

TRAUMA, CATASTROPHE, AND CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS: DOCUMENTARY STRATEGIES FOR THE NARRATION OF VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT:

This essay is a direct result of an immersive and collaborative experience at the Documentary Summer School that took place in 2022 in Switzerland, a joint effort between the Università della Svizzera italiana and the 75th edition of the Locarno Film Festival. I aim to collect a few impressions about the state of the art of documentary production, focusing on modes of narrating violence. Besides the thematic sections that group the films together, I will address a few general points regarding different documentary procedures. Furthermore, I engage with scholarly research surrounding the topics of trauma and catastrophe in order to achieve a new academic outlook. The films analyzed are: *The Hamlet Syndrome*, *The River is not a Border*, *It Is Night in America* and *Matter Out of Place*.

KEYWORDS: Documentary; Trauma; Catastrophe.

1. Introduction

This essay is a direct result coming after an immersive and collaborative experience at the Documentary Summer School that took place in 2022 in Switzerland, a joint effort between the Università della Svizzera italiana and the 75th edition of the Locarno Film Festival. As such, it aims at collecting a few impressions about the state of the art of documentary production, particularly when concerned with modes of narrating violence. Besides the thematic sections that group the films together, a few general points regarding different documentary procedures will be addressed to engage with scholarly research on themes such as trauma and catastrophe and thus give room to further academic exploration. Taking into account a body of work that premiered in Locarno (*The Hamlet Syndrome*, *The River is not a Border*, *It Is Night in America*, and *Matter Out of Place*), this reflection will refer to the use of metaphors, landscapes, cinematographic transparency and other strategies.

2. Trauma negotiations

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, some media responses amplified oppressed voices and complemented political commentary with the urgency of humanitarian action. However, a series of events intimately linked to the full-scale war has not necessarily been addressed in a nuanced manner: starting from the conflicts that led to Russia's annexation of Crimea, up to the combats in Donbas and other territories from 2014 on. Therefore, the recent but persistent history of destruction, casualties, and losses has had indelible effects on the Ukrainian population. The film *The Hamlet Syndrome* captures this recent past by being aware of the violent present and tries to depict traumatic experiences through a dramaturgical framing – a Shakespearian one, for existential reasons. Directors Elwira Niewiera and Piotr Rosołowski sought to work with a stage director and put together an actual play, from casting to premiere, which, in symbolic fashion, mirrors the actors' personal experiences with the ones narrated in the tragedy of Hamlet. The documentary focuses on the staging process (mainly the rehearsals) enhancing conversations between the characters and family members, using them to reflect on the extreme experiences lived during the conflict.

Another documentary devoted to narrating and tackling trauma is *The River is not a Border*, directed by Alassane Diago and set – as the title suggests – on the border between Senegal and Mauritania. The film addresses the horrific episodes that took place mainly in 1989 and invites the victims and the witnesses of these events to sit down for an honest conversation. A considerable part of the film is devoted to letting survivors speak with each other, all sharing their trauma, making a human circle, barefoot, and facing each other. Through narrating personal tragedies and thoughts embedded in a comprehensive view of the political struggles that led to massacres and expulsions, the documentary language marks the necessity of revisiting death and violence to force dialogue and, hopefully, change. Ethnic reasons are slowly shown as responsible for a racial war, with the same dynamics of genocide. One of the main struggles of the people who suffered as refugees or as survivors of the massacre is to achieve some sort of reparation: the ongoing trauma of Senegalese and Mauritanian individuals scarred by violence and exile is immediately appropriated by a humanistic, willful lens that, besides informing an audience, pushes forward a project to remediate unjust geopolitical decisions over a border that caused pain and despair. In the following paragraphs, I will explain the techniques employed by the Polish filmmakers to convey the therapeutic process made possible by art and the effort to document the effects of war on real people and to showcase the complexity of internal Ukrainian discussions on nationalism and resistance, as well as by the Senegalese director, who actively searches for audiovisual solutions which may amend, heal and create internal and interpersonal coherence after decades have passed since the 1989 calamity.

The *transparency of the apparatus* works as a mode of operating the audiovisual discourse in favor of a critical take on war and the consequent personal tragedies. The choice for a theatrical staging in *The Hamlet Syndrome* is much more interested in the conflicts (internal and collective) that may arise out of emotional discords than in the performative aspects of the stage premiere. In fact, the rapid flashes showing the audience's reaction and two of the actresses' performances happen as a way of giving closure to the narrative and resuming a few interpersonal disagreements. Although clearly staging the "true drama," especially in moments of family talk, the camera seeks to prioritize the theatrical space as a safe environment for exploration of the traumatic issues that the cast wishes to address, relocating the transparency/opacity conundrum that haunts the documental

language. The camera avoids filming the crew at all costs and understands that the dramatic cues entangling fictional and real-life tragedy have to be perceived with seamless mediation between the audience and characters. The effects produced with this proximity are intentionally emotional and affirm the directing purpose behind the tragedies shown, the casting of the actors, and the editing, which sheds light on the history of the Ukrainian war. When it comes to *The River is not a Border*, a certain opaque enunciation of the audiovisual hypothesis was chosen instead: the figure of the director himself poses the problem of getting different sides of the Mauritania-Senegal Border War sitting literally face to face, and retains dramatic statements, forming a mosaic of very current forms of trauma, caused by the death of family members, expulsion, and even the act of murdering someone. Traveling from one witness to another, Diago sometimes stays quiet, and sometimes asks something. The most eloquent speech he gives is the one that opens the sessions: putting it clearly for all sides involved, he appeals to the present survivors, to the audience and to the documentary itself to grant some dignity in hearing the other. Curiously, in opening this honest space for conversation, it is not difficult for an outsider to get immersed in the detailed, somber accounts – as these individuals truly wanted and needed to talk. Maybe for decades, they have been waiting for a project like this to honor the memory of the fallen, and it is not without extreme hardship that some of them bring their experience of violence to the fore.

Metaphorical, archetypal, epic dimensions.

Not only the casting of the performers by the Polish directors reflects a necessarily diverse perspective (in terms of gender, sexuality, nationality, class, occupation and political views), but it also plays with archetypes of masculinity, strength, family and nation to start fiery debates on what it meant to take part in the war. *To be or not to be*, at that moment in time, reflected insecurities, extreme views, and passions that the characters bring to life. Furthermore, the use of symbols demonstrates their cultural resonance as fundamental in traumatic negotiations.¹ In this scenario, the symbolic character is embodied by the Ukrainian flag, which is central to a heated argument between two actors, in a very performative, abstract style, welcoming

¹ Particularly in documentaries dealing with trauma and violence, such as Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), the issue of metaphorical construction comes up consistently, as Seligmann-Silva (2003) argues: "there is indeed no representation without metaphors. If the Holocaust is incomparable, how could one represent it? Even more so, the metaphor, as well as the plot, gives us a hint of commensurability. Consolation, too, which the testimony is aiming for, can only take place by means of a comparison" (152).

interpretations about the concepts of State, individual choices, and objective and subjective violence. The figurative presence of individuals reflecting on Hamlet's demise seems to also hint at the consequences that go beyond people who chose to enlist – the family members who still suffer, for instance. In fact, during the film's credits, one learns that most of the characters are actively involved in defending Ukraine against Russia in 2022. That look into an epic trait of the resistance is shaped through the tragic staging throughout the film, as the wounds have not healed before having to face a new menace. The classical music and the conflict-inducing nature of the rehearsals, which are expository by nature, aid this poignant strengthening of the collective through art. It seems that in the case of Alessane Diago, the purpose of the work reveals itself starting from the title, and shows his inclination towards metaphors or the questioning of them (the river is *not* a border, after all), because the adverse conditions in narrating violence need a different strategy than the one from the political regimes – responsible for a great number of tragedies – engaging instead with individuals, giving them at the very least time and space to confront the past. One of the documentary's last sequences shows one of its main characters, a black man in Senegal who still mourns the fact that he was expatriated from Mauritania, alongside his young wife and Diago, reflecting on the other side of the river. That he is helped by his wife, who describes what she sees, makes evident that the man is visually impaired, adding meaning to the greater cause of the documentary in building a visual recollection for these people to access their memories of the geography and the history of those two nations. The documentary is itself a metaphorical device that can go beyond explanation and information, and its biggest strength is getting across the message of faith in peaceful coexistence.

3. Catastrophe and audiovisuality

Another recurring trope in the narration of violence and explored by recent documentary production is the one of catastrophe during the so-called Anthropocene. *It Is Night in America* and *Matter Out of Place* are two outstanding examples that portray catastrophe as a man-made phenomenon. The first, directed by Ana Vaz, investigates the effects of urbanization in Brazil resulting in wildlife displacement. The second film is directed by Nikolaus Geyrhalter and exposes

waste treatment in different parts of the world by collaging long shots of remote areas and their strategies regarding waste management. While Vaz's compelling case that the skyscrapers from São Paulo, which initiate her investigation, are more than a modern model for the rest of the country – the exiled fauna is living proof that urban planning violates living beings and their spaces. Geyrhalter's approach to the violence of human action concerns the remains and residuals of late capitalism, quite literally and sometimes excruciatingly from an observational point of view. What catastrophic events are these artworks exactly dealing with? The juxtaposition of industrialized modes of living with obscene amounts of waste or with harmed creatures is part of a broader need to document imminent destruction, the imbalance in the contemporary world, which happens in close relation to the documentary prowess in establishing spectatorship. Bearing witness to ecological destruction, particularly when dealing with common spaces and activities – which every audience can relate to – more often than not retrieves modes of perceiving the world that the culture has already reshaped via regimes of visibility. In other words, documentaries such as the ones mentioned take advantage of the contemporary audiences' capability of being affected by the imminence of a global cataclysm, related to the capitalist way of living. According to Isabel Capeloa Gil (2015),

Those who impart this hermeneutical task on the catastrophic are the multiple spectators and witnesses, traumatized and numbed, distanced and illuminated, affective or critical. If disaster is a cultural condition of the modern age that is so because the spectator has become the trope of our ever changing and complex late modern subjectivity. (75)

Aware of the multiple possibilities that an audiovisual piece can evoke such as affecting, disturbing, negating, or affirming ideas as well as structures of feeling, both films attract the audience's attention for it to be part of a critical reflection on the outcomes of accelerated urbanization. Some of their distinct strategies involve, as detailed below, capturing non-human spaces and objects or depicting scenes that invoke conflict and the grotesque.

Non-human landscapes. Ana Vaz is concerned with threatened life forms that escape human action – ranging from wild animals followed meticulously to the dazzling waterfalls that close the film – creating imagery that disturbs the anthropocentric narrative is at the center of her discourse. In a recurrent excerpt, a

car drives on a road at night while the subjective take of the camera puts the director at odds with her own responsibility in operating technology, on being part of the city's speed and its nightmarish consequences. The eerie music emphasizes the aspect of imminent disaster caused by human action – at the same time, people rescuing animals are also portrayed, so working as a metonymy of the film's own wish in preserving those creatures' fascinating moves, eyes, and complexions. The filmic apprehension creates a form of commentary on violence through a very effective identification between critical reception (figuring out causes and consequences) and sensorial experience – that fittingly floods once the cascade takes over the screen. In a different manner, but indeed chasing movements, forms and rhythms from machines, objects, waste, and residuals, Geyrhalter composes human action (collecting, recycling, driving trucks) right next to those unsought non-human debris. He does that in the style of repetition, recognizing that “as a general feature of the cultural economy, consumption must and does fall into the mode of repetition, of habituation” (Appadurai 2005, 67). Thus, creating an overarching critique of the human relation to waste – even if the sceneries and languages vary from one location to another, a clear impotence to avoid an impending crisis soars through the shots. One of the initial compositions shows an obscene number of plastic bottles floating on a shore as if the natural landscapes have inevitably conformed to human existence – the lack of soundtrack or interviews chosen here enhances this shocking immersion in normalcy through trash, one that cannot leave the spectator unscathed, for the participation of virtually any individual is linked to this cycle of excessive but undesired residuals.

Conflict and the grotesque. A powerful way to deal with conflict on screen is to rearticulate conventions that in reality would not be able to be associated with each other or be put into sequence. Vaz's documentary is clever in a way that it uncovers and exposes the absurd involved in the Brazilian urban expansion. This is achieved by means such as using telephone conversations about people who have found wild animals in their homes or on the road, or by playing with the scale of filmed subjects. Such is the case of a scene where an anteater kept in a zoo is shown with proportions of a gigantic dinosaur, contrasting to a shot in which a human carries this small being. Nikolaus Geyrhalter, in his turn, hints at the madness of human passion for beauty and pleasure (when employers prepare a fancy bed for guests or when festival attendees go as far as the desert to have fun) which can only

come at the price of the loathsome amount of trash observed for the longest time on screen. If the conflict at heart is attenuated by the day-to-day matter-of-factness with which the subject is sometimes treated, the documentary is able to invoke the absurdity of the situation with images and sounds that ingrain the spectator's presence in the film theater. That is not trivial, considering that a certain effectiveness of media narratives on ecological crimes and global warming relies on a supposed rationality that can only go so far to transmit the specificities of our fast-changing world. In audiovisual terms, conflict can be taken first as an inherently cultural dissonance – which takes very concrete, although ambiguous forms – in the films mentioned, those could be the waterfalls and the scrap shredder machines. The documentary discourse can incorporate its political undertones into a comprehensive but also nuanced practice, which certainly lends more affect and even credibility to narrate such difficult topics.

4. Concluding remarks

Documentary art is known for its ability to contest or reaffirm modes of authenticity, but there are specific manners in which marks of true violence can be articulated. Thanks to the abounding fictional and media artefacts like those produced through social media, contemporary spectators are familiar to techniques that make documentary filmmaking very much a fresh medium to problematize conflict, trauma, and social disarray. The films *The Hamlet Syndrome*, *The River is not a Border*, *It Is Night in America*, and *Matter Out of Place* are examples of how communities in the 21st century dealing with pressing issues such as warfare and ecological crises can elaborate radical discourses in favor of discussion and mobilization of audiences. A few techniques employed by these directors from Poland, Senegal, Brazil and Austria include dramatizing traumatic revelations through theater, designing audiovisual metaphors that can expand in time and space, looking into non-human existences, and questioning the grotesque that arises from conflicts. The singular journeys proposed, which tackle topics such as the war in Ukraine, the massacre in Senegal and Mauritania, the dislodgement of wildlife in Brazil, and the wasting process in different parts of the globe, have shown how very specific types of narration and storytelling were organized in order to make sense of violent and distressing issues. In fact, because of the present-day information

overload, documentaries pose a question of necessary curatorship and framing that can only add to the urgent matters lived in different parts of the planet – the sharing of time for reflection in a space that retains attention is becoming a luxurious experience. For this reason, the more commendable are those films which are highly aware of their social and cultural importance and challenge violence, trauma, conflict, and catastrophe via original – if not risky – imaginations.

Filmography

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