic exploration not only of the human body during surgery, but also of hospital culture at all its levels. Unsurprisingly this visceral as well as institutional film, suspended between the experimental and the documentary, comes from a brilliant pair of anthropologists, artists and film-makers: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel.

These two filmmakers are currently affiliated with the Sensory Ethnographic Lab at Harvard University. As the name of this research program suggests, the sensorial or the embodied dimension is considered to be a privileged area of reflection. In other words, Lucien Castaing-Taylor is the director of a film-making laboratory with the stated agenda to explore animate and inanimate, natural and industrial realms that escape the rationalizations of language.

Born in Liverpool, UK, in 1966, Lucien Castaing-Taylor started his anthropological career as a video-artist and photographer. His co-author, Verena Paravel, was born in 1971 in Neuchatel, Switzerland. She started working with Castaing-Taylor in 2012 for their joint project *Leviathan*. The latter is a groundbreaking piece about the fishing industry in Bedford, Mass., New England, which is also the town of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. The object of wide critical approval, the experimental and ethnographic film *Leviathan*, launched Lucien and Verena into international fame, because they used a new type of technology: tiny, waterproof cameras that can be placed on people, animals and objects to capture natural sounds and visceral images.

In order to shoot *Leviathan*, the co-authors spent plenty of time on a fishing boat at sea. The experience was so raw that Verena Paravel got seriously sea-sick and ended in the Bedford Hospital's emergency room six times.

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The recipient of many awards, this film generated an amazing amount of interest in the world of documentary. This happened because its ubiquitous micro-cameras gave sounds and images to abstract textures and surfaces which simultaneously acquired the tactile density of daily life.

While they were sailing, the film-makers would improvise and share their cameras, food, and daily routine with the working professional fishermen in the same boat. The overall look of this film turned out to be quite surreal and hallucinatory rather than realistic and informational. As a result these two film-makers can be praised for having turned inside out the aesthetic rules of the objective mode in the traditional documentary.

Whereas *Leviathan* veers more towards the abstract rather than the informational, their most recent film *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, combines the experimental with the observational, the visceral with the institutional in a much more balanced and pre-meditated manner. Its subject matter is the French hospital system. The choice to go to Europe to film this kind of topic was a decision of creative survival. In fact, Castaing-Taylor and Paravel were unable to find an American institution that would allow them enough creative freedom. Boggled down by the possibility of law-suits and the demands of insurance companies, the corporate orientation of American hospitals proved impossible to manage for the two film-makers.

Luckily, thanks to Doctor Francois Cremieux, who was in charge of five hospitals in the North of Paris, Lucien and Verena were able to explore how contemporary medicine has appropriated cinematic resources for some surgical procedures. For example, one can say that both surgical film-making and medical surgery equally rely on endoscopy. This word means that it has become possible to travel inside the human body through an optical tube with a system of illumination and a video camera capable of sending its images to an external screen. For doctors and filmmakers alike, surgical endoscopies mutate themselves into a form of visceral ethnography. The body becomes their shared unexplored continent.

Less invasive than traditional surgery, endoscopy replaces the knife with a prong and makes possible a more intimate version of the surgical film. Until recently, this genre was limited to the amplifying power of the close-up and the illustrative force of the microscope. Needless to say, the close-up and the microscope are the other side of the aerial view with its miniaturization of earth-bound objects. These switches at the level of scale profoundly define the peculiarities of Castaing-Taylor's and Paravel's moving image. Their work, in turn, requires a way of looking completely disinterested in sexuality, namely an approach keener on optical possibilities rather than erotic ones.

For Castaing-Taylor and Paravel, endoscopy enables a journey inside hidden corporeal cavities the human eye by itself cannot see. Yet *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* is way more than just a surgical ethnography. As the title suggests, both the body and the hospital are "fabrica," that is, they are both fabrics of well-being and disease alike.

Beyond its title, in *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, the real protagonist is neither a corporeal nor an institutional mechanism, but the intangible and revitalizing power of human interactions in extreme and unresolvable situations. This vitalistic dimension against all odds emerges during one special sequence set in a psychiatric ward. There one patient warns his male nurse that he plans to leave the premises. The ways in which the male nurse interacts with his patient's rebellious intentions is performative rather than punitive. This is the case because the whole sequence shot in real time with a stationary camera. The final result generates a quasi-comedic register without ever becoming condescending or humiliating.

Another sequence worth mentioning has to do with attendants working in the bowel of a hospital and pushing trolleys of corpses through a labyrinth of corridors painted with colorful graffiti. Inasmuch as these morgue practitioners understand the depressing nature of their jobs, they do so with a profound sense of respect for their clients. Thus any foot or hand sticking outside the cover of a white sheet is gently pushed back into privacy. Meanwhile, all the whiteness and greyness of death balances itself out thanks the revitalizing primary colors displayed on the corridors' walls. This intersection of silent bodies with loud chromatism celebrates a creative imagination which is life-affirming.

In the wake of *Leviathan* which engaged with team-work on a boat, Lucien's and Verena's latest film examines the architectures of hospital buildings and the specialized areas of hospital labor in relation to each other. The surgeons are as important as the patients. This egalitarian approach is confirmed by their film's central

sequence, a roof-top champagne party of all the hospital employees. The roof party of the hospital employees stands out as the only sequence en-plein-air in a subterranean world.

The point of view offered by this film is that everybody is as important as everybody else in the world of the hospital, because whether the patient is dead or alive, each single individual is worthy of the utmost care. Castaing-Taylor's and Paravel's overall emphasis is not on language, but on a sort of tactile compassion which language cannot express. The labour that goes on in the morgue is neither ritualistic nor theatrical. Rather it amounts to a series of intimate operations among strangers. *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* exemplifies an intriguing neo-humanist dimension in our highly compartmentalized and technological society where human contact becomes more and more frail and rare.