

AESTHETIC CATEGORIES

Analyzing documentary aesthetics helps us understand how reality is interpreted, content communicated, and how truth may be unpacked in any given film. Following are some categories that represent points along a continuum between aesthetic approaches either less constructed and less mediated, or more mediated and highly constructed.

- Empirical truth, which is observational, as epitomized by the films of Frederick Wiseman (see Chapter 3).
- Rational truth, which uses participatory-style interventions and may privilege language-based information (see Chapter 3).
- Poetic truth, where the visual and aural components of the film are stylized and a narrative is present but is not informational per se, as seen in *Hale County: This Morning, This Evening* (USA, 2018) (see Chapters 10, 18).
- Reconstructed truth, which uses the tools and techniques of fiction filmmaking to evoke truth, but which may raise the specter of false reality and undermine the sense of documentary truth (see Chapter 20).

A related criterion for understanding how a work's aesthetic approaches function to create meaning is the type and amount of exposition. *Leviathan* (USA/France/UK, 2012), mentioned in Chapter 10, was co-directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel as a hyper-realistic observational rendering of the activities on an Atlantic Ocean fishing boat. Each harrowing moment

passes with minimal contextualizing information. There is little sense of an authorial presence in the untethered, disembodied, out of control, canted images furnished by the tiny, wide-angled, waterproof GoPro action cameras clamped to the boat rigging, fishing gear, and even among fish flipping around the sorting table. Taking the viewer with them, the GoPros dive and sink into the dark ocean water, come up for air, arrive on the slippery deck of the boat, and occasionally come to rest on a stagnant image of fishermen in sea spray and fish-gut soaked raingear framed against harsh deck lights and the inky black night. The aesthetic quality does not produce the kind of meaning linked to language but rather to feeling states. The picture and its sync (or fake sync) sound and the many long takes and close-ups, re-contextualizes and makes strange the images to the degree that we cannot see them, antithetically, as anything but highly constructed. The result is a non-narrative experience about the grueling and dehumanizing world of work on a fishing boat. In a telling moment, a solitary crew member at a kitchen table below deck, fights sleep and dips tobacco while half-watching an off-screen television. We hear an episode of *The Deadliest Catch* (USA, 2015–), a popular and ongoing docuseries about crab fishing produced by the Discovery Channel in the style of unscripted reality television. Both the film we are watching and the show heard on the television deal with the trials of fishing and both are highly constructed, but in opposite ways—one uses documentary conventions and contextualizing language while the other is unconventional, relying on picture and sound composition to communicate the ancient experience of survival labor. The former suggests safety, comradery, and comfort, even against the backdrop of a dangerous and difficult job. The latter suggests isolation, sadness, dread, and meaninglessness.