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## VISUAL SYMBOLISM IN THE POETIC DOCUMENTARY

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### *Abstract*

Even though many of the poetic documentaries do not follow a classical narrative structure, their construction has a natural tendency to form certain patterns in order to convey a message. In the formation of these patterns the use of symbols is an important point because the innovative aspect of the poetic documentaries is to make the connection between the experimental film, the visual essay and the classic documentary. Therefore, the entire poetic documentary uses the symbolism from the visual essay and from the experimental film in order to transmit emotions or information to the public in an innovative way, rarely encountered in the documentary film.

**Keywords:** symbolism; documentary; poetic; religion; innovation;

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The poetic mode of documentary film does not refer to the "objective" reality of a given situation or to people, but instead seeks to understand an inner "truth" that can only be achieved by poetic manipulation. It is up to the filmmakers to build their narrative (or non-narrative) structure appropriate to the target audience.

The poetic documentaries first appeared in the 1920s, being a reaction against visual content and grammar, which began to be applied more and more mechanically in the construction of fiction movies. They implement a visual asymmetry (from the point of view of contrasts between successive images), destroying the cluster of image organization by classical models in terms of time and space. The characters, built in an almost heroic form until then, in the fictional movies, become entities similar to ordinary people in the society. The disturbance of the spatial-temporal coherence can be seen as the key element of the modernist era manifested in the texture of these movies.

The first documentary filmmakers, enthusiastic about the theory of Soviet editing and the impressionist cinema, have mastered these techniques in making documentary films in order to create what Nichols later called "the poetic mode". The pioneer of the documentary film, Vertov, made an excellent account of this poetic mode, despite the fact that it was not yet defined as such nor circumscribed theoretically: "Kinochestvo is the art of organizing objects moving in space as rhythmic harmony, in



harmony with the properties of the material and the internal rhythm of each object "(Vertov & Michelson, 1984, p. 7). This internal rhythm, spoken of by Vertov, is the main feature of the functional mechanism of the concept. The poetic mode is manifested through a highly subjectivized interpretation of the content chosen to be treated in the documentary film. The traditional narrative subject is left out: characters and individual events remain undeveloped in favour of building free states or forms of subjectivity. This thing is remarkable in the editing of poetical documentary, in which the classical continuity of the narrative thread does not exist. Rather, the poetic editing explores "associations and models involving temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions" (Nichols, 2001, p. 44).

The subject is built around the audio-visual poetic associations. The films avoid the pursuit of a specific narrative or conventional narrative logic, use figures similar to poetry such as metaphor, comparison and disjunction, but also a similar structure of the material. This is why the mode gets the name of "poetic".

One of the most popular films, framed in the poetic mode, is the film by Joris Ivens, entitled *Regen* (1929). *Regen* is the paradigmatic example of the poetic mode, consisting of pictures that are not in a clear connection, but which are linked together to illustrate an autumn rain in Amsterdam. Because the poetic mode describes such subjective impressions with little or no narrative content, it is often perceived as avant-garde, and modern documentaries, like *Samsara* by Ron Fricke, have continued the same formal pattern (Nichols, 2001, p. 33).

The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (2012) offers a wonderful description of this film, claiming that the film is no longer a representation of the rain, but attempts to give the spectator the feeling or the pure "quality" of the rain, called "skill".

The documentary is, however, very similar to the popular film *Symphony*, which we can not overlook. *Symphony City*, like the one realized by Ruttmann, Cavalcanti, or Vertov, obviously varies in the presented cities, but also in dealing with the subject and the prominence of the director's voice in the structure: Ruttmann's film transformed the city of Berlin into the main character, while Vertov's film is highly reflexive (Cousins & MacDonald, 2006, p.87). Initially, Joris Ivens's cinematographic activity focused on technique, and his close friends said the director was betting on the relevance of conceptual expressiveness, a remarkable performance in the aforementioned film, offering impressive images and a host of characters, but no precise information about them.

Another poetic film, to be mentioned, is *Sans Soleil* (1982), produced by the French director Chris Marker. *Sans Soleil* is a meditation on the human nature, showing the inability of the organic memory to remember the context and the nuances of events. Thus, the perception of personal and global history is dramatically affected. This experimental essay is a composition of thoughts, images and scenes, especially from Japan and Guinea-Bissau, two extreme poles of survival.

These avant-garde directors, through their cinematic works, show us the way to a different aesthetic: an aesthetics of emotions, of subtle personal experiences that must be experienced while watching the cinematic product. It gives us time to reflect on these emotions through the techniques they use. We are trapped in a space where we experience a fragment of real life or a description of what a living person would experience in real life.

## **2. THE RECURRING SYMBOLIC THEMES IN THE POETIC DOCUMENTARIES**

Exploring space and forms, beyond the barriers imposed by cultural dogmas, generates a new direction of contemplation. The forms become true treasures of the visual culture, in which meanings and non-senses intertwine with the purpose of destroying the stereotypical thinking of filmmakers.

A strong, present and promoted symbol in the modern poetic documentaries is encountered in various forms and sequences throughout them. We refer to spirituality, to religion, or to the way mankind has a philosophical relationship to its own existence. The spectacular example presented in this chapter is the series of sequences in *The Samsara* movie, between the minutes 80 to 90. Here we become acquainted

with the connection with the divinity using the prayer, specific to the four major global religions: Jewish, Muslim, Christian and Buddhist.

Although the film begins by presenting this "story" from the perspective of The Buddhist religion (the beginning and ending with the specific rituals), the successive mode in which various modes are described during the prayers of each religion shows us the similarities that can be found between seemingly very different religious systems. Religion being a powerful reservoir of symbols exploited in this type of poetic documentaries, beyond the aesthetic appearances, it has a powerful effect on our subjectivity and the way we decipher the content of the films.

The nature is presented as a support for reality; Practically, here begins "our story". The way in which nature, as a symbol of eternity in the film, is modeled, processed, transformed, destroyed by man is the way in which we relate to this reality. For example, in *Powaqqatsi*, we have a series of sequences (in the opening of the film) with people who carry, load, work on the processing and exploitation of nature. This series is presented in a dynamic rhythm, consistent with the images of an erupting volcano. The destructive force of nature itself is associated with the human nature, equally destructive and unstoppable through its constant actions of transformation of the environment.

In addition to religion and nature, another commonly used symbol is that of uniforms as a way of social organization. From the military uniforms of the militaries from the conflict zones between Israel and Palestine (from *Samsara*, 80<sup>th</sup> minute), the colored uniforms from the military parades (77<sup>th</sup> minute), the uniforms of detainees (64<sup>th</sup> minute), the sports uniforms (*Naqoyqatsi*, 22<sup>nd</sup> minute), the traditional uniforms (*Powaqqatsi*, 99<sup>th</sup> minute), the uniforms of the workers (*Koyaanisqatsi*, 54<sup>th</sup> minute) to the body paintings of the various tribes, the authors of these films succeed not only to show us the diversity of this symbol of social organization, but also the character of the group that these vestments define. The characters often do not interact with each other, being presented in formal situations, whether in factories or in military actions. People move symmetrically, mechanically, in uniforms of the same color and appearance, and perform similar actions. Even the tribes, presented in the traditional garments and body decorations, usually perform symmetrical rituals or identical actions. The affiliation to social groups and the action of modelling, organizing or destroying nature is therefore organized according to certain rules (aesthetic or content).

The consumption, the mechanization and the acceleration of nature's exploitation is another theme explored in these films. The acceleration of images in contrast to the slowing effect shows how, through the process of automation (means of transport, robots, machinery), the inert handmade work, presented in its primary form at the beginning of *Koyaanisqatsi*, remains only a vague memory on which even the now developing countries will soon be over it. Consumption is also described by endless technological processes through which clothing, food or household items are processed (some examples). The multiple repetitive actions do not begin nor end, continuing with small pauses.

The loss of identity is built on these films by the process of film time acceleration, image processing and adding special effects, exemplifying aesthetic operations (58<sup>th</sup> minute, *Samsara*), but also by symbolic sequences like the 38<sup>th</sup> minute (*Samsara*), in which a man masks his face with a layer of clay. Throughout *Samsara*, we find out how man does not just transform himself into a machine, performing mechanical operations after a set schedule, being in fact copied as an aesthetic look in sexual dolls or robots. Even the theme of sexuality and the sex industry exploiting women in a similar way is in *Samsara* (60<sup>th</sup> minute) or *Baraka* (57<sup>th</sup> minute).

In addition to these aspects, we should also remember what does not appear in these documentaries, in order to understand the difference between classical and modern poetic documents regarding symbolic aspects. The classical poetic documentaries deal in particular with the aesthetic valences of the human body, of the surrounding world. The symbols present in Maya Deren's or Stan Brakhage's films are rendered in a subjective manner in terms of editing, framing, or directorial concept. The birth of Brakhage's daughter is not only a new beginning of life (*Window Water Baby Moving*, 1959), but it is also a way through which we can experience this intimate event very intensely.

Exploring the minimalist, intimate space of man or animal through the aesthetic means specific to the poetic way and knowing these characters with their flaws and qualities is a highly invasive artistic approach. These aspects, however, are not found in the modern poetic documentaries, where the directorial concept is constructed by pursuing neutral, unimpressed, the subject presented. Detail shots are rarely used, there are no subjective or "angle shot" footage.

### **3. THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN THE POETIC DOCUMENTARY**

Even though many of the poetic films do not follow a classical narrative structure, they have a natural tendency to form certain patterns in order to convey a message. The narrative structure behind the poetic concept follows a systematization and classification of the dramaturgical elements that define this kind of documentary (Jay, 1977, pg. 3-11).

Moreover, a very important aspect to be mentioned according to the method of research used (structural-semiotic analysis) is the link that the poetic documentary producer builds with his audience. The mirroring of one's own vision of the surrounding universe is the foundation behind the narrative structure. The choice of a certain rhythm of colors, of the night-day alternation, of life-death, the contrast between nature and urbanized society, all these are subjective elements selected by the author and give birth to the entire concept.

As a consequence, in Brachage's documentary, *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), we see a series of detached details in a quick succession describing not only the relationship between the two protagonists through their intimate gestures and the expressivity of the faces, but the chaotic rhythm itself which life and emotions unfold. This chaotic rhythm is made with the dynamic assemblage like in the *Samsara*, the 56<sup>th</sup> minute, when we see groups of people who consume or buy chaotic. In the same disorganized way at the 49<sup>th</sup> minute in *Koyaanisqatsi*, the streets of the cities are full of people and cars that disappear and appear from all directions. Chaos is a pulse that absorbs people, cars, buildings: everything that has to do with us.

In the modern documentaries, we notice that the authors choose to introduce us gradually into a new world. For example, in *Samsara*, the passage from minute 33 from the exotic, tribal world to the man-made universe is done through a series of frames with suspended motorways on which many cars move. This "hive" of human civilization then becomes more and more visible as the rhythm begins to accelerate.

*March of the Penguins* (2005) is a French documentary depicting the habits of penguins during a whole year: their mating rituals, their migration, the laying of eggs, the search for food, etc. The film is accompanied by an external voice in the form of dialogue between two characters (in the original version). Made in French, the dialogues and poetical images create a moderate, relatively constant pace throughout the film. Although it is a documentary about nature, we see that the authors are starting a different approach to content. This concept, the dialogue, gradually introduces us into the world of penguins that we discover with great curiosity.

The first pictures show us a group of penguins that go along the horizon line. A little under the fire disc, they resemble humans - they are described as nomads who commit an ancient ritual. In these images in the film's exhibition, a link is created between the public and the penguins. Shortly after this humanized opening, the film sets (through pictures, not by scientific explanation) that these impressive nomads are emotional beings who, as individuals, form a society. The individual penguins present separate personalities and desires, but subordinate to those in the group as a whole. The whole action of the film, focusing on the phenomenon of reproduction of these creatures, is the tone of all the "actions" that the spectators witness. The motives of the penguins are to survive as a group, to reproduce; to love and to survive as individuals.

If at Stan Brakhage his wife's birth was filmed from his hand, in a crazy, chaotic cut, we see that in this situation, the subject's approach was made by long frames on the tripod, using ambient sounds and fictitious dialogue. Thus, it is increasingly evident that the method of conceptualizing a subject of poetic documentary can be very different, compared to other documentary modes.

The visual simplicity of black and white objects moving against the infinite expansion of ice, sky, and then water matches the simplicity of the story. These simplicities allow the visual landscape and the main narrative thread to be outlined. There are many obstacles for the penguins: the pain, the conflict, the sacrifice and the loss are juxtaposed with moments inspired by humour, redemption, love, beauty and accomplishment. The universality of the story allows the spectator to lose himself inside the frames to enjoy the beauty of the film and the landscapes and the amazing astonishment that this is happening on the same Earth as the cinema that gives it life and also, takes care of the way an individual feels this unbelievable adventure of life. The scientific explanation is not the central point of the narrative (nor does it propose to do so); is the backdrop for the amazing form that brings a deep and rewarding story to the audience. Nature or natural elements are often presented in static or very light panoramic ways. A directorial choice that makes us stop, let us "relax" our eyes on these imperishable buildings. Their appearance has a circular role in the narrative construction. They appear most often after the climax of a certain sequence, reminding us of where we started and where we are returning.

Also in a circular role is built the subject of the film *Samsara*. The film begins with some Buddhist temples in Myanmar ending up with the call of the monks and the destruction of the newly built "mandala", the construction of which was presented in the film's exhibition.

*Baraka* begins with several pictures of nature that continue with other images in a Buddhist temple, the end of the film being built in at first from frames describing the interior of a church in Jerusalem, and then the film ends with pictures of nature in a timelapse. *Koyaanisqatsi* ends with a frame similar to the one it starts with, namely a picture of cave paintings. The list can continue.

The narrative structure of the poetic documentary does not follow a cognitive-logical line. It is built around the emotions that swing from the highest peaks to the deepest precipices, so the spectator is always on a continuous emotional journey, in a continuous search. This emotional connection is formed on the basis of the relationship established by the humanized symbols and elements as we have seen above. In order for the entire narrative construction process to function, it is always calibrated so that the spectators do not only remain in a certain palette of emotions until the end of the film.

#### **4. THE IMAGE AND THE SIMBOLISM**

By looking more closely into the intrinsic universe of the works we refer to, we see the visual similarity between the movies of the great film revolution, such as *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), *Regen*, and Ron Fricke's films.

Separated for almost a century of existence, the recent films seem to use exhaustively many of the techniques discovered and used by the parents of cinema in their films that treated various subjects from a poetic perspective. This demonstrates the universality of aesthetics in relation to the subject, but also a particular rhythm that only a non-verbal film could manage with such mastery. Special attention to the aesthetics reveals the author's preference for the subliminal message behind the mounting mechanism.

The aesthetic is also exploited through the naturalness of costumes or bodily paintings practiced in different cultures. Thus, in the film *Baraka* we discover the beauty of indescribable aborigines, their bodies being decorated with necklaces, bracelets and various small accessories, their faces being painted in countless models, built from points. This phenomenon is also observed during the film, and in the *Amazonians* where the scarlet paint shines on the forehead of a young woman looking through the green leaves of a tree. Approaching the theme of body painting is a direct way of communicating our return to the primordial aesthetics of man and his primary sense of aesthetics.

The color plays an essential role in the semiotics of the audiovisual language. In addition to its technical role, the color brings to the spectator certain states depending on the code of the cultural paradigm in which it becomes exploited. For ordinary viewers, lacking cinematic culture, the story is the most important element of any film. In turn, the color of an icon can have a major impact in keeping the viewer's attention and storytelling. For example, when a frame changes, from a warm yellow feeling to a cold-blue feeling in successive images, it can be quite difficult to keep the viewer's attention on the film. In this case, the color correction really helps the quality of the final version. The color correction helps to

smooth the recorded color at the production stage and to give a more pertinent image, allowing the viewer to focus on the story.

The most common colors have a standard social sense, while the specific colors may contextualize a particular spirit or personal idea. These meanings often do not exceed the limit of society that gave the colors a certain meaning. An example is black (non-color) black, which often represents death in Western society, while white is used to symbolize death in eastern cultures (Faur, 2019).

We notice a particular attention that the documentary filmmakers attribute to the colors in the construction of the poetic documentaries. The predominant colors are green and blue, which are basic colors in nature (life is built around them). A concrete example of heavily conceived semantic use of colors can be seen throughout the documentary *Naqoyqatsi*, where the color becomes the main pawn in the narrative construction. In an experimental manner, the documentary makers have chosen a specific color to represent the states and the actions described by the images. The poverty of the working class and those in developing countries is carefully portrayed by gray colors, colorful grays and desaturate tones. This way of presenting reality has the effect of generalizing the present situation in the areas covered by the documentaries.

The meanings created by the set of lines, dots and spots are defined in relation to the applied aesthetics. Each society and culture is modeled by a specific paradigm of general aesthetics. The lines, in their own right, do not exist in nature, just like no dots or spots. They occur in the form of optical phenomena when the group of objects deviates from the viewer.

Another semiotic lineage, this time, inside the *Naqoyqatsi* documentary, can be seen at the 8th minute when the image of people is overexposed with the image of barcode-like lines, suggesting the concept of transforming people into products that can be sold in supermarkets.

A great emphasis is placed on contour light, with accentuations of shapes and movements in the decor. Besides the role of the ambience, the light gains a dramatic function supported by the assembly of lines and rising rhythm.

The author then introduces us into the metropolitan area of an unspecified city, respecting the same rhythm, the same chromatic and dynamic. Another important aspect is the excessive use of primary geometric shapes, straight lines and trajectory movements, thus structuring a very secure and rhythmic mechanism of the audiovisual message. In addition to this geometric consistency, this whole set of primary compositional elements takes us to the art of Antiquity, but also to the construction of archetypal shapes that carry a universal message in relation to the whole documentary.

Regardless of the media format we refer to, it will include text as a support for the transmission of information. Thus, we observe how this important visual symbol in our culture is carefully selected in various contexts throughout poetic documentaries in order to support the image.

One of the concrete examples appears in the 68th minute of the *Powaqqatsi* film when a red *guerrilla* paint on a wall and a little girl with a red box in hand stops at the wall looking at the camera. The author shows in this way the struggle that is going on between the future of the next and present generations, by using a sign of meaningful signal and premonition.

Another conclusive example can be seen in *Samsara* in the 80th minute, where we are presented a picture of the wall between Palestine and Israel where it says suggestively: "I want my ball back!" And afterwards added "thanks!", thus suggesting us the gap between normality and reality.

As mentioned above, the movement as an aesthetic element in all visual arts is one of the most important general features, whether we refer to the movement of an audiovisual camera or the motion suggested by the lines of perspective and form. The shapes in motion are often visually coordinated to describe relationships between different elements and to form coherent assemblies. The relationship between nature and man is often depicted by forms in motion. One of the most representative examples appears in the *Powaqqatsi* documentary, in the 17th minute, where we see a natural waterfall that then, by enlarging the frame with the zoom-out effect, turns into an artificially formed waterfall by manipulating the water course by man.

The slowing effect is heavily used in all modern poetic documents. Using this effect, the documentaries manage to show us another facet of the surrounding world that we usually miss because of

the amalgam of visual aesthetics that surround us. But in *Ashes and Snow*, the slow motion effect is applied to sequences that transcend space and cinematic time. From the very first minute of the movie, an external voice superimposed on slow-motion pictures tells us, "If you come to me at this moment, your minutes will become hours, your hours will become days and your days will become a lifetime." Thus, the expansion of time is not only achieved through this technological process, but also through the narrative argument that leads us, as an illusionist, in atemporal and aspatial.

It might be confusing and it could be considered that *Ashes and Snow* would strictly respect the characteristics of the visual essay due to the text, which is largely a philosophical, poetic, abstract, but also because of the theme approached, namely the link spiritual nature of man and nature. But the film, as , uses real images to represent a reality (for the most part), whether we are talking about the meditation of the monks or the animal world. In addition to this, the subject matter is as tangible as possible. At any moment, an exhibition, observer or performative documentary can be done on the same theme (the connection of man with nature).

In another eloquent example, in *March of the Penguins*, right at the end of the movie (78<sup>th</sup> minute), there is a slow-motion sequence which shows the moment when the penguin chicks enter the water for the first time. Although the film does not include any other sequence shot through this technical process, the author chooses to slow down the image in order to generate a feeling of joy generated from the pleasure of the small swimmers. The joy of the penguins in water is not only prolonged by the slowing effect, but it also has a different meaning: from a simple ephemeral jovial, it turns into a major moment in the life of those animals. This moment becomes practically a ritual, a transition to maturity.

The camera movements are used to describe spaces, actions, to track characters, and generate emotions. These are classified according to the directions of the dynamics involved in several categories. Throughout the poetic documentaries, we observe the whole range of camera movements. From descriptive or tracking panoramas to helicopter or underwater cameras (as in *Ashes and Snow*, 2005), the poetic documentary filmmakers are trying to use all possible means of shooting - with a visual impact more powerful on viewers - the situations presented in the film. The visual counts and speaks its word by itself, through its own irradiation force. Even "from hand" filming is not avoided, the aesthetics of this style being intensely exploited, especially in the urban scenes or in the poetic documentaries of the early authors.

The rhythm is used in audiovisual products to build drama or to emphasize certain states or ideas. It is usually built on music, the images being cut exactly when the sound resumes a passage or it changes. Perhaps the most spectacular way the rime is used in the film is in this documentary mode. We can see the rhythm of the military choreographies, of the religious encounters, of the traditional customs (as in *Powaqqatsi*, in the 44<sup>th</sup> minute), the rhythm of natural elements, buildings, cities, lights, but the rhythm of digital elements remains the most prominent. If the other forms of rhythm in the picture are integrated into the universal ensemble, more or less, these rhythms consisting of digital codes or digital visual experiments, through various overlaps or digital processing, have a separate aesthetics.

As for the aesthetics of the human face, the authors of all the modern poetical documents use as a leitmotif the faces belonging to different cultures. People's figures remain fixed, staring at the room, or staying locked in a slow-motion, lost in a vast metropolitan area. We often see faces of robots doing the same thing, or silicone doll faces. Through this strategy, the authors not only make us pay attention, observe certain resemblances and differences between cultures or between humans and artificial forms but have as a fundamental purpose to present man's adaptation to modern social life and the way in which it relates to this adaptation, in contrast to the expressiveness that the world manifests.

The contrast is no less used than other expressive features of plastic language elements. For example, during the *March of the Penguins* movie (Morgan Freeman's narrative), exactly at the 18<sup>th</sup> minute, there is a sequence in which the sky, surprised at sunset, gets reddish tones in contrast to the underwater horizon is presented in shades of blue-gray. We have in this sequence not only a contrast of primary or hot-cold colors, but also a contrast used for semiotic purposes: the sunset of the quiet, abundant period, and the brutal arrival of winter.

The visual world of poetic documentaries is the central point around which the entire narrative structure collapses. Its importance is given by the image's ability to generate powerful emotions that the public readily accepts. The image of frozen penguins in Antarctica or the image of a religious ritual has the ability to sensitize the public in the direction desired by the director, and this phenomenon is largely due to the use of a universal visual language and aesthetics that tends also - powers - to some degree of universality.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

It is important to note that although poetical documentary films appear in a wide range of representations, they often have aesthetic, compositional, rhythmic similarities. Just like in fiction films we find a whole arsenal of genres in which they are divided, the contrast between them is essentially reflected in the directorial vision of the filmmaker who is involved in the film. As long as it strives to make a narrative, non-narrative, or original stylistic structure, some basic features can not work without being part of an existing pattern. Therefore, a parallel study between aesthetics and recurrence of the symbols present in the poetic documentary shows the process by which the aesthetics of the poetic documentary evolved, namely what it "borrowed" and what it gave up during its evolution.

It is also important to note how the global interconnection, anthropic fingerprint left on a planetary scale, is designed as a theme during modern poetic documentaries and how they achieve, through music, rhythm, image and atypical visual compositions, to surprise life in its raw form.

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

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