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Mock-Doc Pedagogy and the Ethnographic Unconscious: Ben Rivers' *Slow Action*

Abstract

This essay, by concentrating on the subgenre of fake ethnographic documentaries, asks how these films both do and undo the work of their supposedly legitimate counterparts. The primary focus of this paper is *Slow Action*, a 2011 film project directed by Ben Rivers that uses its disjuncture between sound and image to raise critical questions about viewers' assumptions about documentary authority, particularly as this authority is used to construct Otherness. The mock documentary viewing experience, which, crucially, must also appear to function as a legitimate documentary, is singled out here as a mode that primes viewers to recognize that visible evidence might not be as reliable as it first appears.

In one of the fake ethnographic film *Slow Action's* (2011) four segments, the matter-of-fact narrator begins his description of the island of Somerset by stating, "It is perhaps unusual to consider a civilization whose stone boulevards are lined with drains for the easy dispersal of blood a utopia, but the curator solicits such status for this island." As the voiceover offers this attention-grabbing proposition of moral relativism, we are faced with subtly menacing images of figures who don handmade masks as they trudge through forested landscapes. If the descriptor "primitive" applies to anyone, surely it is these people. The montage continues as these figures engage in simple rituals and pose stoically in front of the camera. The narration's clinical tone suggests rigor typical of ethnographic documentaries that we might have seen before, but details soon emerge that begin to test the narrator's interpretation of events: some of these supposedly primitive people wield weapons that have been fashioned from mass-produced garden tools; others wear blue jeans under their handmade garb. Even viewers who know nothing about *Slow Action's* production will quickly come to recognize that it does not pretend to be an impartial

scientific document like those films it mimics. Still, while watching this film, one wonders about the impetus behind its creation and why it presents its observations as real when they clearly are not. This essay grapples with the dissonant viewing experience created by *Slow Action*, analyzing why the film remains a point of fascination despite its blatant falsifications and considering its complex relationship to the ethnographic documentaries that it emulates.

Director Ben Rivers describes *Slow Action* as "a post-apocalyptic science fiction film that brings together a series of four 16mm works which exist somewhere between documentary, ethnographic study and fiction."¹ These segments offer four ethnographic accounts of futuristic imagined societies, supposedly isolated on far-flung islands due to rising sea levels. *Slow Action*, although patently a fabrication, adheres closely to many of the conventions of anthropological filmmaking, incorporating scientific narration and an emphasis on experiential observation over narrative. As such, while watching Rivers' film, one cannot dismiss it entirely as fiction. The film presents documentary elements and fictive elements simultaneously,

leaving viewers to determine which of its many truth claims can be trusted. Through analyzing *Slow Action*, one gains an intensified understanding of the ways that even supposedly “real” documentary films fabricate reality. Rivers’ world-building willingly disregards actual reality, yet it refuses to give up documentary realism in the process. In some very fundamental ways, Rivers’ work still stimulates what Bill Nichols has called viewers’ “epistophilia,” or their desire to acquire knowledge from what they see in a documentary film.² I argue that, in viewing *Slow Action* while being aware of its contrivances, one comes to better understand the rhetorical methods of all ethnographic documentaries, whether those films are seen as “real” or “fake.”

Slow Action and the other mock documentaries discussed in this essay are extremely complex filmic texts that lend themselves to in-depth explorations of heavily contested issues, such as the nature of screen realism or the ethics of ethnographic representation.³ I focus my argument along three lines. First, my analysis of *Slow Action* underscores how the defamiliarizing tactics of mock documentaries can train us to be more adept viewers of all documentary films. Second, I pinpoint the challenges that these films represent to the truth claims of ethnographic documentary (a genre with a problematic past of its own), arguing that the genre actively constructs and perpetuates notions of difference rather than documenting objective reality. Finally, by grappling with *Slow Action*’s ability to give us epistophilic pleasure even after we come to recognize its falseness, I draw attention to the latent desires that attract viewers to ethnographic documentaries in the first place.

The *Slow Action* Project

Despite *Slow Action*’s futuristic setting, the degraded 16mm film stock used by Rivers and the studied, authoritative speaking style of the segments’ narrators recall ethnographic films made during the first few decades of sound cinema. As a result, the series feels more like an assemblage of found footage than a contemporary fictive creation. As these four accounts (each about eleven minutes in length) unfold, we are given information supposedly aggregated from anthropological accounts in “The Great Encyclopedia,” as the four

narrating interlocutors refer to this fictional, shared source. Alongside the non-narrative montage of images that has been assembled, the narrators parse out trivia about the climates and coordinates of each island as well as details about the cultures that supposedly populate them.

Each of the indigenous cultures on these imagined islands could be understood to present an exaggeration of a preexisting ethnographic stereotype, and each island seems to exist suspended out of time, perched precariously between prehistory and a post-apocalyptic future. The unseen citizens of the island Eleven (filmed in the Canary Islands) embody a fantasy of scientific understanding. We are told that Elevenians embrace mathematics as their culture’s guiding principle, understand the universe as a collection of holograms that enable disembodied interstellar gazing, and communicate to one another through equations. When the camera shifts to Hiva (shot on the Pacific island of Tuvalu), we do glimpse some fleeting looks at indigenous figures, but they fail to match the narrator’s description of the Hivan people being of “dark green color, splendidly formed, with handsome, regular features, their average height about two meters.” Their culture’s narrative indulges in the ethnographic tendency to romanticize the exotic. Hivan culture is described as “novelistic” and is reportedly defined by narrative, as we find from the thick descriptions given by the commentator of pilgrimages and elaborate rituals. An honorable Hivan death, we are told, is suicide, as it allows a citizen to dictate his or her life’s story. Throughout the segment, as the narrator details the elaborate social configurations on the island and its “unfathomable” natural beauty, we are shown images of Taluvan squalor that undercut such claims.

The other two episodes of *Slow Action* unfold in a similarly contradictory fashion. Kanzennashima’s lone inhabitant, never shown onscreen, is a madman, lost among the ruins of a vanished society (the segment was actually filmed on Gunkanjima – an abandoned island off the coast of Nagasaki, Japan). If this chapter perpetuates an ethnographic trope, it is an assumption of total Otherness, utterly incomprehensible to the outsider. Finally, the island of Somerset (filmed in the British county of the same name) embodies the anthropologist’s projection of violent primitivism. As we are shown the citizens of this society (actually British actors donning

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masks) performing crude actions, such as building fires (Fig. 1), holding rituals and sharpening simple tools, we are told gory tales of their cannibalism and violent conquests.

The *Slow Action* project was envisioned by Rivers as a homage, of sorts, to British naturalist Charles Darwin and was undertaken on the bicentennial of his birth.⁴ The work's title borrows a phrase used by Darwin to describe the gradual process of natural selection, and the film's theme of geographic isolation leading to characteristic difference recalls Darwin's own work, as he made his most famous observations on the isolated Galapagos Islands. Beyond this reference, the film's post-apocalyptic setting, in which the seas have risen enough to isolate populations, realizes the nightmare of climate change. Despite such scientific allusions, though, the mood evoked by *Slow Action* is complex, vaguely melancholy, and surprisingly emotional.

Slow Action walks a fine line between the documentary mode and speculative science fiction at all times, only occasionally making itself utterly apparent as a fabrication. Moments of revelation, such as when the viewer spots the aforementioned blue jeans on natives, crop up from time to time. Other such instances include the appearance of crude special effects that depict holograms that only the highly-evolved citizens of Eleven are able to perceive and the narrators' occasional lapses into deadpan humor, but these moments are out of character with the film's overall tone. The bulk of time spent watching *Slow Action*, then, qualifies as a documentary experience. Part of this feeling comes from the fact that, although Rivers is not depicting the spaces that his narrators describe, he is still depicting precisely the kinds of exotic locales that might serve as settings for genuine ethnographic films. Even once we learn that the accounts of these people have been faked, our epistemic desire continues to be stoked by Rivers' use of real landscapes and non-fiction footage. If this is a fiction film, it is one designed to remain open to the same elements of chance that enliven documentary films.

The disjuncture between *Slow Action*'s narration and images never is resolved. Due to this, the narration is not privileged over the film's imagery, with each emerging as an equally



Fig. 1: Production still from *Slow Action*. Director Ben Rivers films a group of British actors for the film's "Somerset" segment.

implausible account of life on the Islands. Rivers' description of his working method encourages such dual interpretations. After aborting an idea to remix existing ethnographic recordings to provide *Slow Action*'s narration, Rivers commissioned science fiction novelist Mark von Schlegel to write the ethnographic narration for the film. Significantly, *Slow Action* was shot by Rivers independently of von Schlegel's writing. The director did not receive a script until his footage had been shot and Schlegel did not see any of the film's images until he had completed his screenwriting process.⁵ The result is a work that lacks coherence, by design.

Given *Slow Action*'s blatant use of fictive elements, it might be argued that to compare the film to documentary works is misguided. Rivers himself alternatively classifies *Slow Action* as a science fiction film and as an experimental work. The futuristic setting, use of special effects, and repurposing of sound effects cribbed from apocalyptic science fiction films (e.g. *Phase IV* [Saul Bass, 1974], *The Seed of Man* [Marco Ferreri, 1969]) render it an entry in the science fiction genre,⁶ while its exhibition strategies do make it legible as experimental cinema. Rivers' original exhibition of the project involved an installation in which the four segments of the film were projected simultaneously across four screens at Picture This, a Bristol exhibition space and artists' studio.

Nevertheless, the presence of documentary elements in the film and its deep indulgence in ethnographic tropes suggest that the film is understandable primarily as a documentary. This feeling is intensified by *Slow Action*'s DVD version,

which includes a pre-title montage of archival ethnographic photos, filmed in extreme close-up. Presented in this manner, the grotesque qualities of the photographs are emphasized, as proximity makes the faces depicted in them appear even more alien than their creators presumably intended. Similarly, this montage calls attention to the constructedness of these images. Due to the tight framing used to re-photograph these images, pixels are visible on the photographic prints, and it becomes obvious that these images are not from “raw” footage, but are instead the result of a mediating process. This montage most explicitly reveals *Slow Action* as a self-reflexive documentary about ethnographic process that nevertheless uses ethnographic process to make its claims.

The Ethnics of Ethnography

The mock documentary only attains coherence as a genre because “real” documentary filmmaking uses a consistent, coded discourse to communicate meaning. As Alexandra Juhasz writes, by corralling the familiar tropes and styles of documentary filmmaking, the fake documentary is able to “acquire its associated content (the moral and social) and associated feelings (belief, trust, authenticity) to create a documentary experience defined by their antithesis, self-conscious distance.”⁷ Crucially, these films are copies of documentaries in many respects, but are not intended to pass as documentaries. They aim, ultimately, for self-conscious distance from the viewer, which is to say that they require viewers to become aware of fakery. The moment when the ersatz reality collapses, when the seemingly “real” documentary becomes recognized as a fake, does not undermine the fake documentary. We still undergo a “documentary experience” after its fakeness is exposed. At the same time, by setting itself apart from real documentary, the fake documentary is positioned to challenge the legitimacy of the borrowed codes and systems of authority of the documentary genre. This moment might not occur at the same time for all viewers, since, as Vivian Sobchack reminds us, “a ‘documentary’ is not a thing, but a subjective relationship to a cinematic object. It is the viewer’s consciousness that finally determines what kind of cinematic object it is.”⁸ Nevertheless, for the fake documentary to work

as critique, whether to serve parodic ends or to question documentary epistemologies, the viewers must become aware that the film they are watching is a canard. This heightened awareness that the mock documentary inspires is not a failure of insufficient trickery, then, but rather an intended effect, designed to promote understanding, which is gained at the expense of “real” documentaries.

Mock documentaries therefore simultaneously execute the documentary form and dismantle it. Frequently, this approach is used to humorous effect, but it would be a mistake to assume that all mock documentaries are intended to function strictly as parody. The experience of watching a fake ethnographic documentary, which is to say the experience of being taken in by the codes of ethnographic film and then later betrayed by them, can serve as a learning experience. In the case of ethnographic documentaries and the films that mimic them, the stakes of realism are especially fraught with ethical concerns, particularly involving how indigenous cultures are depicted. Accordingly, this pedagogical function and encouragement toward questioning can take on serious moral and political dimensions.

In suggesting that fake ethnographic films such as *Slow Action* can instruct viewers on how to interpret ethnographic films more productively, it must be made clear that this claim refers to the classical period of ethnographic film production. Specifically, this essay addresses the subset of ethnographic films that exists most vividly in the popular imagination, which is to say films that attempt to sum up the experience of a group for the viewer over the course of a few reels of film. Using rituals of dance, sacrifice, and religion to represent “typical” behaviors, these films, problematically, are intended to serve, as Fatimah Tobing Rony has suggested, as “a metonym for an entire culture.”⁹ A familiar critique about such films claims that they actively work against understanding of other cultures and ultimately serve to reinforce the culture of the ethnographer.¹⁰ While the field of visual anthropology eventually began to institute ethical guidelines for its filmmaking practitioners by the 1960s, *Slow Action* looks backward through cinema’s history, responding either to those films made before such interventions or to more recent films that share their anachronistic, Anglo-centric

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mindset.

While cinema from its earliest days has been idealized by some anthropologists as having an ability to capture truth, to show people as they actually are and free from the distortions inherent in the ethnographer's accounts¹¹, such claims seem naïve in contemporary times. Still, there remains something inherently captivating about watching an ethnographic recording of a group of people. As problematic as ethnographic depiction might be, it nevertheless often functions as spectacle.

This ambivalence that resides within the genre is explained partially by Bill Nichols, who critiques the underlying fantasies of the ethnographic genre by comparing them to the similarly problematic fantasies in the genre of pornography.¹² Despite ethnography's motions toward scientific rigor, Nichols argues that the ethnographic documentary, like pornography, becomes a site for masculine and heavily symbolic fantasies of possession. In Nichols' conception of the ethnographic film, the subject's filmed body inevitably becomes an objectified site of performance (most spectacularly through the performance of ritual), while differences among studied cultures are ultimately homogenized in the service of the anthropologists' scientific aims. This transformation of the subject into object functions much in the same way that women become the locus of male desire in heterosexual pornography. Ethnography, Nichols argues, consistently turns its ostensibly unique subjects into the objects seen from a consistently male, Westernized, normative point of view. Ethnography becomes "an essential tool for the anthropologist who hopes to tell us something about ourselves by telling us about a more *savage* version of ourselves."¹³ The subjects of ethnographic films are made participants in an unequal encounter, wherein one of the participants inevitably has the final say in describing what has transpired. *Slow Action* redirects this process of exploitation, undermining the audience's capacity to possess by presenting viewers with self-contradicting fictions that escape the ordered containment that comes with the creation of scientific knowledge.

The epistemic urge, or the viewer's desire to know, is constantly satiated by the anthropologist's implied authority in the ethnographic film. Viewers of these works are made privy to spectacles of difference that are presented as "typical" of the

indigenous subjects. Alongside the exhibition of the "strange" people caught on film comes the sense that we can quickly come to know and understand them, as their actions are handily explained through the rhetoric of scientific observation. The affectless narration of the classical ethnographic narrator in the face of nudity, violence, sexualized ritual, or unknowable custom has a taming effect that suggests the production of rationality and knowledge in the face of Otherness. As Trinh T. Minh-ha explains, this process also works to validate the professional expertise of foreign anthropologists above even the observations of the native observer. She writes:

[O]bviously, in the process of fixing meaning, not every explanation is valid. This is where the role of the expert anthropologist comes in and where methodologies need to be devised, legitimated, and enforced. For, if a nonprofessional explanation is dismissed here, it is not because it lacks insight or theoretical grounding, as because it escapes anthropological control [...]. In the name of science, a distinction is made between reliable and nonreliable information. Anthropological and nonanthropological explanations may share the same subject matter, but they differ in the way they produce meaning.¹⁴

Furthermore, just as pornography emphasizes the most visible dimensions of erotic experience, ethnographic film tends to stress the most cinematically accessible dimensions of a studied culture, privileging the visual in a way that the cultures being observed might not. If the ethnographic film is generator of false authority, then, *Slow Action* toys with that authority, twisting it into a critique of the machine itself.

Slow Action's Predecessors

Rivers' experiment in *Slow Action* raises unique questions about the relationship between ethnography and fiction, but his approach is not entirely unprecedented. Indeed, the director has gone on the record acknowledging his debt to

Werner Herzog and Luis Buñuel in particular.¹⁵ Herzog's *Fata Morgana* (1971) perhaps served as Rivers' prime influence. Like *Slow Action*, *Fata Morgana* uses documentary images to visualize its fictional story. Herzog's initial plan for the film was to present its images of the Sahara Desert as alien landscapes, exaggerating the sense that an ethnographic encounter is an encounter with someone from another world.¹⁶ Rivers' use of narrators in *Slow Action* also finds its inspiration in Herzog's film: whereas *Fata Morgana* features film scholar Lotte Eisner as narrator, Rivers' work pays homage by employing another female film scholar, Ilona Halberstadt, as one of his commentators.¹⁷ While the finished version of *Fata Morgana* emphasizes the creation of despairing cinematic atmosphere over ethnographic research or fictional narrative, Rivers' project nevertheless registers as a fulfillment of Herzog's original intent in its fusion of fantasy and anthropology.

Luis Buñuel's landmark film *Land Without Bread* (1932) is another work cited by Rivers in interviews as a working model, of sorts. Like *Slow Action*, it adheres closely to the ethnographic mode of filmmaking and similarly uses voiceover narration to undercut documentary authority. In Buñuel's film, text and image frequently contradict one another, casting doubt upon visible evidence that supposedly depicts the suffering of the impoverished Hurdano people. As the film unfolds, Buñuel's bleak and hyperbolic narrational claims become more obviously false, stating, for example, that a haggard old woman is only 32 (Fig. 2) or that a child seen lying in the street is not only sick but has been abandoned there to die (this outrageous instance of neglect is later contradicted by the depiction of another child's well-attended funeral). The film becomes both an instructive lesson in questioning documentary authority and a testament to our desire to believe primitivist myths about foreign cultures.

Buñuel's arousal of skepticism is echoed in some of the most explicit lessons of *Slow Action*. Catherine Russell classifies *Land Without Bread* as an "open" modernist text due to its contrapuntal use of soundtrack and its general disregard for the rules of continuity editing.¹⁸ *Slow Action*, too, formally eschews the narrow interpretative space of classical ethnographic film, enabling audiences to test the



Fig. 2: Subtitled still from *Land Without Bread*. The subtitle, which transcribes the voiceover narration, describes a woman who appears to be much older in a move that is typical of the film's disconnect between soundtrack and image.

competing truth claims of sound and image against one another. *Land Without Bread* also stands as an example of the underappreciated links between ethnography and surrealism observed by James Clifford. He notes that each engages in "a continuous play between the familiar and the strange."¹⁹ Ethnography, Clifford argues, works to render the strange familiar while the surrealist project does the opposite, rendering the familiar strange. By layering fictive elements into a documentary presentation, *Land Without Bread* and *Slow Action* both work to defamiliarize the ethnographic approach, undoing its pretense of knowledge creation. This maneuver to emphasize ethnographic fantasy would not succeed, however, were the ethnographic genre not already imbued with fantastic elements. Rivers and Buñuel each exploit the documentary audience's tendency to map desires onto the subjects of ethnography, suggesting that ethnography shows us more about ourselves than about its ostensible subjects.

Nichols writes that documentary's "expository mode emphasizes the impression of objectivity and of well-substantiated judgment,"²⁰ but these films ask us to question both the objectivity possible in documentary filmmaking and the value judgments of narrators. The disjunctive effect between image and sound in *Land Without Bread* is so pronounced that it has reportedly prompted some viewers to dismiss the film's score and expository commentary as choices imposed by a distributor, rather than Buñuel himself.²¹ Indeed, the existence of alternative edits

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and voiceovers of mock-documentary works such as *Haxan: Witchcraft Through the Ages* (Benjamin Christensen, 1922, re-edited in 1968) and *Goodbye Uncle Tom* (Gualtiero Jacopetti & Franco Prosperi, 1971, re-edited for American release in 1972), would support this otherwise false suspicion in audiences. At the same time, however, such alternative tracks reinforce the notion that all documentary voiceover, no matter how clinical in its approach, is indeed the product of subjective interpretation and subject to revision.

Mock Documentary Pedagogy

It is less important to classify *Slow Action* definitively (indeed, it seems to be many things at once) than to explore what it can teach us about documentary filmmaking convention and reception. To understand *Slow Action*, as with any fake documentary, awareness of the ruse is necessary. In assuming a level of sophistication in viewers that will allow them to detect the filmmaker's fakery, the film becomes an open text, as opposed to a top-down information dump that implies a hierarchy of power between filmmakers and viewers. Indeed, by cultivating self-awareness in viewers by situating themselves within a larger discourse of knowledge creation, films like *Slow Action* invite audiences to not only consider filmic images critically, but also to use the images as test cases against which the world can be judged. The self-aware viewer is therefore primed to judge not only diegetic veracity, but also the ways in which representations in a film connect to social reality. By presenting audiences with interpretations that they will likely find objectionable, fake ethnographies undermine a discursive strategy that often goes unquestioned in traditional ethnographies.

This ability to make us question the authority of the filmmaker is especially potent when considered in relation to the ethnographic genre. In her book *The Third Eye*, Rony offers a postcolonial critique of anthropological films, observing that the comparative "Otherness" that lends meaning to ethnography comes only through a process of eradicating or masking the power that colonizing nations exert upon indigenous cultures. This atemporal process freezes subjects in time and social context, much like Rivers does, suggesting that

they simply existed as the filmmaker found them, always awaiting documentation. This objectionable move is similar to the work of Direct Cinema practitioners who suggest that their presence in a situation has no effect upon the subjects that they observe.²² In Rony's formulation the influence of colonizers (and not just the filmmakers themselves) is edited away in hopes of creating the appearance of a cultural subject untainted by the presence of outsiders. *Slow Action* could be viewed as a post-colonial corrective to such a genre. By stressing the falsifications of the ethnographic genre, Rivers calls into question its tendency to present its biased observations as scientific truth. In Rivers' film, his narrators have not witnessed life on the studied islands firsthand, but rather only report back what the unnamed "correspondents" have written about life on the island. Authority therefore rests behind an additional level of mediation, which helps to explain the frequent discrepancies between the accounts of the correspondents and the images that we are shown.

In a move consistent with Rivers' post-colonial politics, *Slow Action's* Somerset segment features the most "primitive" inhabitants. Rather than use unwitting foreigners to reenact fantasies of primitivism and control, Rivers strategically employs local actors to act out the part in his ethnographic farce. In interviews, Rivers is quite clear that, when depicting people of other cultures, he does not strive to suggest that their representations are in any way typical of reality. He says, "The films I make use observational elements often. [...] I'm going to actual places and filming real live people going about their business, but I never think of [my films] as documentaries. I think of them more as fictions. I'm creating worlds for the film that exist just for the film."²³ Unlike *Land Without Bread*, or even the series of *Mondo* mockumentaries produced by Italian filmmakers mostly during the 1960s, *Slow Action* suggests Rivers' heightened awareness of the ethical quandaries that can result from negative representations of native cultures. Whereas those films used stereotypes freely to make their parodic or opportunistic points, Rivers' film is more scrupulous. Two of its four segments do not feature people at all. Ethnography, when presented largely through landscapes, removes the pornographic element that so troubled Nichols. Recognizing

that his film cannot capture the complexities of the world, Rivers strives in *Slow Action* to find a mode of representation that turns hermeticism into an asset.

Finally, in presenting *Slow Action* as an impossible document, one that documents a future time, the film's temporal structure calls into question the assumption that documentary filmmaking can function historiographically at all. By proposing that a film can document the future, Rivers forces us to consider the degree to which documentary films can be expected to record the past accurately. Although *Slow Action* might initially appear to be something of an anachronism itself by responding to an ethnographic mindset that is half a century old, many of the issues outlined in this section concern not just an outdated ethnographic mode, but documentary filmmaking as a whole.

Conclusion

This essay questions what watching fake ethnographies can teach us about watching documentaries in general. By staging ethnographic fantasies and then revealing them as false, *Slow Action* has the potential to undo some of the ethically

dubious work that the genre has done in the name of science. As Rivers' truth claims are recognized as false, he seeds healthy skepticism toward ethnographic methods in his audience. Cinematic realism, which has previously been employed as a colonialist tool to reshape reality, is shifted here to animate Rivers' science fiction fantasy and lay bare the hollowness of the ethnographic fantasies that his narratives hyperbolically reenact. At the same time, by remaining a source of attraction in its own right, even once viewers recognize it as a fiction, *Slow Action* makes it clear that our attraction to ethnographic filmmaking extends beyond epistemic desires of possession and into the realms of fantasy.

While writing of the linkages between psychoanalysis and knowledge production, Michael Renov suggests that behind knowledge "lies something completely different from itself: the play of instincts, impulses, desires, fear, and the will to appropriate."²⁴ By substituting fakery for the conventional satisfaction of our epistemic desires, *Slow Action* plays out along these sensual, unconscious, and altogether less-studied axes of documentary reception.

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Notes

1 Ben Rivers, Ben Rivers.com, 24 June, 2013.

2 Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd Ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 4.

3 Significant recent contributions to the literature regarding these issues include David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), and Anna Grimshaw, *The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

4 The work follows Rivers' 2008 short, *The Origin of the Species*, named after Darwin's most renowned text.

5 "Ben Rivers Interview at Picture This," YouTube.com, accessed 24 June, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wng4jk_vXns/.

6 Ibid.

7 Alexandra Juhasz, "Phony Definitions," in *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing*, eds. Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 7.

8 Vivian Sobchack, "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 251.

9 Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 7.

10 Beyond Rony's work, similar critiques can be found in books such as Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) and David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

11 For an extended discussion of photography and early cinema's role in the establishing ethnographic authority, see Alison

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Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

12 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 225.

13 *Ibid.*, 218.

14 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 103.

15 Michael Sicinski, "Listen to Britain: On the Outskirts with Ben Rivers," *Cinema Scope* 43 (2010): 22-26.

16 Paul Cronin and Werner Herzog, *Herzog on Herzog* (London: Farber and Farber, 2002), 47.

17 "Ben Rivers Interview at Picture This."

18 Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 34.

19 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 121.

20 Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 35.

21 *Ibid.*, 72.

22 For example, D.A. Pennebaker, in a 1971 interview, stated, "It is possible to go to a situation and simply film what you see there, what happens there, what goes on... And what's a film? It is just a window someone peeps through." Quoted in G. Roy Levin, *Documentary Explorations: 15 Interviews With Film-Makers* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 254.

23 Interview: Ben Rivers, 25 FPS, Vimeo.com, accessed June 24, 2013, <http://vimeo.com/29777686/>.

24 Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 99.