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# *SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICES IN TURKEY: LIFE ON THEIR BACKS (2004) AND LAST SEASON SHAWAKS (2009)*

## *TÜRKİYE'DE DUYUSAL ETNOGRAFİK SİNEMA PRATİKLERİ: SIRTLARINDAKI HAYAT (2004) VE SON MEVSİM ŞAVAKLAR (2009)*

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**Abstract**
This article explores documentary film production in Turkey, focusing on sensory ethnographic cinema, an artistic approach that highlights local cultural practices through the lens of the body, senses, and emotions. While not explicitly categorized as sensory ethnography, certain Turkish documentaries such as *Life on Their Backs* (Yeşim Ustaoğlu, 2004) and *Last Season Shawaks* (Kazım Öz, 2009) embody similar artistic elements. By highlighting the key characteristics of these two films -such as immersing the audience in a 'being there' experience, their expansive views including non-human aspects, and their distinct regional focus- the article suggests that the geographical scope of sensory etnography extends beyond the works produced by the Sensory Ethnography Lab where this genre originated. Accordingly, the article conducts a comparative analysis of *Life on Their Backs*, *Last Season Shawaks*, and Sensory Ethnography Lab's *Sweetgrass* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash, 2009) within the theoretical frameworks of new materialism and actor-network theories.
**Keywords:** Actor-network theory, Kazım Öz, New Materialism, Sensory Ethnographic Film, Yeşim Ustaoğlu.

**Öz**
Bu makale yerel bir kültürün pratiklerini beden, duyu ve duygulara vurgu yaparak aktaran sanatsal bir biçim olan duyusal etnografik film kavramını Türkiye'deki belgesel sinema üretimi üzerinden incelemektedir. Kendilerini duyusal etnografik olarak tanımlamasalar da Türkiye'de üretilmiş Sırtlarındaki Hayat (Yeşim Ustaoğlu, 2004) ve Demsala Dawî Şewaxan (Son Mevsim Şavaklar, Kazım Öz, 2009) gibi bazı belgesel sinema örnekleri de benzer sanatsal eğilimler sergilemeleri bakımından bu kategoriye yakınlık gösterirler. Makale bu iki örneğin duyusal etnografik film kategorisine giren özelliklerini (seyircide oradaymış hissi uyandırmaları, insan-olmayanı da içeren geniş perspektifleri, belirli bir yerelliği ele alışları) incelemek yoluyla bu kategorinin coğrafi sınırlarının çıkış yaptığı Duyusal Etnografya Lab'ının üretimiyle sınırlı kalmadığını savunmaktadır. Bu amaçla, makale, Sırtlarındaki Hayat ve Demsala Dawî Şewaxan'ı, Duyusal Etnografi Lab'ında üretilmiş olan Sweetgrass (Lucien Castaing-Taylor ve Ilisa Barbash, 2009)'la beraber ele alır ve karşılaştırmalı olarak ve yeni maddecilik ve aktör-ağ teorilerinin teorik çerçevesinden yararlanarak analiz eder.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Aktör-ağ teorisi, Duyusal Etnografik Film, Kazım Öz, Yeni Maddecilik, Yeşim Ustaoğlu.

## INTRODUCTION

Kazım Öz's 2009 documentary film *Demsala Dawî Şewaxan* (*Last Season Shawaks*) begins and ends with two tales told at night in a village house. The tale that concludes the film recounts how a fox loses its tail to a grandmother while stealing milk. To reclaim its tail, the fox visits a goat, a mulberry tree, a fountain, the sultan's daughter, a shoemaker, a sackmaker, a chicken, and a haystack, exchanging various objects that they each demand from it. The scene intercuts the audio of the fairy tale over visuals of storytelling inside the house (which is explicitly fictional) with documentary footage of the villagers at work. Experimental and self-reflexive in its fusion of fiction and documentary, the scene connects the network of relationships among human and nonhuman beings in the tale with the everyday activities in the village, thereby incorporating some of the key concerns of sensory ethnographic film within just a few minutes.

This article examines the concept of sensory ethnographic film, which has emerged in the 2000s at Harvard University's Sensory Ethnography Lab as a form of art and experimental documentary, within the context of documentary film production in Turkey. Although they do not identify themselves as sensory ethnographic works (most probably due to the heretofore limited use of the term that exclusively applied to the SEL production), some Turkish documentary films, such as *Life on Their Backs* (*Sırtlarındaki Hayat*, Yeşim Ustaoğlu, 2004) and *Last Season Shawaks* (*Son Mevsim: Şavaklar*, Kazım Öz, 2009), show significant commonalities with this category. The article analyzes these films based on three features and concepts commonly found in sensory ethnographic works: 1. The films evoke in the audience a sense of sharing the same space and temporality as the filmic subjects. 2. Rather than maintaining a merely human-centric focus, these works adopt a broader perspective that not only includes but also gives equal footing to nonhuman elements. 3. They concentrate on specific localities while acknowledging the intricate web of relations between locality and universality. *Last Season Shawaks* portrays the Shawaks, a Kurdish community that alternates between villages in Dersim and homesteads in the Munzur Mountains. The film explores the lives and movements of this nomadic, pastoralist community throughout the changing seasons of the year. *Life on Their Backs* focuses on the Laz people, particularly the women, of a Black Sea village at the foot of the Kaçkar Mountains. It documents the daily lives of this community that migrates first to Komati and then to the Great Kaçkar plateau during the summer months.

Other works (co-)produced in Turkey such as *Phases of Matter* (*Maddenin Halleri*, Deniz Tortum, 2020), *Cat* (*Kedi*, Ceyda Torun, 2017), and *On the Way to School* (*İki Dil Bir Bavul*, Orhan Eskiköy and Özgür Doğan, 2008) may also fall into this category, particularly in terms of their formal characteristics. Yet, these two films were selected as case studies because their focus on locality and the migration movements of minority groups aligns well with the concerns of sensory ethnography. Emphasizing the characteristics of these two examples that are compatible with the concerns of sensory ethnographic films (their immersive quality, broad perspectives including the non-human, and their treatment of a specific locality), the article argues that the geographical boundaries of this category extend beyond the productions of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab. In this regard, while at first glance sensory ethnographic works highlight locality in terms of subject matter, this broader territory of their production and the common formal characteristics of each film from different geographies lend this category a universal dimension. The article contends that the tension between locality (subject matter) and universality (form) in sensory ethnographic works is also evident in how they engage with the localities they emphasize. Indeed, *Life on Their Backs* and *Last Season Shawaks* explore their subjects not only through their local characteristics but also in terms of their relationships with the outside world and universal themes.

## METHODOLOGY

One of the most significant aspects of sensory ethnographic works is their portrayal of the local habitat along with the objects, plants, animals, and people that constitute this environment from an egalitarian perspective that does not center humans. Shaped by a focus on a specific place and time, sensory ethnographic works also highlight the relationships this particular locality establishes with other places and temporalities. Sensory ethnography resonates with the theoretical approaches of new materialism and actor-network theory, which challenge human-centered thinking and the artificial divide between

nature and culture. With this in mind, the article first outlines the specific features of sensory ethnographic works, informed by both the principles set forth by the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University and the conceptual frameworks of new materialism and actor-network theory. Then, to exemplify these fundamental features of sensory ethnography, the article presents a thematic and formal analysis of the film *Sweetgrass* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash, 2009), one of the first productions of the Sensory Ethnography Lab and a prime example of the core characteristics of sensory ethnography. Following this, the article examines *Life on Their Backs* and *Last Season Şhawaks* in terms of the same thematic and formal aspects (editing and tempo, mise-en-scène, cinematography, and sound design). Through a comparative analysis of the three films, the article emphasizes the shared concerns of the two documentaries produced in Turkey and those of the Sensory Ethnography Lab.

## DOCUMENTARY TURN

In the past twenty- five years, one notable trend shaping contemporary art and moving image culture is the documentary turn (Nash, 2004: 15-21; Nash, 2008: 118-125; Enwezor, 2008: 10-51; Lind ve Steyerl, 2008; Stallabrass, 2013; Balsom ve Peleg, 2016: 10-19). This trend emphasizes a deep and focused exploration of both authentic and constructed archival, historical, and ethnographic documents, as well as traces of actual and fictional events, beings, and objects. It has also raised critical questions about the authoritative and factual tone typical of traditional documentary styles. The documentary turn emerged against the backdrop of digital media's rise and the accompanying claims about the "**death of the indexical**" (Doane, 2007; Gunning, 2007), along with a general disillusionment towards the nihilistic interpretations of reality present in postmodern critiques of representation and factuality. This newfound interest in documentary forms within art manifests in two main but interrelated approaches: reconstructive and descriptive. Although these styles vary considerably, they both challenge the authoritarian nature of classic documentary mode. By defining themselves through distinct aesthetic criteria, these approaches largely yield works within experimental documentary cinema and video that blend art with cinema.

Reconstructive tactics often include re-enactments, essayistic narrative forms, and blurring the lines between fact and fiction. They also utilize non-indexical media, particularly animation, and manipulate indexical documentation aesthetically (Takahashi, 2013: 68-78; Magagnoli, 2015: 55; for various examples mapping the intersections of formal experimentation and representations of history, culture, and social dynamics in experimental cinema, see Russell, 1999; Skoller, 2005; MacDonald, 2013). Artists, such as Halil Altındere, Kutluğ Ataman, Tacita Dean, Christopher Harris, Sharon Hayes, Thomas Hirschhorn, Pierre Huyghe, Hito Steyerl, and Zeyno Pekünlü who adopt the reconstructive approach, use methods to reactivate and recontextualize archival material, building practices rooted in both historical context and aesthetic experimentation (for more on "**archival impulse**," a key trend in contemporary art related closely to the reconstructive approach, see Foster, 2004). These creative efforts critically examine the mediation of facts and real events, while also acknowledging the value of persistently pursuing this task. As Hal Foster (2017) has aptly noted, this turn evinces a shift "**from a posture of deconstruction to one of reconstruction—that is, to the use of artifice to rehabilitate the documentary mode as an effective critical system, if not an adequate descriptive one."** Instead of striving for a straightforward representation of the external world as universal truths, this documentary style aims to convey affective, corporeal, and context-specific truths to " **make the real real again, which is to say, effective again, felt again, as such**" (Foster, 2017).

The latter approach, on the other hand, adopts observational and descriptive strategies that distance themselves from traditional documentary's claims to authority and factuality and recognize that all knowledge and its representation is situated (Balsom, 2020: 180-196). As Marcus, Love and Best argue:

> Description might become a noninstrumental accumulation of particulars with no immediately clear purpose. Or, like the shifts in scale that ''decenter the human perspective'' (…), description conceived of as honoring the object described might occasion a kind of ecstatic dispossession or pleasure in identifying with an object, being, or world. Such acts of mimetic description are unlikely to generate institutionally

> familiar genres of scholarship, but they can be creative, illuminating practices that produce forms, data, and insights keyed to the liveliness of worlds and works.
>
> Why describe? Because describing and descriptions can produce pleasure—granular, slow, compressed, attentive, appreciative (…) Because description can make us more attentive, as when we produce an audio description, copy a painting, analyze or perform a piece of music, and annotate or memorize a text. Because description can allow us both to see more and to look more attentively, more fully, and more selectively. Because description can take us out of ourselves, as when we try to see a mite or to see like a mite. Because description connects us to others—to those described, to the makers of what we describe, to other describers (Marcus, Love and Best, 2016).

Descriptive strategies, unlike analyses that tend to present an absolute point of view, do not possess an authoritarian structure. Unlike analytical thinking, which places itself in a superior position relative to its object of study, descriptive strategies either substitute for or identify with their objects of description. Additionally, descriptive approaches avoid anthropocentric perspectives by situating themselves on the same plane as the worlds, objects, and lives they describe. Dai Vaughan (1999: 81-83) emphasizes how observational and descriptive documentary practices, which engage with the world in an unrestricted aural and visual manner, reflect "**plenitude**" and "**polyvalence**, " thus leaving behind the intentions of the filmmakers. According to Vaughan (ibid), this audio-visual excess and polyvalence is experienced by viewers as a play of associations, leading to an aesthetic experience. For this reason, as Erika Balsom (2020) emphasizes, contrary to initial assumptions, these methods, like reconstructive ones, comprise creative practices that are intertwined with art, which can be observed in the works of artists such as Éric Baudelaire, Maeve Brennan, Antje Ehmann/Harun Farocki, Carolyn Lazard, Zoe Leonard, and Zoe Strauss. Sensory ethnography adopts these descriptive documentary methods and merges the realms of art and ethnography. Descriptive strategies, on one hand, avoid presenting an authoritarian view of reality through observational techniques, while on the other, they regard reality as worthy of representation, inviting viewers or readers into the realities they depict. This is particularly significant in an era marked by post-truth debates. In this context, analyzing *Life on Their Backs* and *Last Season Shawaks* through the lens of sensory ethnography sheds light on how artistic and experimental films produced in Turkey contribute to these critical descriptive strategies and hence such significant contemporary debates.

## SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHY

Although it began to be used as a general visual anthropology term in the 2000s, the concept of sensory ethnography has become particularly associated with the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) founded by Lucien Castaing-Taylor at Harvard University in 2006 as well as the artworks, especially experimental films and videos, produced there. According to the Lab's self-description:

> The Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) is an experimental laboratory that promotes innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography. It uses analog and digital media, installation, and performance, to explore the aesthetics and ontology of the natural and unnatural world. Harnessing perspectives drawn from the arts, the social and natural sciences, and the humanities, SEL encourages attention to the many dimensions of the world, both animate and inanimate, that may only with difficulty, if it all, be rendered with words (Sensory Ethnography Lab website).

Striving to move beyond discursivity, interpretation, claims, and propositions, sensory ethnography focuses on the sensory, emotional, experiential, and bodily aspects of knowledge (Castaing-Taylor, 1996; Wahlberg, 2014; Hepburn, 2016; Unger, 2017). Much of SEL's work centers on the bodily practices and emotional experiences of both humans and animals. Simultaneously, as Nakamura (2013: 13) notes, SEL merges the aesthetic dimensions of art with the ontological aims of ethnography. Castaing-Taylor describes SEL as "**interested in the world, and how to render the world's aesthetic due**," (MacDonald, 2015: 405; see also Grimshaw, 2011 for SEL's blend of aesthetic and anthropological interests). In contrast, traditional ethnography aims to document the traits of native

cultures before they disappear entirely. A fundamental issue with this approach lies in the belief that history is a linear progression, where the ethnographer views civilizations as more evolved forms of 'primitive' cultures (Pratt, 1985: 127; Banks and Murphy, 1997; Griffiths, 1999: 289). By assuming a progressive history, traditional ethnography strives to capture the 'native' or 'primitive' in its supposed "**pure**" condition, aiming to document a particular historical moment as if it represented an eternal and authentic portrayal of an unchanging culture. Additionally, this form of ethnography relies on a conventional interpretation of history, where the past is seen as separate from the present, becoming an easily collectible entity to be recorded, consumed, and left behind. Nevertheless, recent ethnographic research has begun addressing these problematic assumptions, seeking to produce work with more self-reflexive and egalitarian perspectives.

P. Kerim Friedman (2020: 15-29) contends that ethnographic cinema, much like ethnography itself, requires a flexible definition that shifts with historical context. Karl G. Heider (2006: 3) asserts that this genre primarily explores how the visual and auditory aspects of film can enhance the textual elements of ethnography. Nevertheless, traditional ethnographic films not only reinforce the objectification issues inherent in traditional ethnographic representations of other cultures but also introduce new challenges prompted by audiovisual methods (Ginsburg, 1994; MacDougall, 1999; Ruby, 2000; Marcus, 2023). In fact, many conventional anthropological films, including Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson' s *Trance and Dance in Bali* (1952) and the earlier works of John Marshall and Timothy Asch, present an objectifying and detached perspective alongside the constraints imposed by this viewpoint. As Stephanie Spray (2020: 40-48) points out, the representational dilemma of traditional ethnographic films reflects a broader issue within cinematic practices: when we film others, simply directing the camera at someone inherently objectifies them.

In his influential work *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian (2014: 21-35) emphasizes the temporal aspect of this anthropological act of distancing. Fabian (ibid) notes that while ethnographic fieldwork requires immersion in shared spatiotemporal coordinates, the later textual and/or visual interpretations of these experiences in traditional anthropology employ certain distanciation techniques to place the subject culture in a remote, static past. In anthropological filmmaking, particular audiovisual techniques such as "**long takes, wide-angle shots, and explanatory third-person commentary**" communicate a pronounced sense of temporal distancing (Minh-ha, 1991 a: 29-50; Minh-ha, 1991b: 53-62; Tobing Rony, 1996: 77-155; Rangan, 2017: 5). This approach, which Fabian (ibid) describes as "**denial of coevalness,**" is rooted in a linear view of time that relegates the 'other' to the 'primitive' past relative to the supposedly advanced Western culture. Considering this notion of coevalness, Mark Rifkin (2017: 1-47) underlines the necessity of avoiding dominant temporal "**frames of reference**" when discussing cross-cultural contexts. Rifkin (2017: x, 98) proposes the idea of a 'temporal knot" in these colonial exchanges, acknowledging "**the complex interaction of two spatiotemporal formations, addressing how they interpenetrate and affect each other without becoming identical**."

Sensory ethnography emerges as an artistic method that challenges the hierarchy of power established by classical and traditional visual ethnographic practices. This artistic approach, often taking the form of experimental film and video, emphasizes a specific spatiotemporal context (Macdonald, 2019: 451). In doing so, sensory ethnography reflects the bodily and affective experiences of both the subjects being filmed and those filming through the temporal knot framework mentioned by Rifkin (2017: x, 98). Simultaneously, these works aim to create a comparable sensory experience for the audience. Sensory ethnographic films generally concentrate on a single location and trace local relations and interactions. They typically avoid formal techniques (primarily voice-over, non-diegetic music, informative texts) that would clarify and overly concretize meaning. Additionally, they share common formal features that counteract temporal and spatial distancing, such as equal —sometimes even more— emphasis on sound design as on image along with their slow tempo, which emphasizes prolonged sequences based on intense observation (Nakamura, 2013: 133-134; Lee, 2019: 139). These common features serve, as Faye Ginsburg (2018: 141) notes, "**to enhance the ethnographic sensibility of 'being there' in its most physical and most haptic sense**." The formal characteristics of sensory ethnography create the impression that the works convey a certain space and temporality directly and without mediation. As Nakamura (2013: 134) highlights, the only indication that extensive fieldwork has already taken place

on location is the camera's positioning at the right place at the right time.

Three important points closely link sensory ethnography with critical theoretical approaches of new materialism and actor-network theory: 1. their focus on heterogeneous communities and their activities rather than singular subjects, 2. their challenge to anthropocentric perspectives in favor of approaches that address both human and non-human elements, and 3. their egalitarian rather than hierarchical approach to the web of relations between the local and the universal. First, as Max Bowens (2019: 435) notes, sensory ethnography and the works produced by SEL demonstrate significant similarities with the philosophical approach of new materialism in their shared "**advocacy for Nature's intrinsic vitality, the necessity for humans to have a more sensorial engagement with it, and for a relational, systems-based phenomenology.**" Highlighting this systems-based intrinsic vitality of nature, Jane Bennett (2010: 21) argues that activity and/or agency always depends on the cooperation and joint action of multiple actants. Consequently, "**efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces**" (ibid). According to Bennett (2010: 23), bodies enhance their power "**in or as a heterogeneous assemblage.**" Thus, the efficacy inherent in the traditional meaning of agency is not merely a localized capacity within a single human body or a collectivity based solely on human endeavors. Rather, Bennett defines agency as a collectivity distributed over a "**heterogeneous field.**" Traditional philosophy has viewed agency as a moral capacity wherein the single-subject agent acts according to a pre-arranged plan or intention (Bennett, 2010: 31-32). In this model, agency refers to the agent's creativity, the capacity to bring about the emergence or realization of something new. However, the distributive agency theory proposed by Bennett (ibid) does not assume a single agent as the root cause of an effect. Instead, this theory of distributive agency interprets activity and efficacy in terms of a series of relations among heterogeneous and temporary assemblages rather than individual subjects and their intentions. This approach is influenced by Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-network theory, which proposes to analyze activities and events by focusing on and describing flows between heterogeneous actors.

At the same time, both new materialism and actor-network theory underline that these heterogeneous communities bring together the human and the non-human, thus emphasizing the agency of the non-human. These systems of thought, which oppose the evaluation of all existence through the "**sieve of humanity**" (Bogost, 2012: 3), underline the necessity of not only taking the non-human into account but also placing it on an equal footing with the human. As Myra J. Hird and Celia Roberts (2011) argue:

> On one hand, the nonhuman seems an obvious referent. The majority of the Earth's living inhabitants are non-human, and nonhuman characterises the deep nonliving recesses of the Earth, the biosphere and space's vast expanse. (…) Western humanism commands nature to such a degree that it becomes either subsumed within the human or entirely effaced. So a clear benefit of delineating a nonhuman is acknowledging humans are not the only, or even most important, living organisms on the planet we inhabit. (…) 'meeting the universe halfway' means recognizing relationality as both immanent and intra-active, producing phenomena at every turn. Autonomous individuated selves fade as analyses articulate the agential cuts of phenomena as cascading, always-already intra-acting entities (Hird and Roberts, 2011: 111).

The works produced at SEL are notable for their approach, which extends ethnographic and experimental documentary production beyond anthropocentrism and towards the network of relations between humans and non-humans that shape activity and agency (Smaill, 2014; Westmoreland & Luvaas, 2015). Examining agency, activity, and existence through this network of relations among heterogeneous assemblages encourages a rethinking of the traditional hierarchies established between micro and macro scales, as well as the local and the universal. As Latour (2005: 176) notes, when we begin to define local spaces as sites producing global structures, we alter the entire topography of the social world. In this context, "**macro no longer describes a wider or a larger site in which the micro would be embedded like some Russian Matryoshka doll, but another equally local, equally micro place, which is connected to many others through some medium transporting specific types of**

**traces.**" In such an analysis, the scale of localities is less important than the strength and security of the connections they establish with other places. While traditional studies represent micro and macro-scale places on a vertical axis from top to bottom, Latour (2005: 187) proposes a horizontal network of different localities that relate to one another in various ways, numbers, and intensities. In this network, all the connections, cables, and means of transportation linking them become as important as, or even more so than, the localities themselves (ibid). Similarly, sensory ethnographic works, shaped by their focus on a specific place and time, assess the relationships that this contextuality creates with other places and temporalities through heterogeneous networks of relations rather than hierarchical positionings.

***Sweetgrass***

One of the best examples reflecting SEL's key concerns and approaches is Ilisa Barbash and Castaing-Taylor's 2009 film *Sweetgrass*. Focusing on a sheep ranch in Montana, this experimental documentary tracks sheep herding (cowboying) activities in the Absaroka-Beartooth mountains during the summer months. The film's two most prominent features are its challenge to human-oriented camera work and its experimental approach to sound design and sound-image relationships. Although the film initially seems to align with the concerns of traditional ethnographic cinema by documenting the disappearing sheep herding practices in the region (Ratner, 2010: 27), it diverges from conventional approaches in both its formal characteristics and its treatment of the network of relations between the human and the non-human. The documentary equally emphasizes humans, animals, plants, the natural environment and its components, human-made objects, and technology, exploring their interrelations in a manner that sensualizes the philosophy of new materialism and actor-network theories. The film draws viewers' attention to these concerns, particularly with shots taken from among the sheep and at their eye level, along with a strategic sound design that often prioritizes the voices of the sheep over human dialogue. Barbash and Castaing-Taylor note that *Sweetgrass* aims to "**evoke the experiences of the sheep, of what it was like to inhabit their bodies, rather than to stare at them as objective bodies/animals**" (Ratner, 2010: 24) (Figure 1). Indeed, Castaing-Taylor elsewhere highlights the diminishing validity of distinctions between sheep-human, natural-cultural, and natural environment-built environment in sheep farming and shepherding practices. Instead of these singular, self-contained concepts, he employs the term "**sheeple**" to underscore the relationships between them. According to the filmmaker:

> *Sweetgrass* is interested in both the sheep and the people, or more precisely their intertwined naturecultures within the context of their larger ecological fold. Sheep and humans have existed uneasily with each other since we first domesticated them in Mesopotamia ten-thousand-odd years ago in the Neolithic Revolution; sheep were quite possibly the first domesticated livestock animal. They gave humanity our first staple proteins: milk and meat. Not to mention their skins, for shelter—and a couple of thousand years later, also their wool. They wouldn't exist without us, and couldn't survive without us, because of the way we've bred them (to maximize both birth weight and the number of live births) over the millennia. So I don't think you can distinguish between "**people**" and "**sheep**." It's more that we're so many variations of sheeple (MacDonald, 2015: 383-384).

*Sweetgrass*'s sound design gives equal importance to human, animal, and environmental sounds. One of the most obvious examples is the prioritization of animal sounds and human mimicry of those sounds over human dialogue. This specific sonic approach underscores the film's concerns that align with the philosophy of new materialism. At the same time, the experimental documentary also displays an unexpected perspective on sound-image relations. For instance, the film reinterprets traditional sound design in close-ups and long shots by juxtaposing the shepherd's whispers to the sheep and his horse with long shots of the mountains or sounds emanating from a distant location with close-ups. *Sweetgrass* and other SEL films focus on a particular locality, especially in their evocation of "**a sensory experience that reflects and reflects on the actual experiences of others (including the filmmakers themselves) as they occurred in a specific place during a specific time,**" as Scott MacDonald (2013, p. 13) states. However, these films also challenge conventional distinctions between locality and universality by emphasizing seemingly local elements that connect to other contexts and relationships that may also

surface in different settings. Details such as news about the Iraq war on the radio in the herders' tent constitute, in Barbash and Castaing-Taylor's words, "**one of the few ways within the diegesis of Sweetgrass that the global (national and international politics) is referenced in the (hyper)local)**" (Ratner, 2010: 26). In this context, the film's sound design, which ignores the boundaries between distance and proximity, also revisits the traditional oppositions between locality and universality, pointing to more complex relationships.

**Figure 1.** *Sweetgrass*, dir. Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash, 2009 (*Sweetgrass* DVD, Grasshopper Film)

What makes *Sweetgrass* a sensory ethnographic work can be categorized into three main aspects: 1. The slow pace of the film, focused on long sequences rooted in observation, gives the audience a sense of sharing the same spatial and temporal reality as the filmed subjects. 2. Rather than treating sheep as mere objects of representation, the film employs specific camera angles and levels to evoke in viewers an understanding of what it feels like to inhabit the bodies of these animals. Simultaneously, the sound design reflects the sounds of humans, animals, and the surrounding environment, promoting a viewpoint that transcends anthropocentrism. 3. Although the film appears to center on a particular locality, it equally highlights the intricate relationships between locality and universality, emphasizing situations that could arise in diverse contexts.

***Life on Their Backs* and *Last Season Shawaks***

Although sensory ethnography films seem primarily associated with SEL production at present, scholars like David MacDougall (2005), Sarah Pink (2006; 2009), Paul Stoller (2023), Scott MacDonald (2013), and François Laplantine (2015) have sought to broaden the scope and provide relevant examples of this term. While they do not label themselves as sensory ethnography, since the 2000s some experimental documentaries from other geographies such as *Estate, A Reverie* (Andrea Luka Zimmerman, 2015, UK), *Bitter Money* (*Ku qian*, Wang Bing, 2016, China), *Railway Sleepers* (*Mon Rot Fai*, Sompot Chidgasornpongse, 2016, Thailand), *Tonsler Park* (Kevin Jerome Everson, 2017, USA), *Honeyland* (*Medena zemja*, Ljubomir Stefanov, Tamara Kotevska, 2019, Macedonia), *Cow* (Andrea Arnold, 2021, UK), and *A Flower in the Mouth* (Éric Baudelaire, 2022, South Korea), *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, 2024, France and Senegal) have reflected similar concerns. *Life on Their Backs* and *Last Season Shawaks*, produced in Turkey, align closely with the category of sensory ethnography by examining the practices of a local culture with a focus on the body, senses, and emotions. Kazım Öz' s *Last Season Shawaks* chronicles the lives of the Shawaks, a nomadic Kurdish pastoralist community, documenting their experiences throughout the changing seasons of a year as they move between villages in Dersim and homesteads in the Munzur Mountains. Yeşim Ustaoğlu' s *Life on Their Backs*, filmed while scouting locations for the narrative film *Waiting for the Clouds*, follows the summer migration of the Laz people, particularly the women, from a Black Sea village at the base of the Kaçkar Mountains to Komati and then to the Great Kaçkar plateau.

**Figure 2.** *Life on their Backs*, Yeşim Ustaoğlu, 2004 **(***Bulutları Beklerken* DVD, BİRFİLM)

The majority of the literature on Öz examines the director's fictional and documentary productions in relation to minority politics (Akınhay, 2009; Çiftçi, 2009; Çiçek, 2011; Koçer, 2013; Koçer, 2014; Koçer and Candan, 2016; Candan, 2016; Koçer and Göztepe, 2017; Akçali, 2019). However, none of these studies thoroughly analyze the relationship between the formal features Öz employs in his experimental documentary works and his thematic concerns. Studies on Ustaoğlu, on the other hand, generally focus on the director's fictional films, both to examine her approach to minority representation from a political perspective (Monceau & Ustaoğlu, 2001; Göktürk, 2002; Vitali-West & Ustaoğlu, 2002; Iordanova, 2008; Suner, 2009; Mersin, 2010; Başçı, 2015; Daldal, 2021; Öneren Özbek, 2021) and to position her films within existing feminist film practices (Suner, 2007; Başçı, 2015; İlbuğa, 2018; Salman, 2019; Gürkan, 2020; Kurtuluş Korkman, 2020; Uçar, 2023; Uğuz, 2024). Almost the entirety of this literature has concentrated on Ustaoğlu's fictional films. The only detailed analysis of *Life on Their Backs* has reflected the trends of the existing literature, discussing this documentary in terms of issues related to gender and ethnicity (Öztürk, 2010). Rather than adhere to the trends noted in the literature on these two directors, examining *Life on Their Backs* and *Last Season Shawaks* through the lens of sensory ethnography enables us to identify three significant formal, stylistic, and thematic characteristics of these films. First, they utilize descriptive documentary methods that create an immersive atmosphere for the audience. Second, they adopt a broader perspective that moves beyond anthropocentric camerawork to include the non-human. Third, these films challenge conventional distinctions between the local and the universal.

First, both films create an immersive experience that gives viewers a sense of sharing the same space as the filmic subjects. Thematically, both films focus on a specific place and time, documenting a disappearing culture with the impression of a direct relationship to the context. This impression of immediate connection is achieved stylistically through basic cinematic elements (montage, cinematography, mise-en-scène, and sound) in various ways. For instance, long camera takes that avoid intensive editing help establish this direct communication between the audience and the location. These long takes also contribute to the sense of 'being there' by focusing on the place and its creatures in detail, revealing the mise en-scène with all its elements. Neither film includes explanatory text or voiceovers but instead consists of sequences of unobtrusive observation. The extensive use of surround sound, preferred over explanatory voiceover, also helps both films engage directly with the audience. On the other hand, while establishing this impression of an immediate relationship between the audience and the film, *Life on Their Backs* and *Last Season Shawaks* do not gloss over the fact that they are mediations of an actual spatio-temporality. On the contrary, both works feature self-reflexive elements that draw attention, even if implicitly, to their nature as films. For example, the shadows cast by the camera crew in *Last Season Shawaks*, the camera lens getting wet with raindrops in *Life on Their Backs*, the direct gazes of people and animals at the camera in both films, and sometimes even filmed individuals gesturing towards and addressing those behind the camera serve as examples of these self-reflexive features. The fact that both films provide the audience with a sense of 'being there' without concealing their identity as films showcases important similarities with sensory ethnographic works.

Just as *Sweetgrass, Life on Their Backs*, and *Last Season Shawaks* treat locality as a whole with its animate and inanimate actors. As mentioned earlier, we often encounter in SEL films one of the key concerns of new materialism, which, in Richard Grusin' s (2015: vii) words, involves "**decentering the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies.**" Thematically, both films portray evenly human beings, animals, plants, objects, and natural and built spaces, emphasizing their complex relationships without drawing distinctions or hierarchies between the animate and inanimate. Simultaneously, the use of mise en-scène, camera, and sound in both films underscores the importance of decentralizing the human perspective. Both films treat their mise-en-scènes as a whole, with their animate and inanimate, built and natural actors playing equal roles. For instance, the images of the highland houses in fog in *Life on Their Backs* and the village houses captured through the filter of falling snow in *Last Season Shawaks*, along with the long takes of repairs and alterations to the spaces in both films, highlight how the built environment is a constantly changing

phenomenon that we cannot conceive in isolation from natural climatic conditions and natural processes and objects **(**Figure 2). In cinematographic terms, both films treat animate and inanimate objects in an egalitarian manner giving them equal screen time and space. In scenes that explore human and animal relations in both *Last Season Shawaks* and *Life on Their Backs*, the camera shifts between human and animal eye levels. The contribution of objects such as windows, doors, and cups to camera framing creates an immersive atmosphere -one of the most important features of sensory ethnography- while also emphasizing how the human perspective is shaped by various inanimate objects, including the camera (Figure 3). Additionally, the sound design in both films equally prioritizes human, animal, and environmental sounds. The human mimicry of animal sounds, evident in *Sweetgrass*, is also highlighted in these two films. Such thematic and formal approaches draw the audience's attention to the interventions and contributions of humans to the lives of animals and vice versa. Therefore, the implications of the concept of sheeple, as argued by Castaing-Taylor and audio-visually expressed in *Sweetgrass*, are also present in both *Life on Their Backs* and *Last Season Shawaks*.

**Figure 3.** *Last Season Shawaks*, Kazım Öz, 2009 (*Demsala Dawî Şewaxan* DVD, Mezopotamya Film)

**Figure 4.** *Life on their Backs*, Yeşim Ustaoğlu, 2004 **(***Bulutları Beklerken* DVD, BİRFİLM)

Both films highlight the intricate dynamics between locality and universality often seen in SEL films and *Sweetgrass*. Understanding locality as a web of connections among animate and inanimate, organic and inorganic entities, these films portray a specific region not as a static, isolated whole but as, in Doreen Massey's (2001: 3) words, "**the lived world of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism.**" Thematically, movement and transportation are central to both films. These actions, which occur across

distinct spaces, are realized and occasionally interrupted through relationships involving humans, animals, natural elements, and human-made artifacts, placing this network of interactions at the heart of both films (Figure 4). In the world depicted in these experimental documentaries, as Latour (2005: 204) articulates, "**[m]ovements and displacements come first, places and shapes second.**" The objects and garments in both films, which come from elsewhere and foster communication with the outside, situate the mise-en-scènes between the local and global realms. Similarly, *Last Season Shawaks* presents a site-specific, handmade scale as a vital tool for sheep trading between the local community and external markets. This distinctive scale merges a universal measurement unit with local contexts (the meadow and trees), illustrating how the local and global are intrinsically intertwined (Figure 5). In *Last Season Shawaks*, we can observe intentional cinematographic techniques, such as the sheep eye-level shots during scenes of the sale of a lamb born at the beginning of the film to the slaughterhouse towards the end. The framing of a truck transporting sheep destined for trade through the display of sausages at a shop serves a parallel purpose. These methods allow the audience to connect emotionally with the nonhuman elements of the locale while underscoring that these local assets are part of a larger trading network. Similar themes emerge in the dialogues of the films. Conversations regarding migration and changing traditions due to interactions with major cities in *Life on Their Backs*, along with discussions that emphasize trade with external areas in *Last Season Shawaks*, underscore the complicated ties between local and broader contexts. In this regard, both films illustrate how, as Latour (2005: 178) notes, "**what counts is the possibility for the enquirer to register that kind of 'networky' shape wherever possible, instead of having to cut off data in two heaps: one local, one global.**" Through these thematic and stylistic methods, *Life on Their Backs* and *Last Season Shawaks* question the simplistic separation between the local and global, presenting a more nuanced understanding of their interrelation.

**Figure 5.** *Last Season Shawaks*, Kazım Öz, 2009 (*Demsala Dawî Şewaxan* DVD, Mezopotamya Film)

## CONCLUSION

Although sensory ethnography films are often associated with works made at SEL, the films *Life on Their Backs* and *Last Season Shawaks* produced in Turkey exhibit significant thematic and formal similarities to *Sweetgrass*, a work that well encapsulates the principles of SEL output. Three key features render all three works sensory ethnographic. First, their thematic foundations depict a particular locality through observational long takes and slow tempos with minimal use of montage, evoking in the viewer a sense of being present in the same space and time as the filmed subjects. Second, all three films—both thematically and stylistically—portray the locality as a cohesive whole, complete with its animate and inanimate actors, equally reflecting both human and nonhuman elements of the environment. Finally, although at first glance, all three films appear to focus on a specific locality, they actually consider it a network that connects to the global in intricate ways rather than portraying it as a closed, unchanging totality.

Thus, the works produced at SEL are interconnected through their shared thematic and formal approaches with the films *Life on Their Backs* and *Last Season Shawaks*. While these films explore different localities and are produced in a geography distinct from SEL, such a connection also transcends the distinctions between the local and the global. In this regard, it is crucial to broaden the geographical

definitions of sensory ethnography. This expansion highlights that the remarkable features of these films are not only their opposition to the power hierarchies at the center of conventional and traditional visual ethnographic practices and their egalitarian methods that do not prioritize human beings, but also their capacity to address the complex relationships between the local and the global from a fresh perspective. When examining how the films *Life on Their* Backs and *Last Season Shawaks* resonate with audiences, we can once again observe how the local and the global have become intertwined. As Suncem Koçer (2013, pp. 721-733; 2014, pp. 473-488) notes, these and similar films that engage with local contexts establish their circulation networks within film festivals and art cinema, which possess transnational characteristics. This phenomenon largely stems from their experimental elements, on one hand, and the varying degrees of censorship they face within Turkey (as seen in the case of *Last Season Shawaks*), especially when they depict minority cultures, on the other. Consequently, the distribution and viewing practices of these two experimental documentaries produced in Turkey also parallel those of SEL works. Accordingly, a comparative analysis of sensory ethnographic works produced in Turkey regarding their distribution and viewing practices alongside SEL films has the potential to become the foundation for a more comprehensive study.

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