

Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Theatre and Film

DOCTORAL THESIS

AESTHETIC OF THE POETIC DOCUMENTARY:
FROM THE JORIS IVENS TO NONNY DE LA PEÑA

Summary

Field of study: Cinematography and Media

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Documentary, poetic mode, virtual reality, symbolism, innovation, interactivity, direct cinema, ciné-vérité, observational documentary.

In drafting this work, several research methods were used, such as the analysis of the socio-historical context and the production of films, the content analysis, the film analysis, the structuralist-semiotic analysis and the case study.

By the method of analysis of the documents, the road of the documentary film from his birth as a genre to date have been studied. In this approach, I have taken into account the critical essays compiled by theoreticians of each historical period, as well as by current theoreticians, researching the nuances that emerge from their juxtaposition.

Highlighting the sub-genres and the trends towards which the documentary film is heading is one of the important points that have been explored during the work, through case studies, semiotic analysis and analysis of the necessary documents.

The static images described in the doctoral thesis, entitled *The Aesthetic of the Poetic Documentary: From Joris Ivens to Nonny de la Peña*, have the fundamental purpose of illustrating the image concepts presented in the paper. In other words, for the most accurate reception of the information on the cinematographic footage we refer to, providing a still frame from that specific footage, facilitates the understanding of the written text. These images, whose references of origin are given, function as quotations that support the scientific approach.

Also, as most of the used still images are exported from movies, with reference to these films as study objects, the access to the mentioned audiovisual materials can often be difficult, if not impossible. That's why inserting images becomes a binding element, especially in situations where the present work talks about hard-to-reach or very hard-to-reach movies.

All the translations and interpretations present in this paper were made by me, being fluidified to converge with the entire contents of the research.

Also, throughout Chapter 1, with the help of the document analysis method, I have made an overview about the concept of aesthetics (definitions, occurrence, evolution), to point out the information needed to elaborate the chapters on the aesthetics of the poetic documentary.

As we have seen, the reality and the reporting to reality represent the cornerstone of documentary film in general and of the poetic mode in particular. Thus, this way of recycling ideas, concepts, principles, which have been the basis of visual arts since Antiquity, becomes the bridge between the new media and the aesthetic of the poetic documentary.

I have also pursued the impact and importance of the birth of new symbols and directing concepts important for the evolution of the documentary film throughout history.

The research of elements in the sphere of aesthetics generates a context conducive to documenting episodic or less visible phenomena in the poetic documentary. Towards the end of the chapter, I insisted in particular on the key elements that generate a cinematic language focused on symbolism and visual poetics. Attention was focused on certain cultures or historical periods at the expense of others, with priority being those relevant for the conceptual and argumentative development of this paper.

In Chapter 2, titled *Incursion into the history of the documentary film from the perspective of aesthetics*, I analyzed several cinematographic products (chronologically) representative

for the documentary genre. Through this incursion, with the help of the case study method, a heliocentric structuring of the present or absent aesthetic elements was pursued in the film, highlighting their significance, importance or genealogy.

We must emphasize that the content analysis method, applied to several documents, films or scientific articles, was used in the elaboration of this chapter in order to reach an assembly of information in chronological order.

I also wanted to take our analysis on the meeting of the documentary with the essay and the poetry, beyond the concerns of the answer to the question – yet – important "what is a poetic documentary?", in a complex and generative space which is constructed by following, rather, the questions "what kind of reality" or "whose reality is represented?".

My research has documented the evolution of the genre since the first public projection of the film, carried out on 28 December 1895, through the fight against the predominance of the consumption zone fudged by the desire for maturity, as well as the actual shaping of the documentary genre. The research focuses on the diegetic world of the documentary film, both from the historically point of view and from specialized criticisms, in order to highlight the current theoretical knowledge and a few research perspectives, for the future.

During this chapter I approached not only the birth of the documentary as a genre, but also how the poetic documentary builds a specific aesthetic. *Nanook of the North*, the one who highlighted the importance of directing in the documentary film, takes us into a hybrid area, borrowing elements from the fiction film, while deepening experimental, poetic, or even non-narrative lines. It is becoming more and more clear, in our research, that the documentary is not the keeper of absolute truth, as the propaganda films try to persuade us, nor will it represent a strip of reality, despite the attempts of those who have activated in the cinema direct, *ciné-*

vérité or *observational*. Also in Chapter 2, I showed how technological innovations were able to spoil the monopoly of large video production houses, using the reliability of video editing programs, video cameras and online distribution platforms. Another advantage of the modern technologies, which we have discovered in the research, also refers to the measurement of the reactions, the preferences of the public in real time.

The importance of this chapter is underlined by the transformation of the chemistry between the public and the documentary film. The way the public relates to the type of cinematographic product covered by this research is essential in order for paradigm changes to be beneficial to the production process.

Chapter 3 seeks to point out, through thorough research, the genres, the sub-genres, as well as the influences or differences between the narrative structures in the documentary films. This research journey will begin with the work of pioneers in the field such as Paul Rotha, Bill Nichols or Ian Aitken.

Documentary modes are a system whereby movies can be categorized into one of the many subdivisions of the genre. However, this approach did not live without being criticized. Tony of Bromhead opposes to the modes as they were circumwritten by Nichols, claiming that the core of the documentary storytelling lies in the emotional response and that the source of empathy and distinction should be sought in the narrative structures.

From the same chapter, it is important to remember that although the documentary movies appear in a wide range of representations, they often have aesthetic, compositional, rhythmic similarities. Just as in fiction films we find an entire arsenal of genres in which they are divided, the contrast between them is rendered, essentially, by the vision of the filmmaker involved in the film. As much as he tries to achieve a narrative, non-narrative structure, or an original

stylistic, certain basic features cannot function without being part of an existing pattern. Therefore, a study in parallel between the aesthetics and the evolution of other documentary modes, as well as experimental films or essay, shows us the process by which the aesthetic of the poetic documentary evolved, what was "borrowed" and what it gave up during its evolution.

Chapters 4 and 5 are of particular importance because in these chapters the poetic documentaries are structurally and compositionally analyzed. It is important to note how the global interconnection, the anthropogenic footprint left on a planetary scale, is shaped as a theme throughout the modern poetic documentaries and how they succeed, through music, rhythm, image and atypical visual compositions, to surprise life in its brute form.

Even though many poetic documentaries do not respect a classical narrative structure, their construction has the natural tendency to form certain patterns with the role of sending a message. Therefore, in Chapter 4, the emphasis will fall on the patterns implemented by the authors in the achievement of the mentioned genre of films. The present approach implies an analysis of several aspects, such as: rhythmicity, timing, use of colors and lights, connection elements and dialogue or any verbal source used in the narrative structure.

The production of the poetic documentary film is carried out in a manner relatively similar to that of the fiction film. During the current *ciné-vérité* or *cinema direct*, filmmakers created films in a more disorganized fashion, preferring an area of privacy, the natural state of the world. Today, documentary films are largely produced based on previously written scenarios and well-organized production. The film team, production, assembly, including reconstitutions written by fiction writers, line by line, of events from real life, make us question the truthfulness of the information presented in the sphere of mainstream and beyond.

Beyond these aspects, deciphering the aesthetics of the poetic documentaries and analyzing it by the case study or by the document analysis method, I have noticed how these documentaries respect a specific structure and how the elements of this structure have a universal applicability in the case of poetic documentary, demonstrated by the comparative study.

At the same time, I underlined, in Chapter 5, how the aesthetics of the poetic documentary evolves in relation with the new technologies. I have analyzed the connection between the poetic documentary films and the other emerging technologies, highlighting the contributions of the most important theoreticians of the field of interest. The classification of the new modes of interaction between the documentary film and the spectators, which came up with the technological evolution, comes as a complement to Nichols's theory, which only refers to the classification of classical documentaries. After careful research, we realize that the poetic documentaries not only dress with versatility the possibilities of new technologies, but become an important way of representing reality in relation to new types of documentaries.

The emancipation trends of the documentary, at the beginning of the internet era in the 90's, focused around the interaction between the public and this new technology that would completely change the paradigm of the relationship between people and the cultural products. The public becomes aware of the freedom in selecting content and distribution platforms, so how the public will choose a media content will be entirely different from the period before the Internet. Websites dedicated to virtual reviews, such as imdb.com or rottentomatoes.com, filter and provide a wide range of information about the documentaries we want to see. Distribution platforms offer the ability to watch documentaries anytime and anywhere via Internet-connected devices.

Even for the creators of poetic documentary film access to a varied offer of stock images, free online courses or advanced technical features proposed by video processing programs, all in terms of household comfort, have meant a radical shift in how they relate to the whole process of producing and distributing a movie.

In order to demonstrate this versatility and universality of the specific elements of the poetic documentary, in Chapter 6 I developed a comprehensive case study on the video project titled *Persistence of Memory* produced by me as a valuable complement to my research. Through this practical project, I have demonstrated the applicability of aesthetic elements in the construction of a poetic documentary, following the specific production stages. Thus, most of the elements, debated through case studies, the analysis of documents, the method of contradiction or transdisciplinarity (combining the theory of visual arts aesthetics with the theory of documentary film aesthetics), become sustainable as archetypes, which can be extracted from the sphere of theoretical conceptualization and used as starting points in the construction of future poetic documentaries.

The documentary has as its central theme the self-portrait of my childhood-adolescence, trying to capture, in a poetic way, the subjective experience that the person in question has in relation to reality. The choice of this theme, beyond the subject's accessibility, is motivated by the simplicity and subjectivity of the narrative perspective.

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