

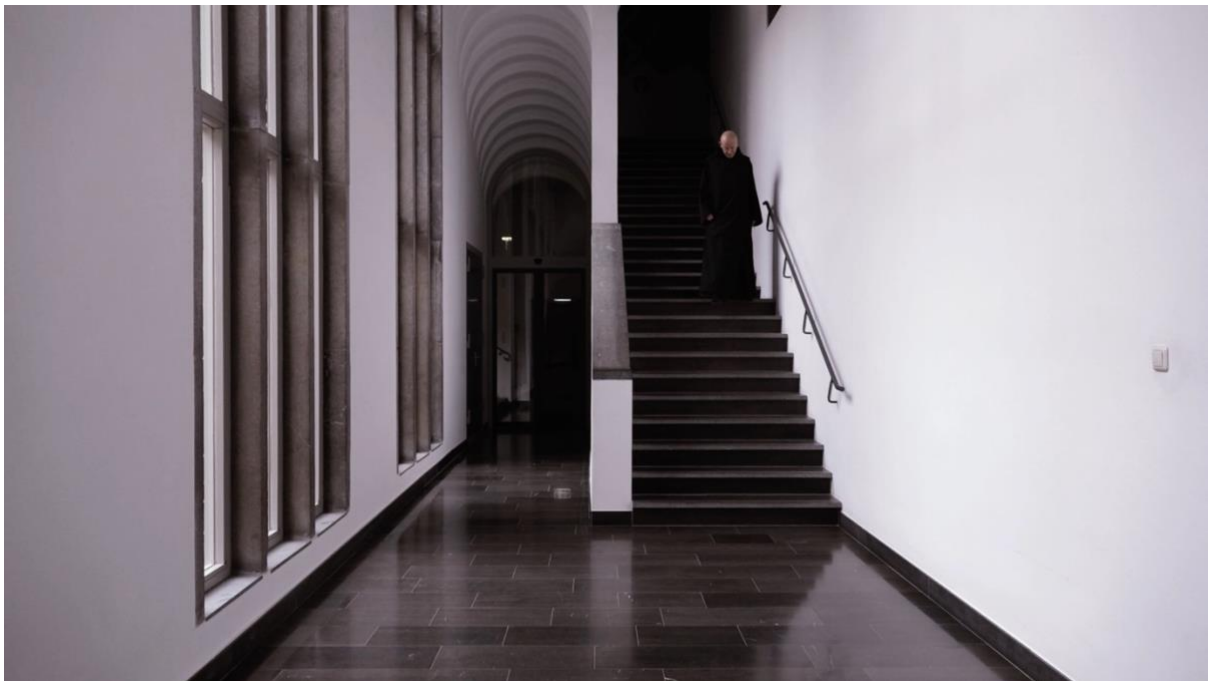


UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

Institute for Social Sciences

The Reflection of An Empty Room – Sensorial Consumption of Monastic Architectural Spaces



Emanuele Bergquist

Master's Thesis in Master of Philosophy in Visual Anthropology

Supervisor: Peter I. Crawford

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Abstract

The following research aims to explore architectural spaces, and the human presence therein, in a Benedictine monastic environment. The empirical material was collected during the spring and summer of 2023 over a period of twenty days during which I stayed as a guest in St. Benedictusberg Abbey in the south of the Netherlands, just a few kilometers away from the tripoint where the country borders with Germany and Belgium. The monastery is home to fourteen monks who live together under the Rule of St. Benedict. This research topic sprouts from my main area of interest within anthropology, which is material culture studies, and more specifically what we commonly perceive as Home; how this perception is often challenged by alternative lifestyles which may be shaped by socioeconomic conditions, by feeling drawn away from urban environments and towards natural landscapes or, indeed, by religious motives. My aim is to bridge material culture and sensorial anthropology to argue how enquiring on monastic architectural spaces can lend itself to a study of spirituality. I am therefore going to focus on the sensorial consumption of monastic architectural spaces, how they are perceived by the visitor and the monk, and how the daily routines are carried out within the walls of the Abbey. When discussing the importance of sensorial experiences, I will focus first and foremost on the visual and auditorial exploration of the monastery, and the role of perception in mapping the space.

As part of the thesis, the 30-minutes film “Oculus Silens” (Latin for “The Silent Eye”) will accompany the written part and offer an audio-visual representation of my experience in the Abbey. The film will lead the audience through the hallways and places of cult and portray the people therein with the help of the sounds that permeates the place.

Keywords: Architectural Spaces, Benedictine Monks, Monastery, Sensorial ethnography, Soundscapes, Sensory Consumption

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank the community of St. Benedictusberg Abbey for accommodating my request of visiting their home, both as a curious guest and as a researcher. My position, and the presence of the camera, had to be carefully compromised in order to avoid any disruptiveness in the day-to-day routines of the monks. I would therefore like to thank fr. Abbott and fr. Prior¹ in particular for their patience and their suggestions of alternative approaches during my filming process.

Furthermore, this research would not have been possible without the support shown by br. Leo, who's stories and anecdotes on the Abbey greatly enriched my understanding of monastic life and whose artistic skills in engraving statues and gravestones allowed me to better understand his relationship to the architecture. His stories and anecdotes about his mentor Dom. Hans Van der Laan, the architect that redesigned parts of the monastery and thus left a much deeper mark on the monks' everyday life, helped me get acquainted with the person that created the architectural spaces and his philosophy. I would like to extend my gratitude to br. Mathieu, who has been supportive of my research from the beginning, and keen on answering any questions I had about the Benedictine way of life. His words were most insightful. Additionally, through the sporadic yet enriching and enjoyable conversations I had with br. José in the vegetable garden I learnt about the monk's life and journey from the United States to the Netherlands, as well as his relationship with the community.

Finally, I wish to thank br. Lambertus who, despite some linguistic barriers, was able to guide me through the history of the monastery; I am also grateful to br. Mikael, whose thoughts on architecture I found illuminating.

¹ Although the title for each member of an ecclesiastic community often depends on the country or the customs of the specific Abbey, the Abbot is often referred to as Father (fr.) or Dom. (abbreviation for "dominus" meaning Lord). The Prior was referred to as fr. by the Abbott himself. The rest of the monks referred to each other with the title of brother (br.).

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1 Introduction

As I step off the bus just in front of the road leading up to the monastery, I take a moment to savor the journey so far, which led me from a little island in northern Norway to an empty bus stop in the middle of the Dutch countryside. On my way up the hill I notice the first sprouts on the apple trees and become suddenly aware of the spring approaching rapidly this far south. Back in Tromsø the streets must have still been covered in deep snow. I walk up to the entrance of the Abbey where the Belgian groundkeeper Jerome tells me I am awaited. He opens a door next to the reception and tells me to wait. I take off my hat and notice the rawness of the wooden room, and the very square furniture. I finally made it here, now I feel ready. The person replacing the guests master is br. Mathieu. Br. Lambertus, with whom I corresponded through email, is indisposed. Mathieu arrives not 5 minutes later. He smiles and welcome me with quite some energy. He asks me about my travels and if I am ready to learn more about the place. I am. I tell him about my journey so far, that I am going to need a few days to become familiar with the place, and then I can start filming. He nods and smiles. And then comes the question I feared, because I did not know if this would change their attitude towards me and towards my project. “Are you religious?” he asks. I told him I see myself as a spiritual person and that I grew up in a catholic environment. I explain how I later in life got acquainted with the Lutheran way, to which I got closer as an ethical philosophy, but that I was not religious. He understands. They get all sorts of guests, not only faithful followers. He just needs to know how to approach my presence. He offers to take my camera bag and I feel sorry for his back. I follow him out of the room, into a small courtyard surrounded by columns and then down through the crypt. The emptiness and the austerity of the room has a soothing effect on my senses, and for what it feels like the first time, I feel the presence of space. I sense a primordial atmosphere, and the timelessness of it. The rawness of the stone surfaces speaks to me, the monochrome tones shout. What I was feeling when I looked at the pictures of the interiors is now concrete. It’s almost as if I became part of the room and the empty space had become as tangible as the stone pillars. A Buddhist sutra comes to mind as I write this: “The form is emptiness, and the emptiness is form”. This awareness of the empty architectural space, which I soon come to feel as alive, would follow me throughout the duration of my stay.

A month later, I arrive at the monastery ready for my second four-days-stay. At this point I feel ready to pick up the camera and start getting acquainted with St. Benedictusberg through it. In order to get the community gradually acquainted with the recorder, I decide it would be best to start by filming neutral spaces, such as the yards, the hallways, the staircases, and empty

rooms. From the moment I start my recordings, I am followed by a constant feeling of being observed, a feeling augmented by all the sounds I hear from afar. Footsteps, indistinct murmurs, keys jingling, doors opening and closing are all reminders that I am not alone in this place. During the meals and the liturgies unrelated dialogues are strongly discouraged and the monks have developed their own communication techniques to understand each other. Any whisper becomes a shout, any movement which might be considered inappropriate becomes as loud as if it were performed under a spotlight. As a consequence of this, my perception of my own movements and of what I am doing is highly sensitive. Bringing the camera into such an environment feels much like bringing a boombox into a library; at first, it seems like an impossible task.

*

Ever since the first steps I took in formulating my research proposal, material culture studies had caught my attention, and specifically dwelling places as part of that material culture upon which we build part of our identity. This led me to wonder what would happen in a place where the consumption of material goods, and their cumulation, is discouraged; where the very architecture demands a certain lifestyle and opens up a dialogue between the visitor and the rooms. These initial considerations helped me formulate my research question: **Why does empty architectural space in a monastic environment become an important element for its inhabitants in their experience of the monastery and of a spiritual journey?** Throughout the present paper I am going to answer this research question by bridging the conversations I had with the visitors of the monastery and with the monks with the monastic environment and the architectural spaces. I am going to make use of material culture studies, anthropology of the senses, and phenomenology, as analytical tools to illustrate this relationship between human activities and human surroundings.

1.1 On the Benedictine Order and the Rule

Ever since the dawn of the first European monastic communities dating back to the third century, which were created by persecuted Christians (Goddijn, 1960: 432), the number of orders branched in many different directions in the later centuries, gathering around different saints and following their doctrines. As the Christian Church gained influence and power from the fifth century onwards, some monasteries sought the protection of and affiliation to the

Church, while others chose to remain independent and practice their faith the way they deemed fit. The order of St. Benedict, alongside the order of St. Augustine, is listed as one of the oldest communities of cenobitic monks, i.e. those who have chosen to follow a communitarian lifestyle as opposed to the hermits who choose a solitary spiritual path (Mark, 2019). The main difference between the former and the latter is that the monks following the teaching of St. Augustine, who was himself a bishop, are affiliated with the local diocese, whereas Benedictine monks lived outside of the ecclesiastic jurisdiction and thus had an intermediary role between the Church and the secular authorities (Goddijn, 1960: 433). Ever since the creation of the order, the Benedictine lifestyle has been characterized by the words “ora et labora” (meaning “work and pray” in Latin) and is to this day still a vital element in their identity as an ecclesiastic group. By the end of the tenth century a schism occurred within the Benedictine order. There was a partial dissatisfaction towards the involvement of the monasteries in what was considered worldly matters, which led to the establishment of the Trappist (Cistercian) order which was still following the Rule of St. Benedict but adopted a much more isolated lifestyle, with a much stronger emphasis on material detachment, silence, and contemplation (Mark, 2019).

The Rule was conceived and written around 540-550 AD by St. Benedict of Nursia (Middleton, 2010) as a manifesto for the monastic lifestyle and organisation. It contains 73 short chapters which correspond to an equal amount of dogmas, ranging from “1. On the Kind of Monks”, to “9. How Many Psalms Are to Be Said at the Night Office”, to “42. That No One Speak After Compline”, and finally to “73. On the Fact That the Full Observance of Justice Is Not Established in This Rule” (Benedict, 1948). These dogmas provide detailed guidelines that regulate the life of a benedictine monk. The order follows the Rule to this day, although the severity of it has, from what I could observe during my stay, somewhat loosened. For instance, in the sixth chapter “On the Spirit of Silence” the Rule states that “as for coarse jests and idle words or words that move to laughter, these we condemn everywhere with a perpetual ban” (1948: 39). In their interaction with the guests br. Leo and br. Mathieu spoke lightheartedly and jokes were often made. As I will discuss in the following section, a major focus is dedicated to the liturgies. Of the 73 chapters contained in the Rule, twelve of them are dedicated to the liturgies, which psalms are to be sung on which occasion, and which gestures or routines accompany them. In Middleton’s words, the chanting of the psalmology serves the purpose of “ritualizing humanity’s dialogue with God” (2010: 51).

1.2 Ethnographic Context

Worldwide, today we can find around 300 independent Benedictine monasteries belonging to 20 different congregations, home to nearly 8,000 monks.² In Europe there is over half a million religious buildings³, not all of which are still used specifically for ecclesiastical purposes, whereas in the Netherlands there are today five monasteries still standing and still hosting a community of monks or nuns who live under the Rule of S. Benedict, and three hosting Trappist congregations⁴. According to a report issued by the European Commission in 2010⁵ on the population's perception on and relationship to biotechnology, the Netherlands occupy the fourth spot among the most secularised countries in Europe (30% of the population does not believe in any deity), after France (40%), Czech Republic (37%) and Sweden (34%). Among their religious counterpart, the majority is affiliated with the Catholicism (almost 20%), followed by Protestantism (14%) and Islam (5%). The remaining is affiliated to other religious groups.⁶ These numbers show the country's ranking as one of the most secularized in Europe. S. Benedictusberg rises on a hilltop in Limburg, just a few kilometers away from the tripoint where the Netherlands meet Belgium and Germany. This is the southmost rural region of the Netherlands which single handedly provides most of agriproducts to the rest of Europe. Limburg is, in fact, the second-largest horticultural region in the continent⁷. The community of monks living here under the Rule of Saint Benedict has grown considerably smaller in the past few decades and only fourteen of them inhabit the Abbey today.

I conducted my fieldwork over a period of four months (April 11th to August 14th, 2023), during which I was allowed to stay as a guest in the Abbey for four days each month; this amounted to twenty days during which I had access to the place and the opportunity to film and interact with its inhabitants and with the guests. Over the remaining time in the spring and summer of 2023, I had the chance to explore the country, and I was struck by how different the

² Retrieved from Andechs Monastery webpage, available at:

<https://www.andechs.de/en/monastery/benedictines.html>. [Accessed: 24/04/2024]

³ "Secular Europe Backs Religious Heritage" (2014). Online article, available at: <https://www.frh-europe.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2014-06-Secular-Europe-backs-religious-heritage-report.pdf>. [Accessed: 24/04/2024]

⁴ Retrieved from: <https://www.ericasp.com/2011/10/monasteries-in-the-netherlands/> [Accessed: 10/05/2024]

⁵ Available at:

https://web.archive.org/web/20101215001129/http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_341_en.pdf [Accessed: 16/04/2024]

⁶ Data retrieved from CBS at <https://longreads.cbs.nl/the-netherlands-in-numbers-2021/what-are-the-major-religions/> [Accessed: 16/04/2024]

⁷ <https://businessinlimburg.com/Key-sectors> [Accessed: 06/05/2024]

southern region is from the northern more urbanized and industrial part of the country. When I was not staying as a guest at S. Benedictusberg I did Workaway (an initiative which allows people to work for a host in exchange for room and board)⁸ for a period of two months. As part of Workaway, I worked on an eco-building project a few hours away from the monastery in the northern part of the province. My experience with Workaway was enriching in understanding the relationship between manual work put in a home and the experience of inhabiting a place.

The day of a Benedictine monk is rigidly structured around the so-called eight liturgical hours, during which they gather in the church and chant the psalms in Latin. Every week they chant 150 psalms in a precise order which is stipulated in the Rule of St. Benedict (Benedict, 1948: 74). The eight canonical hours include Matins (at 4.30 am), Laude (at 6.30 am), Prime (at 7.45am), Terce and High Mass (at 9.30 am). After lunch, the afternoon continues with None (at 2 pm), Vesper (at 5 pm), and finally Compline (at 8 pm). These moments represent eight liturgies, each demanding certain gestures, movements, and psalms. In between the liturgies the monks retire to their rooms to read or rest, or they walk in the garden. For half an hour a day in between the dinner and Compline, br. Leo and br. Mathieu would take turn in leading the guests to the small pond (or to the guestroom in case the weather wouldn't allow outdoor activities) and engaging in a conversation with us; this moment was referred to as "recreatie". A three-course meal is shared right after None and a light dinner just before Compline. On both occasions the guests join the monks in the refectory, but not a word is exchanged. Instead, the monks take turn each week to stand in front of a lectern, where the chosen one will read out of the Rule and out of the Book of The Saints alternately. All forms of conversation are prohibited, and when the occasional monk would arrive late to the refectory or disturbed the reading with any improper behavior (often resulting in disruptive sounds) he would walk up to the Abbots table and kneel in front of him. If a plate or a jar would be emptied on the guests' table, or a piece of cutlery would be missing, the most attentive monk would take what is missing from their own table and bring it to the guests.

Alternative forms of communication have been adopted in the monastery. A wooden hammer is placed next to the seat of the Abbot (in his absence, the seat of the Prior) in the Church and in the refectory, which the head of the congregation would hit lightly to signal the start of the liturgy or of the meal. In the Church, as the hammer hits the wooden surface, the brothers would lightly bow towards the Abbott and the chanting would begin. A second

⁸ <https://www.workaway.info/> [Accessed: 06/05/2024]

medium of communication which would be used by the monks to communicate with the guests, is in the form of written notes which are left in front of the guests' bedrooms. On three separate occasions I returned to my room and found out one of the monks had left me a message. The first of these was a webpage that br. José had printed out. Earlier that day I had visited the vegetable garden for the first time and had found the monk tending to the plants. I asked him about the name of one of the tallest bushes in the garden, which gave off a strong sweet smell. The page he had printed out read "Syringa vulgaris" and came with some general information about the plant which is commonly known as Lilac in English. On the second occasion I received a message from br. Lambertus, with whom I had most difficulties communicating. He did not speak one word of English, and I tried my best to communicate in German with him, as I later did with br. Leo as well as with the guests who did not speak English. The old monk had printed out a few pages of text he had written himself in German. The pages told the history of the Abbey, from the early days of the persecution of monastic minorities in the Prussian empire during the first half of the 19th century, to the restoration and redesign process of Dom Hans Van der Laan. The last "note" was left by the Abbott in the form of a book about Mariavall convent located in Tomelilla, Sweden. Together with St. Benedictusberg Abbey and Roosenberg Abbey (in Waasmunster, Belgium) it is one of the three monasteries designed, or re-designed, by Van der Laan.

2 Methodology

This project will include a written thesis as well as a 30-minutes long film which will serve as a sensorial experience of St. Benedictusberg, through which I will introduce the audience to the environment and the atmosphere I perceived. Throughout my fieldwork I gradually became aware of "walking as an ethnographic method", and the implication that this simple human activity entailed for the development of my project. Lee and Ingold (2006: 68) argue that "walking affords an experience of embodiment to the extent that it is grounded in an inherently sociable engagement between self and environment". This epistemological engagement between our bodies and the environment I will elaborate on in chapter 6. Most of the conversations I had with the monks at St. Benedictusberg Abbey were carried out in a very informal and unstructured manner, and often while we were walking through the garden. It soon became clear that a number of guests who visited the monastery came with one or more questions they were seeking an answer to. Throughout this paper I am going to take a few testimonies into account: I will introduce four guests, which I refer to by their initials. I never

asked the details about their spiritual journeys, as I felt it was too personal, but from what they told me it was in many cases related to their own relationship with spirituality and a deity; in the case of their atheist counterparts, it entailed an existential contemplation, through which their relationship with everyday life and materiality was critically scrutinized. Of the fourteen monks living in the Abbey, two of them (br. Leo and br. Mathieu) are appointed by the Abbot to spend the recreational time (“recreatie”) with the guests, while br. Lambertus is the official guest master and has the task to gather the guests for the meals, prepare the bedrooms and organize the bookings of the eight available guestrooms. The time I spent eating breakfast or drinking coffee with the guests in the big round recreational room were valuable moments during which I had the opportunity to engage in informal conversation; these conversations came out of a personal interest rather than being purposefully intended as contributions to this paper. Nevertheless, I have found some of their stories enriching for my research.

Audio-visual recordings were, of course, the major tools I used to document my experience. I was well aware of the potential disruptiveness of the camera in such a place even before I reached it and wanted therefore to conduct my recordings as discretely as possible. For this reason, I rarely used the two microphones we were equipped with, and chose instead to use a portable Zoom microphone, which I could place on a bench or in a corner and record the sound that I would at a later stage synchronize with the footage in the editing room or use as a voiceover. After the first two months I also invested in a Gimble, which helped concretize what I envisioned the film would look like. The stableness of the shots and the slow-paced walk-through of corridors and hallways conveys a quite vivid experience of being there and sensorially interact with the architectural spaces. At the very start of my journey from Northern Norway to the Dutch monastery I was also very thorough with my field journal, which by the end of my fieldwork amounted to 29 pages. Many parts are not directly relevant for my project, but I nevertheless took it as a challenging exercise not only to focus on my surroundings, improving my memory (especially during the conversations I had with the monks which I did not record, as opposed to other fieldworks I did, throughout which the sound-recorder was always on) and recording immediate feelings and impressions. This exercise was of great value to focus on my sensorial experience of the place.

The use of film as complementary material to the written thesis will, in my opinion, be of great potential for the understanding of my research topic. My hope is that, through my film, the audience will be brought inside the walls of the monastery and perceive their surrounding in the way that I did. Through the juxtaposition of moving images and soundscapes collected at St. Benedictusberg, and by using an introductory textual contextualization, I aim to appeal

to the viewers sensorial receptiveness and offer an immersive experience. The film alternates between slow-paced walks with the camera and moments in which I stop and observe (in the church, in the garden, in the crypt, in the sleeping quarters, and in the library). The idea I wish to convey through this cinematic technique is that of a search for a human presence, which automatically brings us to explore architectural spaces and the essence of the building. The present paper offers the analytical tools to read the film from a sensorial-anthropological perspective, although film and text are to be taken as two separate ethnographic methods each with its own strengths and weaknesses, which can tell different stories in different ways.

2.1 Considerations on my role and the presence of the camera

As I am sitting among the rest of the guests during the High Mass, I am sensitive to all visual and auditorial stimuli. While the monks start flowing into the room, the ones who would celebrate the Eucharist dressed in white, and the singing monks dressed in black, I become aware of how a film might present this scene to the audience. The risk of exotification was high, and I do not have as of this point enough material to contextualize it. Halfway through the ceremony my thoughts are interrupted by the sound from a chain being shook. A few moments later one of the youngest monks enters the church spreading incense in the air and filling the room with smoke and a pungent smell.

[extract from field diary]

A number of reasons lied behind my choice of researching architectural spaces in a monastic environment. My main area of interest was (and still is) the reflection of a certain lifestyle on the places we inhabit. My interest for the subject grew out of a first-hand experience in renovating an old ruin in the Swedish countryside, together with my father and my brother. As the house slowly, over a period of almost five years, started to turn into home, I felt an affinity to a building in a way I had never done before. Over this period of time, I simultaneously started my bachelor's degree in Social Anthropology and eventually got acquainted with Daniel Miller and his anthropology of material culture. I was very much fascinated by the idea of a mutual agency between people and building, especially in light of my own experience in renovating a house. This initial interest in the topic grew throughout the years, especially as a result of new acquaintances with whom I discussed at large the definition and perception of a Home. The diversity of opinions was to me quite fascinating, and I kept reflecting on my own experience of the places I inhabited throughout the years, and how much "at home" I felt in each of them.

This resulted in an brainstorming which led me to read up on a number of topics, ranging from eco-villages to the so-called “van-life” community (people who choose to live permanently, or semi-permanently, in furnished busses or vans). The underlying focus was alternative lifestyles and alternative housing. As I dug deeper in the already vastly explored ground of material culture studies, I asked myself “What would a study of material culture look like in a place where material consumption and accumulation is strongly discouraged? What would the relationship with a house look like in such a scenario?”. This initial question constituted the bulk of the process of formulating my research topic. A second factor which played its part was the aesthetics of monasteries as architectural artefacts, which I have long found fascinating, as well as an interest in art from an anthropological perspective. Once I comfortably settled on a topic to which I felt I could contribute to, that I found deeply fascinating, and that I could enrich with first-hand experience, I reached out to a number Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries. The majority of them were reluctant to invite me in as a guest, and straight-out against the idea of me filming these places. A compromise was reached when I contacted the Abbott of St. Benedictusberg who accepted my project on the condition that I did not overstay a period of twenty days. I realized, even before I started my journey, that it was going to be difficult introducing a camera in the monastery, especially in such a short period of time. In light of my own obstacles in accessing the field with the camera, it is not surprising that one of the most famous films portraying life inside the monastic walls, Philip Gröning’s *Into Great Silence* (2005), is a product of a sixteen-years long wait for the community to consent being filmed as noted in an interview with the filmmaker (Gröning, 2006). Additionally, my role as a non-religious filmmaker would soon become the proverbial elephant in the room. My situation was quite similar, if not identical, to Irvine’s (2011) experience in conducting fieldwork in an English Benedictine monastery, throughout which he constantly reflects upon his role as a visitor in a monastic environment, and on the risk of “playing at being a monk”. His role as a “peripheral participant” (2011: 224) only had “limited consequences for the community [but] gave me a vantage point to recognize and understand social relations”. On this note I would like to clarify that even though the way I filmed my surrounding does not tell much about the person behind the camera since the less pious guests and the monks alike would move through the abbey in the way I did, this section serves the purpose of clarifying my own positionality towards the film, my own background and religious beliefs (or rather, the lack of them).

My thoughts are simultaneously drawn back to my upbringing in Italy. I remember how certain gestures became taken for granted when going to church on Sundays, on Easter and Christmas morning. I remember people around me telling me to do this, because it’s a symbol

of peace and of love. I remember the same people leaving the church and changing immediately, becoming more hateful, discriminating, and prejudiced. After some time, I stopped believing in these gestures and started on my personal path of self-discovery, leaving religion behind but still trying to understand spirituality. In the mind of the people that I met in the monastery there is most certainly a god watching them, and their gestures are a way of showing their respect to this god. I do not feel the god's presence, just the one of the people around me and that of the room. I am not however present only with my five senses, because I also feel the atmosphere this environment creates, solemn, contemplative, and self-reflecting. Through my movements I pay my respect to it and the beliefs of the monks. In Ingold's words (2017: 23), I was not gathering data but committing ontologically, being there and respectfully acknowledging these rituals, but not participating in them.

During a conversation I had with the Prior, he told me that I am free to film the surroundings when no-one is around and that if someone would enter I should either ask for permission to include them or stop the recording. As an anthropologist in the field, I was naturally prepared for this scenario, and knowing the kind of environment I was entering I suspected this outcome. While we were discussing alternative approaches, he took out a piece of paper from under his robe where he had written down the link to a webpage in which they upload the livestream of the liturgies taken with a camera installed on the ceiling of the church and told me that I was free to use this footage for my film. The frustration rose after our meeting. I considered any alternative solutions. This film was bound to be experimental from the beginning, now I just needed to adapt and present the material that I can collect in the best possible way. At the same time, I understood their preference towards using their own material. As Grasseni (2004: 13) puts it, "meaning is inherent in such shared practices, internal to a community of practitioners and 'objective' only in that it is an aspect of participating in a practice – with its aesthetics and moral order". While the meaning behind the practices was of great interest to me from an anthropological perspective, I am not a monk and I do not share the meaning that these hold for the community. As for the aesthetics of the practices, I suspect most of the visitors would look at these rituals differently from the people performing them, simply because they would be considered extraordinary in the sense that they would not belong to a range of human activities we would be observing in any "ordinary environment" (and here I refer to the perception of an atheist visitor such as myself). For the monks on the other hand, what they do is as ordinary as wearing a pair of jeans or go to go to a karaoke would be for me.

During a conversation I had with br. Leo, the monk brought up a task he had recently taken upon himself. His mission is to see through the congregation, to inspect his fellow

brothers, and see the holiness inside each of them. “We live as a community in a beautiful place” he says, waving his hand around the garden we were walking through “but all that is superficial and in your relationship with God as [in the one] with the people around you it is important to see, to have an eye contact with the person in front of you”. He says everyone has two histories on their back, or two masks they wear, an outer one and an inner one. He feels the importance of getting to know someone on a deeper level. He understands people through the suffering, through the lack of excessiveness and through the simplicity. “And” he adds “this is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit”. Throughout my stay at St. Benedictusberg Abbey, I always tried my best to translate the monks’ words in a way that they would fit my own cosmology. I felt that was the best way in which I could feel some affinity to the community. Br. Leo’s enterprise of understanding people was not so different from my own role in the monastery, with the difference that the holy spirit interested me to the extent it was part of the monks’ cosmology. Listening, taking mental and physical notes of what was happening all around me, and recording it with the camera only constituted the ethnographic aspect of this project. It is however in this translation of cosmologies, which allowed me to fill the gap I was feeling towards the people I met, that I see my anthropological endeavour throughout my fieldwork. Ingold (2017) defines anthropology as the “generous, open-ended, comparative, and yet critical inquiry about the conditions and possibilities of human life in the one world we all inhabit”. Through my translation process, I found myself constantly attempting to bridge my own atheist ideology with the one of the monks.

3 Theoretical Framework

Although my initial theoretical frame pivoted around material culture and its consumption, it became clear throughout my fieldwork that the audiovisual material I was collecting required a slightly different body of literature in order to be analyzed properly. The reason for this was that the relationship between the monks and the monastery was challenging to capture on camera; instead, the camera became a tool to record my perception of the place, and to hint at the presence of its inhabitants. Merleau-Ponty (1964: 15) raises a valid point in stating that in interacting with others we cannot possibly live their lives; “but that distance becomes a strange proximity as soon as one comes back to the perceptible world, since the perceptible is precisely that which can haunt more than one body without budging from its place”. I will return to the epistemological relationship between the perceptive body and the perceptible world in chapter

6 and illustrate to what extent we assimilate our surroundings through our senses, and how much we project ourselves into them. I am therefore going to make use of anthropology of the senses and phenomenology as the main backdrop for this research, while material culture studies will hold a secondary position. These two trends within the discipline of anthropology can however be used as parallels, especially when considering homes as a material product of our culture. The meeting point of the two theoretical frames lies in a “sensory consumption” (Low, 2015) of material culture, which in the case of the present research is the architectural space. In his article, Low (2015) illustrates how sensorial overstimulation in a Singaporean ethnic enclave are approached methodologically and analyzed; I would, however argue that sensorial consumption in a monastic environment is imbued with a contemplative aspect, both for the more pious guests and for the atheist visitors. In chapter 6, I am going to further elaborate on how a space is created sensorially. The creation of an architectural space by its visitor occurs empirically through the senses as well as culturally, as a reflection of ourselves. This process is different from, yet simultaneously a byproduct of, the work of the architect.

Ethnographies have increasingly been focusing on sensorial experiences as a medium to bring the audience to the field (or rather, the field to the audience), and in the last twenty years much anthropological research, as well as ethnographic filmmaking, has made use of multi-sensorial and phenomenological approaches as research methodologies (Butler, 2006; Chau, 2008; Sunderland et. al. 2012; Low, 2015; Storaas & Yuan Wang, 2006). These approaches challenge the perception of the bodies in the field as static actors, whose narratives we follow in a quite detached way enlarging the cultural and social gap between us and them. Appealing to the five senses creates anchor points for the audience and is a step towards a fully inclusive manner of carrying out research in a way that the reader or the viewer is able to feel affinity to the people portrayed through a sensorial experience. As Steven Feld (1996: 91) so eloquently phrases it ‘as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place’; with these words he describes the nomenclature of natural landscapes among Kaluli people in Papua New Guinea.

3.1 A theory of Material Culture

Following the definition of Prown (1982: 1), when writing about material culture we refer to “the study through artifacts of the beliefs – values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions – of a particular community or society at a given time”. Behind the history of religion lies a major premise, that is the opposition between materiality and immateriality, the mundane and the

sacred, the object and the meaning it is imbued with. The human body and the Christian soul. This premise might appear as quite paradoxical, and we may end up in a chicken-and-the-egg kind of conundrum; did an almighty deity create the thinking body, or did the human brain create a god? Furthermore, in the words of Prown (1982: 2) “The word material in material culture refers to a broad, but not unrestricted, range of objects [...]. It embraces the class of objects known as artifacts – objects made by man or modified by man. It excludes natural objects”. According to pre-Christian polytheistic religions, the natural world was imbued with godly powers and natural phenomena was seen as a manifestation of a deity’s will. Later, religion started to transcend the realm of nature, which is often associated with the profane, becoming its opposite pole. Natural materials, such as stone, were now reshaped in the form of places of cult, such as monasteries, and once again attributed religious significance.

A number of monastic orders, including Trappist (Cistercian) monks to which the monks of S. Benedictusberg often liked to compare themselves with, take a vow of poverty as part of their spiritual journey, renouncing all material possessions in order to pursue their calling; and yet, the few objects that they do surround themselves with hold a great value, to the extent that they are used in religious practices. Among the community of the Dutch abbey, this vow is not followed as strictly as among other religious communities, even though material cumulation is strongly discouraged. During a conversation I had with br. José, the monk pulled a smartphone out of his pocket and told me how they still rely on material commodities for practical reasons, beyond which they lose all meaning. The same thing happened whilst I was attempting to set up a one-on-one conversation with the abbot. He too unlocked his cellphone and navigated to the calendar to give me his availability. Practical necessities in the 21st century have to some extent overwritten the Rule, in which St. Benedict (1948: 104) tells them:

“This vice especially is to be cut out of the monastery by the roots. Let no one presume to give or receive anything without the Abbot’s leave, or to have anything as his own—anything whatever, whether book or tablets or pen or whatever it may be—since they are not permitted to have even their bodies or wills at their own disposal; but for all their necessities let them look to the Father of the monastery. And let it be unlawful to have anything which the Abbot has not given or allowed. Let all things be common to all, as it is written, and let no one say or assume that anything is his own.”

Engelke (2005) speculates whether it is at all possible to enquire upon religious practices without taking into account the materiality they are imbued with, which makes us question

whether even the most pious and secluded monastic orders such as the Trappist, can embark on a spiritual journey leaving everything but spirituality behind. The vast majority of monastic communities would agree with the followers of the apostolic Christian Church in Zimbabwe which Engelke opens a dialogue with; that “material culture in its various forms constitutes the single most important obstacle in developing a relationship with God” (2005: 119). And yet material commodities are, to a very little extent, always relied upon.

Our alienation with respect to the material world we create first became subject of in-depth philosophical analysis when Hegel developed his *Phenomenology of The Spirit*, first published in 1807. The German philosopher takes a juridical body as one of many examples for a alienating human behaviour-regulating creation, to which we are subjects to, and by which our actions are sanctioned by. We can find countless examples of this alienation processes; clothes creates fashions, which we may see as an expression of our personality, of somebody else’s as opposed to our own, or as a process of homogenisation we feel the need to escape. Food plays an important role in each of our own upbringing and is a very strong cultural marker; in many cultures the ability to cook the food from one’s own country is highly valued and the inability to prove oneself in the kitchen become almost stigmatizing and proof that one does not fully belong to their culture. Houses is one example through which we may best understand the alienation process. As I will illustrate in chapter 5, moving into a new home entails a process of familiarisation, which is achieved by stylistic and aesthetic choices that have a meaning to us, often through the spreading of material objects (identity markers such as pictures, inherited furniture, books, plants and so on). What happens if the house itself rejects certain identity markers and aesthetic choices? We would not install an IKEA kitchen in a stately home for instance, the result would be that of an eclectic mishmash of identity markers that would in many ways clash with each other. Miller (2010: 83) brings up the example of English residential blocks in the UK that were supposed to embody the idea of socialistic architecture, of shared spaces. By the mid 1980’s, the same buildings became stigmatised due to structural faults, and their inhabitants perceived as “urban detritus”. The personified House, or the spirit of it, is a recurrent theme in both fictional and academic literature, as illustrated by Daniel Miller in his essay *Stuff* (2010: 93) and in chapter 6 of the anthology *Home Possessions* (2001: 107) about material culture. He mentions the emblematic example of the American Hiram B. Otis who purchases a stately home and has a close-up encounter with the ghost haunting it in Oscar Wilde’s novel, *The Canterville Ghost*. The spirit of the house in Miller’s analysis of the Victorian novel is in fact the agency of a place we might call “home”, layers of meaning laid out by its history, outlook, narratives, and embedded culture.

In one of his lectures (1983) Van der Laan outlines his architectural philosophy. His conviction is that humanmade architectural spaces are carved out of their natural surroundings, almost like a negative mould of a statue, but the two coexist together in the same macroscopic space, opposite and complementary. The architect's philosophy is in many ways similar to Hegel's alienating process with respect of human creation, of the material culture we are surrounded and shaped by. Through the process of carving out liveable areas from our natural surroundings we create a polarisation, the inside and the outside, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the private and the public and, in the case of a monastic environment, the sacred and the profane. This illustrates how the transition between pantheism and the construction of places of cult, has turned the sacred/mundane dualism inside out.

3.2 Walking With Video

The relationship between walking and conducting ethnographic fieldwork has been described in-depth by a number of articles and essays (Pink, 2007; Lee & Ingold, 2006; Yi'En, 2014), as well as the perception of our physical surroundings through our senses (Ingold, 2000; Feld and Basso, 1996). In my own film, I make use of "walking with video" (Pink, 2007) as a central methodological approach, whereas in the present paper I employ this idea as an analytical tool to bridge anthropology of the senses and material culture. During my stay at the monastery, due to the reluctance that the majority of the monks showed towards being filmed, I overcame this barrier by filming my surroundings and portray the inhabitants and the visitors mostly through sound. As a result, in the film I map the architectural spaces inside the monastery by walking through them. During the first sequence in which I employ this method (00:04:27 – 00:05:55) the audience is brought up the stairs leading to the church from the main courtyard. This is the route that the guests and the visitors would take to attend the liturgies. Later on, I introduce the church (00:08:40 – 00:09:06) following the side-aisle through which the fourteen monks would flow into the church and take their place on the sides of the altar. I then exit the church and walk through the garden (00:10:52 – 00:11:18; 00:13:09 – 00:13:26) where I had the most insightful discussions with br. Mathieu and br. Leo. Afterwards, I introduce the audience to the crypt (00:15:06 – 00:16:10; 00:16:43 – 00:17:08), in which I first heard the sound of the chisel when br. José was engraving names onto the stone wall. Towards the end of the film I move towards the guests' bedrooms, virtually identical to the monks' living

quarters which the guests were not allowed to see, following the arched corridor (00:21:09 – 00:21:43). The corridors in front of the eight guestrooms were regularly walked through by people heading to the services, returning to their rooms, leaving for a stroll in the park, or gathering in a group waiting to be allowed in the refectory and eat with the monks. Lastly, I use the same filmic technique in the library (00:23:24 – 00:24:39), where the monks store their collection of over 7.000 volumes, containing everything ranging from hagiographies (biographies of saints), history, modern interpretations of holy scripts, and theology in its wider sense. This is where the rules dictating all aspects of their lives are stored, enriched throughout the centuries but at their core unchanged by technological innovation and thus anachronistic. It was not until after my fieldwork, when I came back to Tromsø and I started working on my written thesis that I realized the potential of “walking with video” as an analytical link in understanding the experience of a home, of architecture, and material culture. In chapter 6, I will return to the sensorial implications of this methodological approach.

4 The Blind Audience

I notice how in the absence of verbal dialogue all other noises are amplified. Also, and most importantly, I become aware of every movement of my body. Reaching for the coffee powder or spreading the butter over a slice of bread or chewing or sipping. Gestures I would not take much notice of otherwise I am now aware of, as if I was speaking out loud.

[extract from field diary]

I am bringing up the example of a metaphorical “blind audience” to underline the importance of sound in filmmaking, ethnographic or otherwise. The role of sound in ethnographic filmmaking is a topic that has been neglected in most anthologies or that has been regarded as secondary in comparison to moving images. Michel Chion describes sound as an add-on and tells us that “a film without sound remains a film; a film with no image, or at least without a visual frame for projection is not a film” (1994: 143). Chion was not wrong, and the history of cinema, especially in its early years, is full of examples of “silent” films after all, even though none of these were ever completely silent. Audio-visual stimuli has grown parallelly to the growth of audio-visual technologies and distribution platforms. As Toop observes of modern society, “All silences are uncanny, because we have become estranged from absences of sound” (2010, 182).

It is my opinion, however, that soundscapes offer the possibility of exploring a place sensorially which brings the audience closer to the film, creates a much more vivid and immersing narrative. This is because, silence is often associated with absence and immobility, while the presence of sound will inevitably raise the listener's awareness of something happening, whether it is identifiable or not. In my own film, the opening sequence (00:00:00 – 00:01:07) is quite illustrative of this. By juxtaposing a black screen with the crescent sound of footsteps, which intends to portray an anonymous person walking towards us, of a door being locked (or unlocked) and finally adding a fading sound of footsteps, we are able to draw a scene in our heads, without the use of images. My aim here is to convey the idea of a person unlocking the door to a visitor and immediately stepping away, allowing the guest to explore the monastery, aware of a human presence. As mentioned, I worked with a camera and a zoom recorder, which I placed in different places to record the sounds that, as a guest and as a monk you would be surrounded with daily. During the editing process, I used these sounds to create a soundtrack of sorts, for all those scenes in which I am, in Pink's (2007) words, "walking with video" inside the monastery and showing what I mean by architectural spaces. Examples of this is the sequence inside the church (00:08:40 – 00:10:28) where the birds or footsteps can be heard from a distance, as well as the scene in the crypt (00:14:23 – 00:17:36) in which we can hear someone using a hammer and a chisel. Even though it does not show in the film, it is br. José who is making these sounds in the crypt. When he is not busy in the garden, where I found him during most of his recreational time, he is learning the art of stonemasonry from br. Leo, who has taken him as an apprentice. On a number of occasions, I found br. José engraving names on one of the walls in the crypt although regrettably I was not allowed to film him. Here, the monks honor the benefactors that contributed to the preservation of the abbey by engraving their names on the stone surfaces. Another example of a soundscape is the four sequences throughout which we can hear the monks chanting fragments of the weekly psalmody (00:03:12 – 00:03:53; 00:04:30 – 00:08:07; 00:22:59 – 00:25:46; 00:26:50 – 00:27:07). During the first and the last sequence we can hear a plethora of voices singing "Deus in auditorium meum intende" to which a second group answers "Domine, ad adiuvandum me festina". These are the opening sentences of the majority of the liturgies, and are translated to "Oh God, come and save me" and "Lord, come quickly to my aid". The conventional structure of these chanted liturgies is antiphonal, meaning that each sentence sung by the group of monks sitting on one side of the altar is answered by a second group sitting on the other side, thus engaging in a sung dialogue. Csordas (1990: 8) defines the practice of speaking in tongues ("or glossolalia") within religious communities as an "embodied experience within a ritual system as a cultural operator

in the social trajectory of the religious movement”. Incidentally, the Latin language is used in everyday life as much as Dutch, and sometimes even more often, both during the singing of the psalms and when reading from the Rule of S. Benedict during the meals.

My film aims to explore monastic architectural spaces not only by representing them visually but through the association of soundscapes. I soon became aware of the community’s uneasiness in front of a camera, that there was a general concern about the way in which my film was going to portray them. It became clear during one conversation I had with the Abbot that the person holding a camera, whether it was me or a visitor taking a picture with a smartphone, puts the monks on a stage somehow. He explains to me that although there is a camera installed in the church which streams the liturgies live, when the actual audience in the room start filming or taking pictures, he feels like their routines becomes a staged performance, and lose their value and their meaning, if decontextualised. I therefore wish to be very clear on the purpose of this paper, which written from an anthropological perspective and focuses on material culture and our sensorial relationship with it. Due to the lack of material capturing the community involved in their daily routines, I found myself in a difficult position, which I decided to navigate through by telling a story about the community of St. Benedictusberg Abbey without showing it, and portray the people therein through the sound they produce. In Iversen’s words (Iversen, 2010: 78), my aim is to “map space with sound, creating atmosphere and context, which rubs off on the images themselves, and transform them”. The extract from my field diary with which I have opened this section is an accurate example of the paradoxical nature of sound, “an amplification” (Iversen, 2010: 201) ”of slight events within a low-level auditory environment [...] the lower the level of auditory background, the more intense the listener’s awareness of minimal interferences. Quiet becomes loud”.

5 St. Benedictusberg

5.1 Architecture

For Dom Hans Van der Laan, order is the underlying principle of everything. Nature, as God’s creation, is unfathomable. Its forms have countless sizes. Architecture, as the fundamental HABITUS is there to surround us like clothing and to make our environment readable. As such, it is closely linked to our process of knowing. Van der Laan defines ‘to inhabit’ as being able to enter into a relationship with a space, being able to measure that space.

This is the EXPRESSIVENESS of architecture.

Most of us have had the experience of moving into a new apartment or a new house. Let us try for a moment to picture ourselves walking through the empty rooms of this place we call home. We might find ourselves in a room with white walls, large windows, and a parquet floor. In our heads we might start to fill this space with objects that we feel affinity towards; polaroid pictures from our travels to hang on the wall, plants from our grandparent's garden in the countryside to place on the window frame, a carpet we found in a flea market to lay out on the floor. The pictures, the plants and the carpet are all identity markers, material objects that reflect our personality and identity, which we spread out around us to extend that feeling of affinity to the place itself. For a person who refuses material accumulation because of ideological reasons, identity markers will look quite different. The objects that the Benedictine monks surround themselves with, i.e. robes of different colors, books, a paraphernalia of cups and jugs and incense burners for the celebration of the High Mass, are meant to serve a purpose beyond which they lose all sentimental value. These objects become identity markers on a collective level rather than on an individual level. The layers of meaning which these objects are embedded with overtake the objects themselves and become much louder and apparent. These layers are extended to the architectural spaces and embedded in the building. During one conversation I had with br. Mikael, the young monk told me: "There is a saying among us: the soberness of the place invites you to fill it with your personality". The monastery becomes a reflection of the visitor's and the inhabitant's spiritual Self. It is my assumption that even the atheist visitor who would step into the Church, would feel as if they've entered a place charged with a powerful, solemn atmosphere, regardless of whether religious practices are carried out within. It is as if the architecture in itself would invite anyone who looks upon it to contemplate, meditate, be mindful.

Among the pages that br. Lambertus left in front of my door, the following section illustrate Van der Laan's definition of a building, and whether or not it can be inherently religious:

It was a fundamental belief of Father van der Laan that there is no specific religious and ecclesiastic architecture. Every building should be first and last a human building and obey the basic rules of every human creative work. Objects made by humans are suitable for liturgical or ecclesiastic use not because they bear any religious symbolism or are distinguished by their religious decoration, but

⁹ <https://domhansvanderlaan.nl/theory-practice/theory/the-plastic-number-ratio/#:~:text=7%20is%20divided%20in%203,PLASTIC%20NUMBER%20or%20GROUND%20RATIO>
(Accessed: 06/05/2024)

because [...] they represent the most beautiful and sublime experiences of human creative work [...] Through consecration, the church became a place of worship. A space is suitable to be dedicated to God through consecration if an ideal human creation is created through the use of harmonious conditions, whereby this space becomes an image, a sign of a higher reality. Only such a space is suitable to become a Church through consecration.

[extract from br. Lambertus' notes]

When talking about architectural spaces, I refer to any and every three-dimensional “room” created by and in-between walls, ceilings, floors, and pillars. These are rooms through which we move and which we interact with sensorially, through our perception of length, width, and depth. The lack of objects, of concrete identity markers beyond the place itself, leads to a much stronger sensory consumption of architectural spaces, which goes beyond the assimilation through our senses but rather entails something more. This is where we find a bridge between architectural spaces and spirituality. As Gilchrist argues (1994: 17), we can see “space as a form of material culture” and can therefore be consumed like any other form of material culture marker such as clothing or food (I am however going to make a distinction in what we mean by consumption in chapter 6).

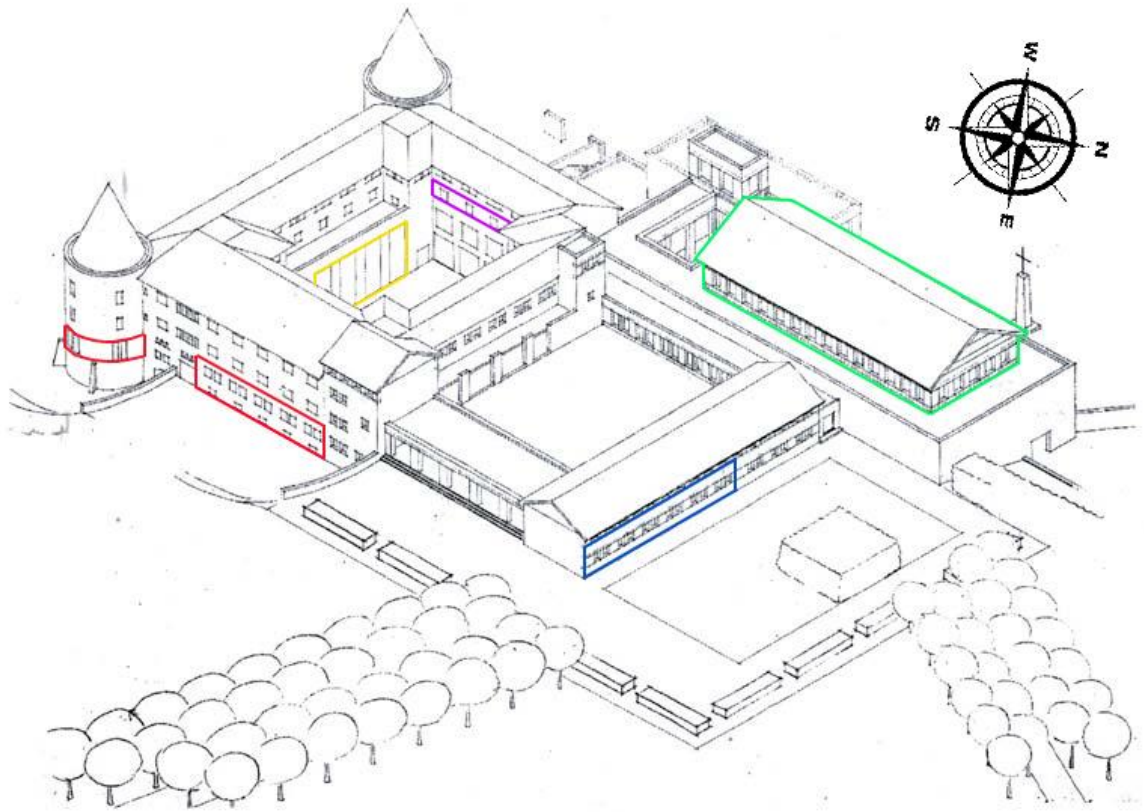


Fig. 1

The map of St. Benedictusberg shows the Church (marked in green), the bedrooms of the monks (marked in purple), the refectory (marked in yellow), the guestrooms and the common room in the east tower where the guests have breakfast, read and/or engage in conversations (marked in red) and, finally, the library (marked in blue). The crypt lies underneath the church. [Retrieved from: <https://socks-studio.com/2014/08/17/the-st-benedictusberg-abbey-at-vaals-by-hans-van-der-laan/> on November 28, 2023]

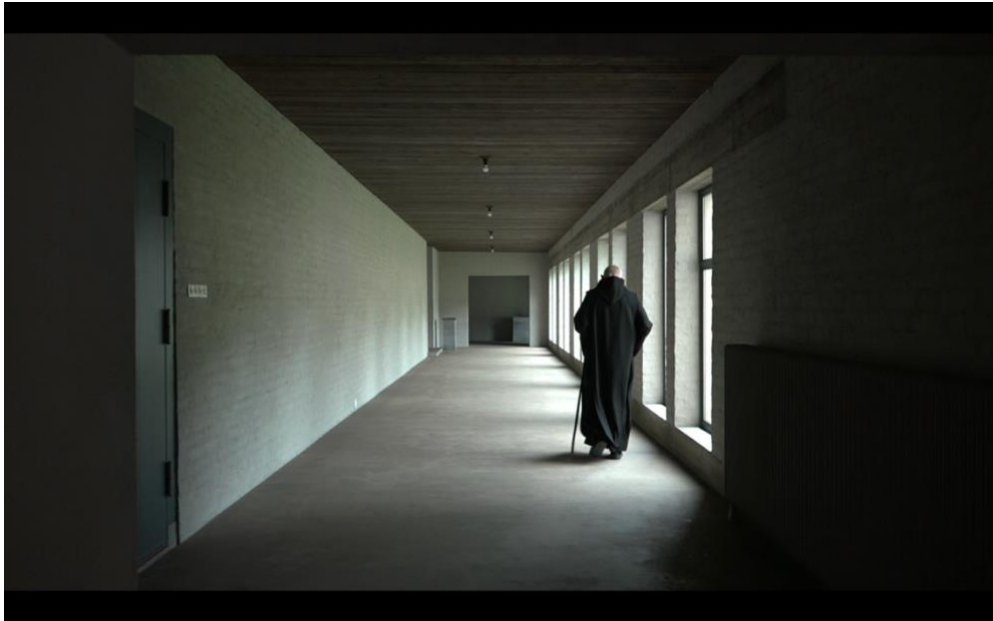


Fig. 2

The northern part of the Abbey, i.e. the church (built in 1967), the crypt (built in 1961) and the library (built in the late 1980's), was almost entirely realized following Hans Van der Laan's plans [Source: screenshots of my own footage]



Fig. 3

Most of the southern part of the Abbey was left as it was at the time of its foundation and follows the design of Dominikus Böhm (1880-1955) and Martin Weber (1890-1941), although minor alterations were made in terms of isolation of the walls, installment of solar panels and electrical heating systems. In August 2023, the original built of the monastery celebrated its first centenary [Source: screenshots of my own footage]

If we juxtapose the two images above, we notice a striking difference in the architectural style, one that was brought up during a conversation I had with br. Mikael. He points at the passageway between the crypt and the kitchen, where the red floor under an arched ceiling abruptly stopped to leave space to the square hallway of grey and white stone and tells me this concept is very fascinating. The sphere is placed above the square in the older part of the Abbey, as is the case with much of the roman architecture. The square shape is symbolic for what we consider worldly, more specifically the four elements (earth, fire, air, water), while the sphere is associated with the celestial plane, holiness and the immaterial. These associations date back to the dualistic philosophy of Platon. Following Van der Laan's definition of buildings as a product of human creative work mentioned above, we can see the ways in which his architectural style differs from the original design. His architectural philosophy is much more anthropocentric than the one of his predecessors; he conceives buildings first and foremost as human creations which can, through consecration, be used for ecclesiastical purposes.

5.2 The Monastery

“How would you describe the relationship between the community of St. Benedictusberg and this place?” I asked br. Mathieu one sunny afternoon in mid-July. The monk had never given it much thought. He tells me that no other monastery he has been to had changed so little in such a long time. It has been over 50 years since the monastery had been reshaped following Van der Laan's design. Everything was thanks to him. The architect had designed the hallways, the pillars, the windows, the furniture, the garden, the tree-lined boulevards, the ornaments and even picked the colors. In over four years which have gone since br. Mathieu started living in St. Benedictusberg, he still hasn't grown tired of it. When he thinks of the monastery he thinks of the choice of the design and the choice of the place. I tell him about how I feel timelessness when I am inside the monastery, I feel the stone surfaces and the space they create. I tell him how different it feels entering a church in Italy for example, in which spirituality is represented through frescos, statues, ornaments, and icons. As beautiful as they are, they feel overwhelming. The Dutch Abbey feels, on the other hand, as if a razor had scraped away everything in excess and left the core of a place standing. “How do you deal with the core of a building? Can you put into words?” I asked. Br. Mathieu told me that he sees the relationship between time and space in the interaction between the community with the building. The day is divided into hours,

eight according to the Benedictine Rule, each demanding a specific routine which the monks carry out with diligence and obedience. The building is the space within which these routines are carried out and has been shaped to ease the fulfillment of each task. And yet, according to Van der Laan's philosophy "there is no specific religious and ecclesiastic architecture. Every building should be first and last a human building and obey the basic rules of every human creative work". It is only through consecration that a building becomes religious, and a place is consecrated if it "becomes an image, a sign of a higher reality".

During my first visit of the abbey, I had a conversation with two guests in the round recreational room over a cup of coffee. M. and C. are both pursuing theological studies to become priests, and they travelled to S. Benedictusberg with some questions that they needed answered by the monks. This, I discovered, was a recurring reason to visit the monastery amongst the most pious visitors. Some would see it as a retreat, while others would be drawn to the place because of its architectural significance or to retreat from the turmoil of urban life. I tell my interlocutors that people often confuse religion and faith, put them in the same box and miss the nuances. I tell them that faith can, in my opinion, be put in a god but also in people, and that my spiritual journey had led me to place it in the latter rather than in the former. M. tells me that religion without faith is like a giftbox without anything inside. C. then asks what faith without religion is. I did not answer on the spot, but the answer came to me later. It's an Ockham's razor. When you strip religion of all ornaments, all excessiveness, and its institutional meaning – which we did discuss, and C. understands my point about how religion is experienced in a catholic country such as Italy – you are left with faith. But the excessiveness can both lead to extremism and chauvinism on one hand, and the production of material culture on the other, which in itself is merely a cultural expression. Another guest recollected the first time he had visited S. Benedictusberg with his dad when he was 16 years old. Son of an architect, and one himself, H. had met Van der Laan during his first visit, and tells me how his own father had worked together with the monk on a theory of colors and decided the chromatic tones of the furniture around the monastery. Fifty years later H. came back to study the architecture of "the plastic number" and the monastery has attracted him since, "not because I am a believer but because I find harmony and peace in the building and the rituals that the brothers perform. It brings me closer to myself, to nature-man and the universe. Big words, but it is simply helping me deal with the stress of daily life" he says. During our conversations he would talk about the architectural movement in Herthogenbosch, the Bossche School, a movement that revolved around ecclesiastical architecture. He shows me a book about it. I asked him about his father's inspiration for the colours, and he says they are created in a pursuit of a soothing visual

harmony, no contrasts with the surroundings. During a conversation I had with C. he expressed his feelings towards the monastery when he would find himself contemplating and listening to the singing monks. As he phrased it “the building can be a bit confronting, grey, or dull. But the simplicity of the building has a calming and simplifying effect on your own mind; you are able to just focus on the prayer and let other things go”. When I returned to the monastery in July, I was happy to learn that there was another guest who was not Dutch, and I could therefore speak in English with. G. comes from Canada, and he came to S. Benedictusberg to temporarily escape the urban life of Utrecht, where he was now living. He tells me how, when he sees the monks bowing towards each other he thinks of martial arts, where two opponents bow to each other as a sign of respect for each other’s ambitions. By the end of my stay, he told me how he had taken this experience as a personal challenge to stay away from his smartphone, from all that was happening outside, and to talk as little as possible. This was his way to be mindful of the place and to contemplate.

5.3 The Garden

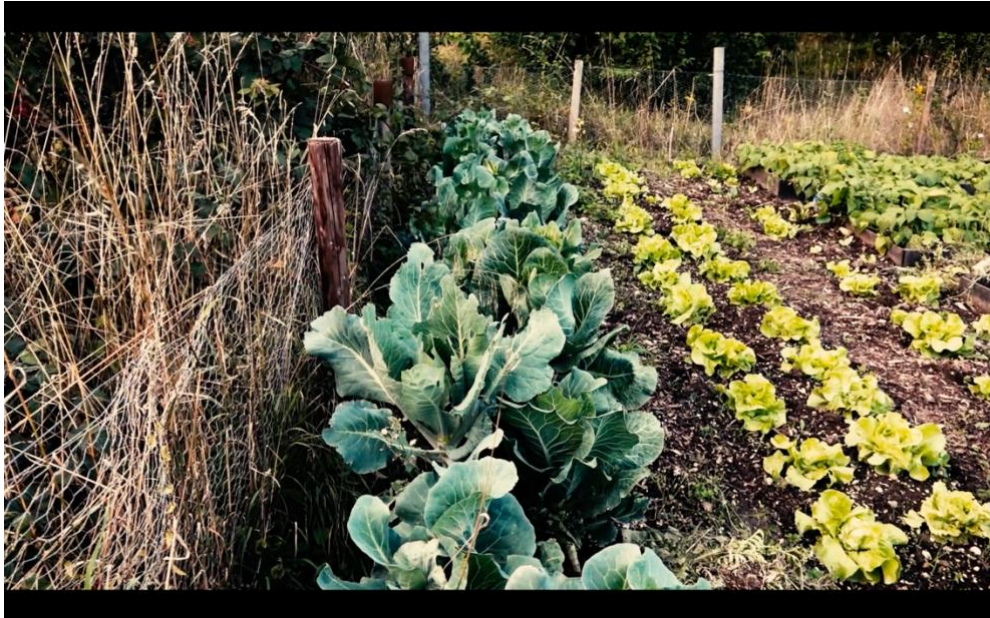


Fig. 4

Br. José tends to the vegetable garden during most of his spare time. Almost all food served at the dinner table is produced inside the monastery. What the monks cannot do themselves, like milking the cows or retrieving honey from the beehives, they rely on the expertise of local farmers. [Source: screenshots of my own footage]

As mentioned above, the Benedictine doctrine rests heavily upon the notion of prayer and manual labor as the main prerequisites for conducting a pious life (“ora et labora”), which has been a cardinal point ever since the creation of the order. Work ethic and religious commitment are complementary aspects of the life of a monk. Also, their pursuit of an independent and self-sustainable lifestyle has always been promoted. In recent years, ecological research has increasingly been focusing on faith-based organizations to understand our relationship to agriculture and gardening (Puglisi & Buitendag, 2022; Ahmad, 2020; McKay et al, 2014). At one point, as I was sitting with the rest of the guests by the fountain in the garden, brother Mathieu told us about the division of labour at the monastery, and the potential it has of being a true community through collective work. I asked about the garden, and he tells me about one of the brothers who takes care of the vegetable garden especially and of the cooking. They used to have a brother who kept the bees, but now he’s been moved elsewhere. Now the bees are still there but are kept by outsiders. A hundred tasks are divided among the 18 monks, and every three months the list is updated. It is hard work, and everyone does what they can. Jerome, the Belgian receptionist and groundkeeper, later told me that they once had sheep, but that they now lacked the manpower to keep them.

From my very first visit of St. Benedictusberg Abbey, I couldn’t help but notice a striking contrast between the inside of the Abbey and the natural landscapes surrounding the place. During a conversation I had with br. Mathieu in the tree-lined boulevard, my interlocutor started reflecting on the indoor environment as opposed to the outdoor milieu. Each room in the monastery has windows, and through the windows we see the outside constantly changing, days, nights, seasons and so on. Through the windows the outside reaches the inside in the form of light, which is also changing at every hour of the day. The hallways are timeless while the surrounding trees represent time itself. Throughout my film, I show a number of timelapses during dawn, midday, and sunset, in which part of the building stands in the foreground while the sky, the light and the shadows quickly change around it. This represents vividly, in my opinion, the passage of time as opposed to the timelessness of the building and, by extension, of the doctrine. Br. Mathieu and I pass by an old wooden bench in the park, covered in moss and cracks. He points at it and tells me that part of the architecture also shows the passing of

time. He then argues how peculiar behavior, and how beautiful of a contrast, it is to strive towards horizontal and vertical lines in man-made creations, whereas nature never shows any sign of this. An attempt to bend the natural surroundings into a more domesticated landscape can be seen in the beech trees planted by the architect delimitating the garden. These become an example of natural rooms, as opposed to the architectural ones inside the abbey. “The community of monks living in St. Benedictusberg Abbey” br. Mathieu concludes “has definitely been shaped by the space they inhabit”.



Fig. 5

The boulevards surrounding the garden create natural rooms, subject to a sensory consumption whenever a visitor walks through them. The length, width and depth are clearly delineated by beech trees. [Source: screenshots of my own footage]

When Br. José is not engraving names on the walls of the crypt, which I have seen him do a few times, he spends most of his spare time in the garden. During my first visit to the vegetable garden, he mentioned that he loves spending time there, caring for the flowers and everything that grows, and that he sometimes finds hidden treasures in the garden, arrowheads from tens of thousands of years ago and the occasional fossil. In my own film, when filming the outdoor surroundings, I focus especially on the vegetable garden (00:12:21 – 00:13:09) by

using a number of medium- and extreme close-up shots to explore what the monks had been planting, and what they would use as main ingredients in the meals they would consume. Here, the visual exploration of the place, blurs with a gustatory experience due to our affinity with what is portrayed (most of us know the taste of a raspberry, of tomatoes and leeches and zucchini). On one occasion I was filming the garden for the first time after being absent for a month. During my absence, br. José had been quite busy planting dozens of different kinds of flowers; the result was an explosion of colors covering an area of several square meters. Shortly after the monk joins me and tells me how he would usually use the flowers. The brothers of s. Benedictusberg do not celebrate conventional birthdays, but rather their namedays. It was going to be br. Fritz's nameday soon, and br. José intends to prepare a bouquet for him, as he does for most of the celebrations occurring in the monastery. During my previous visit, I witnessed another member's nameday celebration. Br. Antonius was one of the elder brothers and on his nameday, right after we had finished dinner and exited the refectory, I saw all the brothers taking turn in walking up to him and greet him with two kisses on the cheeks. On August 6th the community celebrated the Transfiguration of Jesus, in honor of which br. José had prepared a bouquet that he placed under the side-aisle in the Church; it appears in a short sequence in the film (00:11:18 – 00:11:32).

5.4 The Workshop

The first time I visited br. Leo's workshop a few objects caught my attention immediately. A hammer had been hung as a knocker on the door leading to the antechamber where the monk would take breaks from his work to smoke a cigarette or have a cup of coffee or look up at the photograph portraying his mentor, dom. Hans Van der Laan. Next to the entrance the stonemason had engraved these words a square block of granite: "If the people will fall silent, the stones will shout" (Luke 19:28-44¹⁰). This is a reference to a parable in the Bible, an episode in which Jesus is told to refrain his disciples from cheering his arrival and a false religion, to which he replies with these words. I found these words accurate for my own project, although using them as a preliminary title, as was my idea, would have taken them out of their context. All around the garage outside the workshop lied blocks of granite, marble, limestone, imported from all around the world, in different sizes and shapes, ranging from rocks I could

¹⁰ *The holy bible - djvu*. Available at: <http://triggs.djvu.org/djvu-editions.com/BIBLES/DRV/Download.pdf> [Accessed: 18 October 2023]

fit in my fist, to monoliths the size of a single bed. The one statue that caught my attention the most, and which I briefly introduced in the film (00:20:31 – 00:20:37) was representing a male figure standing behind a female figure; the latter had a swirling hole in her womb. A preparatory sketch next to the negative in wax was showing how it is going to look. Eight stars are drawn in a circle above their heads, and a ninth is represented in the form of a fetus in mother's womb. They say that unborn children become stars in the sky, and this commissioned statue is supposed to convey that idea. The stonemason mostly works on commission, and the compensation of his work goes to the community as a whole; as the Rule tells them "If any of the work of the craftsmen is to be sold, let those through whose hands the transactions pass see to it that they do not presume to practice any fraud" (Benedict, 1948: 164). Leo has the closest relationship to the monastery, to its stone surfaces. His left little finger is thicker than his right one from holding the chisel for many years. As br. José told me during one of our meetings in the garden, monasteries usually differentiate between the monks who have specific occupations within the monastery and are excused from the celebration of the liturgies if they so want (like brother Leo) and those who are not.

The stonemason's workshop becomes a cardinal turning point in my own film and can even be seen as the climactic moment of the narrative, in that it shows a long-awaited sequence in which we connect the sound of the chisel being hit during the earlier shots, and the tools that produces that sound. Stepping into the Leo's workshop we are introduced to a leading character in the story, and the fact that I chose him as my protagonist was due to several reasons. Br. Leo was one of the few monks who welcomed the camera without any major objections, and when he showed me his workshop, he was most eager to talk about architecture, tell me anecdotes on his mentor and on his own life. As I kept coming back to the abbey each month, I became increasingly aware of the importance of Hans Van der Laan as a figure of cult inside the abbey. His name was mentioned on a daily basis, when referring to the importance that the monastery itself holds for the monks. In light of this my curiosity towards the workshop as a site of production of stone idols grew. Following the definition of Prown (1982) discussed in chapter 3, material culture excludes natural materials that have not undergone a process of artificialization, or that have not been turned into artefacts. When talking about monastic architectural spaces, the line between artifacts and natural materials blurs somewhat because in crossing a church, a crypt, or a courtyard the presence of the bear stone surfaces is much more obvious than, for instance, a building in which a dissemination of cultural markers has brought up the layers of meanings behind embedded in them, and thus hidden their material features. It is not surprising that Prown argues for a revision of the term "material culture" due

to its almost paradoxical attempt to reconcile the concrete with the abstract (materiality and culture). The reason for including the stonemason's workshop as a key sequence in my film is that I see it as a bridge between materiality and culture.

6 Creating Our Sensorial and Physical Surroundings

As mentioned in chapter 5, architectural spaces are defined as any three-dimensional room we walk through, whether delimited by walls, pillars, floors, or ceilings, which are made much more evident if stripped of any sorts of identity markers, leaving “empty rooms” (which are never empty, but rather only contains the necessary). In the next section I will explore the epistemological relationship between the body and its surroundings, as well as the concept of “depth” as it has been tackled by two different philosophical schools in Europe over the 19th and 20th century, the empirical and the phenomenological. This will clarify how the body perceives and consumes architectural spaces through its senses, and this relates to spirituality as it is perceived by its most religious inhabitants. Later, I will tackle the role of the architect in the creation of our perception of a place and outline Hans Van der Laan's philosophy behind human buildings as first and foremost human creations.

6.1 The Moving Body As a Consumer of Spaces

After the last liturgy of the day, the monks kneel at the sides of the room facing the lateral hallways. I sit back on the bench as everyone leaves. The more I sit the more I can feel the room, the architectural space. The silence is deafening. It is as if the atmosphere becomes heavier and heavier. Or maybe my mind is. As if I was becoming one with the surrounding pillars, or with the empty space in between them. It is a strange feeling, hard to describe. Space and matter feel like one.

[extract from field diary]

One of the definitions that the Oxford English Dictionary provides of the word consumption is “The purchase and use of goods, services, materials, or energy. Frequently opposed to *production*”¹¹. If we were to look for the use of the word throughout most recent ethnographies and academic papers, we would find a more variegated range of definitions. Graeber (2011) insists on the fact that we should distinguish between: a. consumption as a

¹¹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “consumption (n.), sense 7.a,” March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9879857400>. [Accessed: 13/05/2024]

Marxist ideology, in terms alienations towards what we produce which is in turned consumed by those who buy it (consumption as the opposite of production); and b. consumption as an inalienable activity, nor good or bad in itself, through which we build our individual or collective identity, which should nevertheless be studied critically (Miller, 2012). In the present paper “consumption” assumes a slightly different nuance than the one Low (2015) imbues the term with, even though I found his study of urban landscapes in Singapore very much inspiring for my own project. “Sensorial consumption” in a monastic environment will, for obvious reasons, appear quite different than what we would experience in an ethnic enclave in Singapore. In S. Benedictusberg the visitor would consume the space by interacting with it both empirically and in a contemplative way, by “feeling the room” and projecting oneself into it. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the guests and the monks would interact in different ways with this environment. Some would find that the quietness and austerity of the place enables them to be closer to a deity, or to augment their spirituality, as a consequence of a detachment from the material. Others would reconnect with themselves on a more existential level, rather than spiritual, by stepping out of their routine and into a place where they are not reminded of the fast-paced rhythm of urban life, of their jobs, or other types of distractions from an introspective analysis. In light of this, consumption becomes inalienable in the sense that we are sensorially present, that the lack of material circulation opens a dialogue with the space, and that we come to terms with it.

Pink (2007) argues that the body perceives and, in a way, creates space through the five senses by moving through it. Places are just conventionally delimited surfaces with no meaning in themselves until experienced by a person being there. The consumption of a place is very subjective, and depending on our own associations and past experiences it can look very different. The camera acts as a bridge between the experiencing body and the surrounding space, a recording medium that through the skills of the filmmaker can convey a sense of what it means to be there. As MacDougall remarks “Visual Anthropology opens more directly onto the sensorium than written texts and creates psychological and somatic forms of intersubjectivity between viewer and social actor” (MacDougall, 1999: 262). This is what I aim to convey through my film, where the visual exploration of the monastery is closely linked to a tactile one; one example of this is the roughness of the walls and pillars, of the unaltered monoliths in br. Leo’s workshop. In another sequence I focus on a blown-out candle (00:08:07 – 00:08:39). Each time one of the monks would stay behind after performing a liturgy to put out the flames, or whenever one of the brothers would enter the church in the middle of the High Mass swinging the incense holder attached to a chain, I was mesmerized by the patterns

created by smoke in the large empty room. As soon as the smoke would start to fill the room, I would get lost in the patterns it created in the air, how it would slowly stretch for the next half hour over the benches and across the room, invisible in the shadows and taking the shape of waves in the sunrays that enter through the window and cut the empty space. All these impressions would always be accompanied by the pungent aromatic smell of the incense or by that of the smoke created by a candle that had been put out; these lingered on for a long time after the smoke had vanished from the rooms and became an olfactory marker for the place itself. Much like the sequences from the vegetable garden discussed in the previous chapter, this scene intends to carry the audience through a multisensorial exploration of the monastery. As I have illustrated in chapter 4, sound also becomes a powerful medium through which we perceive the presence of others without necessarily seeing them. Sound is also valuable as a storytelling tool and will give a quite different atmosphere to the film depending on how it is used throughout the editing process. In the next section I am going to give an account of how space is conceived by the human eye according to two European philosophers, in order to understand how we make sense of our physical surroundings through our senses.

The following anecdote has kept philosophers busy for centuries and it encapsulates quite clearly the epistemological relationship between the body and the physical surroundings: “If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?”. One of the major enquiries conducted on the empirical construction of reality was carried out by the Irish 18th century philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1753) in his “Treatise concerning the principles of human knowledge” (1734), to which the aforementioned conundrum is attributed to. Some have argued that it is impossible for a falling tree to produce any sounds if there is no receptive channel such as the human ear to translate the silent sound waves that travel through the empty space. The Irish philosopher developed a similar theory concerning visual stimuli, in particular the human eye’s perception of depth. Our eyes perceive our surrounding by relying on bidimensional representations of light and colors and can thus not perceive three-dimensional space without relying on the sense of touch (Schwarzer & Schmarsow, 1991). Berkeley was, by all accounts, an empiricist; he believed that what we consider to be real can only exist to the extent that it is perceived through the body’s five senses.

On the other end of the empiricism-rationalism spectrum we find Maurice Merleau-Ponty, although he never fully rejects the notion of empiricism but rather attempts to find a synthesis between the sensitive body and the cognitive processes of the mind. In the preface of his essay on perception, the philosopher tackles the notion of phenomenology, a “transcendental philosophy for which the world is ‘already there’ before reflection begins – as

an inalienable presence” (2002: vii). We are part of the world whether we question it or not. What the French philosopher identifies as perception, on the other hand, is not necessarily linked to chains of events, or to “the order of judgements, acts, or predication”, but there are always additional elements perceived by us that have no place in the perceived context. He condemns is the idea of the so-called “constancy hypothesis” defined as a “point-by-point correspondence and constant connection between the stimuli and the elementary perception” (2002: 8). There are, in other words, always additional layers of meaning embedded which do not correspond to reality such as we perceive it empirically. Depth is merely breadth seen from a different angle. In formulating his phenomenological philosophy, he rejected Berkeley’s empirical assumptions and formulated his own theory of depth, according to which it “exists only for a subject who synthesizes it and embrace it in thought” and that it is “the most ‘existential’ of all dimensions, because [...] it is not impressed upon the object itself, it quite clearly belongs to the perspective and not to things” (2002: 297f.). Building upon the premise that the body is inalienable with respect to its surroundings, that they are necessarily entwined, we end up imbuing the world around us with meaning; this is because our body “is the very movement of expression, it projects significations on the outside by giving them a place” (2002: 169). The experiencing body is a cardinal point in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, but sensorial experiences cannot be perceived separately from cognitive ones. Parallely, Csordas builds on Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception and asserts that “the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture but is to be considered as the subject of culture” (1990: 5). If we were to bridge these two theoretical assumptions, we can see how our surroundings are coded by the body in ways which reflect the cultural influences that have shaped us into being.

This phenomenological premise resonates with br. Mikael’s words about the visitor’s tendency to project themselves onto the soberness of the place, as well as the scenario illustrated in chapter 5 in which we would find ourselves in a new home and perceive a neutral space as a potential container which we aim to fill with identity marker and thus make it familiar to us. The rooms invite the visitor to be present and contemplate; one of the atheist guests with which I talked most to during one of my stays, told me how the place and the ceremonies performed by the brothers brings him closer to himself and helps him come to terms with the stress of daily life (see previous chapter). Rather than a spiritual contemplation H’s words, which resonate to some extent with my own experience, reveal a much more existential form of contemplation, as opposed to C. who feels that the austerity of the place echoes his spiritual journey.

6.2 The Architect As Creator of Places

As mentioned in chapter 3, a shift occurred throughout the history of religion. Supernatural and godly attributes were initially poured onto natural elements and phenomena, and in examining polytheistic religions pre-dating Christianity we can find numerous examples of this. As a reaction against the scattering of godly figures around the natural realm, the catholic church elevated its own deity above nature, immaterial and timeless. Natural elements, however, kept serving their purpose as they were used for the construction of idols, objects, and places of cult. When I first entered the stonemason's workshop, and as I watched the statues, reliefs, tombstones, and ornaments he had carved out of rough stone surfaces, I immediately saw a bridge between my initial research proposal, material culture and our relationship with it, and the sensory consumption of architectural spaces.

Another topic that was often raised by br. Leo was his mentor's great contribution to architecture, what is known as the Plastic Number (1,3247...). Van der Laan formulated the Plastic Number as an alternative proportion system to the well-established Golden Ratio, which in turn was built on the idea that there is a set of natural and harmonious proportions in the human body (the most illustrative example of this being Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man). This breaking with the architectonic tradition came from the monk's conviction that we perceive the world empirically and "not based on any metaphysical belief in a designed universe" (Padovan, 2015); as absurd as this might sound coming from a Benedictine monk, Van der Laan separated the realm of architecture from his religious beliefs (which resonate with the quote in chapter 5 about the architect's definition of a building). Proportions rather than shape give rise to a "natural" sensorial interaction with a place, and its aesthetic is secondary to its harmony. In light of this the plastic number has been criticized for not being strictly accurate since it relies on our ability to perceive rather than measure.

Br. Leo told me how, when Van der Laan was still alive, visitors of S. Benedictusberg would often be tested by the architect. He would tell the guests to draw an approximate middle point on a straight line or ask them to identify a longer segment between two seemingly identical ones. Padovan (2015: 412) tells us another anecdote, according to which the monk would ask the visitors to group pebbles by size and when one size-group was established and the volunteer would move on to the next, there would be a natural perception of difference. In light of this, we may notice a point of divergence between Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology

and Van der Laan architectural philosophy, beyond the fact that both critically look upon the perception of our sensorial surroundings. According to the French philosopher perception always entails sensorial stimuli which we can place in our immediate surroundings, and embedded meaning which has no apparent correlation to what we perceive through our five senses, whereas for the Dutch architect perception is first and foremost concerned with our ability to visually discern different sizes, a knowledge which, if put into practice, creates harmonious architectural spaces.

The architect followed this ratio in all his plans which is the reason why when walking around the rooms and hallways of St. Benedictusberg the visitor has a “natural perception” of the architecture. These proportions, the stonemason explained, are used in everything in the monastery, from the pillars to the furniture, from the statues which were constantly commissioned to him to the letters engraved on the walls, from the altar to the crosses.

7 Conclusion

In this last chapter I am going to sum up this paper and link my considerations on sound, architectural space, and sensorial consumption to my initial research question by summarizing the major arguments discussed so far. In chapter 1. I have provided an historical, geographical, and social context around the Dutch abbey of S. Benedictusberg, in which we start to make out the cardinal points of the Benedictine doctrine and the routines of the monks as identity markers. Later on, I have formulated a theoretical frame which, in my opinion, sheds light over the relationship between architectural spaces and spirituality: the main theories employed are anthropology of the senses, material culture, and phenomenology, to which I return to in chapter 6. I shortly discuss the importance of sound in chapter 4, how I have used it in my own film, and how soundscapes contributed to the overall sensorial perception of architectural spaces as places of human activity. In chapter 5 I provide a more nuanced definition of architectural spaces, and hint to our consumption of these in a domestic setting and in a monastic one respectively. I continue with a number of testimonies from the guests of the abbey, in order to understand what this place means to the pious and to the atheist visitor. By the end of the chapter, I consider the role of the garden as an identity marker and the place it has in the community’s lifestyle, as well as the importance of br. Leo’s workshop to illustrate the bridge between materiality and culture.

In chapter 6 I propose a definition of consumption, specifically within a monastic environment as opposed to other settings, which entails an act of projecting oneself onto the soberness of the place (spiritually or existentially), of leaving something behind, of being-there and contemplating. I then reflect upon the difference between a phenomenological and empirical perception of our surroundings. Here, a juxtaposition between Berkeley (1734) and Merleau-Ponty (2002) shows how places can be perceived as a. alienable and the body as ontologically separate from the perceptible world; or b. as inalienable, and the body as mediating bridge between our perception and the object of it. Linking Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to the definition that Csordas offers of the experiencing body not as an object "to be studied in relation to culture but [...] as the subject of culture" (Csordas, 1990), we find that when facing an empty architectural space we reflect our own cultural self. Consumption here is to be understood as mutual process between the visitor and the architectural space, an open dialogue through which we detach ourselves from routines and stress, as well as temptation and distractions. This detachment runs parallelly with a distance from materiality, through which we lose our anchor points in the form of identity markers we might reflect ourselves in. In this sense material culture (and the lack of its circulation) lends itself to a project on spirituality. Finally, I give an account of Hans Van der Laan's architectural philosophy and of the Plastic Number. The architect formulated a theory of perception which permeates all of his designs and is based on the skill of the human eye to differentiate types of size (small, medium-sized and large objects) and orders of size (as illustrated through the experiment with pebbles). Through the relation between orders of size "one can establish a chain of relationships by which the whole architectonic environment, from a brick to a city, can be connected together and made intelligible and human" (Padovan, 2015: 415).

I now return to my initial research question: Why does architectural space in a monastic environment become important for its visitors and its residents in their experience of the monastery and of a spiritual journey? The answer lies in our perception of architectural space, in our relationship with material artefacts as identity markers, and in the dialogue that the lack of these opens with the surrounding environment. The monastery stands as an opposite pole to the whirlwind of human activities, to the passing of time, and to the surrounding natural landscape which almost resembles a manifestation of entropy. For its pious inhabitants and visitors, the lack of material cumulation can be seen as a detachment from the sensitive body, from distractions and temptations. The empty spaces are a manifestation of this endeavor. For the non-religious guests, stepping into this environment comes with a much stronger "leaving something outside", routines, relationships, and objects that we would constantly interact with,

all of which one eventually comes back to. The empty spaces make this opposition all the more evident. At the same time any visitor, regardless of their spiritual calling, has to deal with the materiality of the place, with its tangible surfaces, as well as the spaces created in between them, and our dialogue with the room. Revisiting the definition provided by Miller (2001) of the ghost of a house, of the embedded layers of meaning which might create an alienation towards the place we inhabit, I am arguing that in the context of monastic architectural spaces we become our own ghosts, in the sense that we project our own identity onto an empty room in an inalienable way. In the eyes of the monks there is, of course, already a ghost both in the room and everywhere else, a god to which they give themselves up to. The architectural space serves as a surface onto which this idea is projected.

My hope is that this paper will challenge our conception of sensorial consumption, make us reflect, in broader terms, upon a place we perceive as a home and our relationship with materiality. In the eyes of the monks of S. Benedictusberg, as well as the most religious visitors of the Abbey, attachment to the material leads to detachment from the spiritual. For a person who rejects spirituality, materiality assumes a different meaning, and a detachment would lead to a weakening of the person's identity. This premise raises ulterior questions; is a complete material detachment in a pursuit of a religious calling at all possible? Would any visitor of a place such as this stop and reflect on their own relationship to materiality? I have tackled topics such as material culture in the form of identity markers, the enhancement of a spiritual as opposed to an existential state through the interaction with our surroundings, as well as the sensorial consumption of architectural spaces. All these topics, lend themselves to further inquire on the relation between material culture studies and religious studies from an ethnographic standpoint.

In terms of the audiovisual potential of my film, I would like to argue, it challenges the idea that film – whether fiction or documentary – needs to have a rather conspicuous line of action in order for audience to grasp the narrative. *Oculus Silens* is my attempt to portray human activities and human creations in their own beauty whereas this paper serves the purpose of force a critical inquire upon them. Following Vaughan's (1999) perception of film as a narrative and that of reality as a "non-narrative" in that "film is about something, whereas reality is not" (1999: 21), my film narrows that gap between storytelling and documenting and challenges mainstream media's continuous sensorial overstimulation of an audience in an attempt to awaken an interest in what it is witnessing. Much like the architectural spaces it depicts, it lacks any intentional excessiveness, allowing the viewer to gradually take in that

which is portrayed in front of them, through a sensorial exploration and thus by creating anchor points which close the gap between observer and observed.

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