

# DOCUMENTARY DISCOURSE: COGNITIVE AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON MATTERS OF REMEMBERING AND AUDIO-VISUAL MEMORY

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## **Abstract**

The article examines the ramifications of documentary discourse. The approach is formulated to give a voice to interdisciplinary research on documentary. The emphasis on the close analysis of extracts and larger documentary entities will bring a new level to this meeting of various aspirations. It gives the possibility to create a heightened sensitivity of matters of analysis that covers similarities and differences, as well as causal and empirical reflections. The aim is to create a web of associations for these perspectives and perceive a wider approach on documentary in order to argue that the meaningful appropriation of various tendencies in documentary studies requires sufficient correspondence and dialogical proneness for an understanding of the conceptual, formal and aesthetic legitimacy of this phenomenon.

The essential part of the investigative strategy relies on cognitive mapping, which means a combination of individual and collective perceptions. Furthermore, cognitive mapping enables the viewer to practise distinct perceptual, phenomenological and cognitive activities. It also features a methodical device that is related to a contemplative attitude towards the discourse of documentary, forming a relationship between the projected images and sounds and a mind that observes them. This leads to a method of aesthetic contemplation that is connected to a disciplinary logic of inscription which aims to produce insights and patterns of thought provoked by filmic affectations. In this article, the focus lies especially on questions of remembering and audio-visual representation of memory issues.

The article features three film examples, which are Patricio Guzmán's "Nostalgia for the Light" (*Nostalgia de la luz*, Chile, 2010), Pirjo Honkasalo's "The 3 Rooms of Melancholia" (*Melancholian 3 huonetta*, Finland, 2004), and Chris Marker's "Sunless" (*Sans soleil*, France, 1983). These films are cinematic re-meditations of past and present, and forms of audio-visual ethnography. The resulting inferences

and elementary conclusions include that they aspire to demythologize the past, and bring forth a mode of representation, which features an elevated and sensory form of documentary discourse, connected with artistic signs of narrative, performative and aesthetic connotations.

**Keywords:** *discourse, cognition, perception, memory, phenomenology, aesthetics, documentary film.*

The term *documentary* refers to all processes by which the filmic input is transformed, reduced, elaborated, stored, recovered, and used. It is concerned with these processes of images and sounds that create filmic environments; it is apparent that documentary is involved in many processes of existential being. Research of documentary has described the idea of documentary film and its relation to various processes. These underlines have been widely discussed among documentary theory, especially when seeking to account all the intellectual and other activities related to documentary perspective. Generally, theory of documentary forms an interdisciplinary research cluster, related to the fields of philosophy, psychology, anthropology and aesthetics [Álvarez 2015, Nichols 1994, Bruzzi 2000].

Each field consists of a unique and notable set of tools and perspectives. Documentary approach unites different theoretical perspectives and is, in this sense, a position and a stance of intellectual and attitudes. Documentary approach is often historical, an inquiry that designates the very operations of historical knowing. In another connection speaking of historiography, Paul Ricoeur has spoken of “documentary phase”, which starts with the reception of the witnesses’ statements and ends with the production of archives that serve to establish documentary proof. And further on, he has exemplified explanation and understanding phases, where the historian explains the reasons and consequences of things that have happened, and then, a representative phase in which the actual representation of the past occurs. These are the methodological moments interwoven with one another, as Ricoeur explains [Ricoeur 2004: 137–138]. His model forms a methodological layout that has its connections with documentary discourse as it appears in Patricio Guzmán’s film “Nostalgia for the Light” (*Nostalgia de la luz*, 2010).

### **Dimensions of declarative memory**

Guzmán’s film is a study of heaven and earth, situated in Atacama Desert in Chile, a place for stargazing, and a place for searching the bones of people who were buried in the desert sand during the Pinochet dictatorship. Guzmán’s filmic methods resemble Ricoeur’s list, since explanation, understanding and representative phases are

all present in Guzmán's approach. He has designated his film as an interdisciplinary historical research within the aesthetic domain of film language. He concentrates on these phases as to concentrate on the practices of temporality. The historical roots of explaining things, comprehending and representing them are all relevantly present. It is the audience's duty to resolve these puzzles once the question of historicity has been addressed, as well as, the question of extra-terrestrial phenomena. Indeed, the fundamental motivation for Guzmán is to raise questions, and to see what the relationship between past, present and future would be. In the documentary phase of Guzmán, a declarative memory is born out of these circumstances and turned into documentary proof of matters. Guzmán presents testimonies of witnesses, and they are evaluated so that a documentary truth prevails.

Crucial is Guzmán's affirmation that the declarative memories of witnesses are the initiating moments of historical knowledge and possible aspects of truth. In the film, Guzmán interviews Luis Henriquez who is one of the survivors of Pinochet's death camps, and he recounts how inmates studied astronomy until it was later forbidden. Another survivor, Miguel Lawner was a very talented draughtsman, able to produce compelling drawings of the concentration camp by memorising how many feet he covered as he paced its grounds. In another passage of the film, Guzmán's interviews Atacama astronomers' attempt to link their probing of the cosmos with the equally daunting task of making a nation to recall its victimisation. The study of heaven seems to be offered as a form of consolation, when a scientist tells us that the stars contain the same calcium as our bones, including the bones of the disappeared lying near the telescopes. The moments show how essential is Ricoeur's affirmation that the testimonies are the initiating appearances of historical knowledge. The people who are the witnesses of terrible events want to reassure us; they want that we believe what they are saying. It is our responsibility to evaluate the credibility of their testimonies. In Guzmán's film, this forms a key operation in the establishment of the documentary proof through remembering.

The type of questions raised in "Nostalgia for the Light" are crucial for historical research, since they concern documentary facts that are dealing with not just the remembered events but their actual occurrence. In this way, the described event becomes the referent of testimonies. Ricoeur's description of the historical traces of documentary actually discloses and gives form to something very meaningful, showing a great concern of the silenced voices of the people who have lost a lot and lived through and experienced a paradox of being a human whose humanity has been utterly jeopardised.

"Nostalgia for the Light" represents an artistic practice that invites the audience to think about the past, and to make multiple connections between characters and objects in sequences that describe the happenings. It also represents a memory work

that concentrates not only on certain historical matters, but also on cultural representation of them. In Guzmán's film, the method of investigation controls the narrative, representing a view of ignored past. The filming at Atacama Desert performs a way of retelling, and a way of how a contemporary activity of a filmmaker can shed new light on past events. The idea concerns remembering and forgetting, produces a meta-historical account, a trace in mobilising the effect of the past, and adds cultural meanings to it. As Malin Wahlberg has demonstrated: "The trace is a trace of something, and therefore it stands out as an intentional object whose mode of being is equivalent to its function as inscription of the past within the present" [Wahlberg 2008: 35].

A documentary can invoke an act of reminiscence that is outside of personal memory, symbolising something more. This is in line with the influence of existential phenomenology and phenomenology of time experience concerning historical ideas and their outcomes. Nostalgia in "Nostalgia for the Light" represents a form of audio-visual memory as a productive force. Guzmán aims to show possibilities that are still valid in the present and Guzmán's nostalgia contains a utopian presence of the future, a desire for a state of matters that could be better than the current one. Following this logic, one can think that nostalgia contains a critical element, since it is usually a symptom of longing for something else, a change, or hope for another reality [Magagnoli 2015].

### **Scholarship and criticism**

Current research on documentary – concerning the meaning, interpretation and status of it – is based on a complex history of ideas. Many of the earlier arguments have formed the basis for a great deal of research on documentary perspectives down to the present time. Therefore, it is crucial to know the heritage of this tradition, and to understand what kind of issues are at stake in talking about documentary. When addressing the historical value of documentary, several theoretical stances have been adopted in discussion of ontological differences and similarities between them. As Vivian C. Sobchack and Thomas Sobchack have emphasised: "Documentary filmmakers who choose to analyse their subject matter rather than simply record it have also chosen to acknowledge their own mediation in the filmmaking process" [Sobchack and Sobchack 1987: 354].

The increased subjectivity of the filmmakers has also affected the nature of documentary discourse, but there have been difficulties in assessing subjective and objective dimensions together or deciding the borderlines between them. This mediation concerns other disciplines as well. For instance, in cognitive and neuroscientific approaches to mind and brain we can find similar problematics, because of the difficulty to clearly separate objective and subjective realms. The systematic

interest in the operations of the mind has been a major target of cognitivism. In this perspective, the mind is a representational and intentional system, and the study of the mind is a challenging and complex issue where no single perspective is adequate. Cognitivism, as well as documentary theory itself is not a unified field or theory but more a collaborative stance or effort among researchers working in these fields. The uniting factor that holds cognitive theory together is the study of the mind and, for the most part, the use of scientific methods [Friedenberg, Silverman 2006: 2].

We can say that documentary discourse fragments the complexity of matters, since some matters are valued over others without comprehending the relationality between them. Documentary discourse forms a basic way of communicating ideas forward, favouring conversational, formal and orderly represented voices as expressions of thought [Nichols 2011].

At best, documentary discourse develops an interdisciplinary field of matters studying the structures documentary and its artistic practices that have expanded and changed the directions of investigations. The spectrum of documentary is nowadays wider than ever, mainly because of this interdisciplinarity approach that connects philosophy, psychology and screen studies with documentary modes of address. These modes can be direct, or indirect, depending on the point of view, scale of narration, and the perspective of the audience. Jonathan Kahana has notified that “documentary is a process by which certain traits of cinema as such – the indexical character of its auditory and visual signs; the capacity to separate the audio track from the visual track, and to recombine them in different ways; its ability to incorporate other performance, textual and recording media; its portability; and its ability to be viewed by one or many – are brought to bear on a social topic” [Kahana 2008: 23].

By appropriating this perspective and using techniques of representation to produce certain kinds of stories with meaningful structures that are there to be notified and explored, documentary as a discourse can differentiate itself from other modes of cultural and historical representation. One of the most significant features of documentary has been its relation to authenticity. So, if a documentary is authentic, it contains a certain amount of freedom from conventional expectations that are supposedly required in a given situation, and with a sense of responsibility that characterises the discourse.

Documentary discourse can be hermeneutic when interpreting individual and social perspectives. A documentary can feature ontological events, which produce interaction between the film and its audience. In approaching documentary, the circularity of interpretation concerns the relation of parts to the whole, since the interpretation of each part is dependent on the interpretation of the whole. In a sense, a single documentary emphasises the understanding of it as a continuation of historical and cultural tradition, as well as a form of dialogical openness, which creates a

situation where the horizons of documentary can be broadened. Both directly and indirectly, this passage echoes the authenticity of documentary's social effectiveness, which does not come merely from technical or other capacity but is comprehended as a diffusive element of documentation considering a number of different, even contradictory, purposes. According to Mike Wayne, "documentary sits at the intersection of contradictory philosophical streams and manifests this in its theory and practice" [Wayne 2008: 83].

### Sensory estimations

The rhetorical capacity of documentary has changed through time, since documentary films address the state of our being in a certain moment of time. Effective rhetorical way of dealing with documentary matters includes the art of speaking and writing, as well as studying the application of the principles and rules of composition. This creates a thicker sense of documentary's forms and aesthetics that provides a needed interplay between objective and subjective forces, complicating the dimensions of documentary knowledge as a basis of actual experience. The state of being aware of something relates to the act of understanding documentary's perceptual challenges, and the acknowledgement and cognizance of the mind [Merleau-Ponty 1964, Bruno 2002]. Perception in this sense relates to the characteristic experiences associated with different senses. Often in documentary, the complex relations between narrative imagination and historical and cultural representation provide new and revelatory insights of understanding the social realm of events. This outlines the possibility to understand the inner nature of documentary discourse as a token of intuitive seeing, bringing forth a documentary stance that can connect representations of the past with a creative montage and narrative imagination.

This kind of specific cinematographic eloquence is fully experienced in Pirjo Honkasalo's film "The 3 Rooms of Melancholia" (2004). The film is a three-part – *Longing, Breathing and Remembering* – journey, which tries to come to terms with children and the effects of the Second Chechen War. As we follow Honkasalo's narrative, we become aware that the places and spaces she depicts are permeated by historical and personal touch. The war was the site of political and ideological confrontations, including the most harrowing battles between Russian forces and Chechen rebels. Honkasalo's aspiration extends beyond that, since she is mainly dealing with the many-sided effects that the war had on Russian and Chechen children. Director's exploration becomes a compass point within the field of global and political ramifications. The three parts examine critically the features of this landscape in Russia and Czechya. Throughout the mixing of documentary form and political and ideological critique with poetic undertones, Honkasalo provides a powerful commentary on these matters.

Beyond this, "The 3 Rooms of Melancholia" deals with cinema's ability to exist as an audio-visual entity for memory and history. Honkasalo refers to the complexity of representation. She seems determined by the way cinema has the ability to grasp the impressions that have their context and source in the faces of young children in a Russian military academy (Room No. 1), in the people's desperate situation during the war in Grozny (Room No. 2), and in the social rituals of people in Ingushetia (Room No. 3). The theme of war acquires added dimensions in all three sections.

The issue of the fragility of children in front of these events saturates the images and sounds, and the political and cultural memory is marked by a prevailing sense of the harmful effects of war. This suggests another way to understand the described reality, since the film is a journey through the complexity of spatial and temporal dimensions. The rhetorical framework of the documentary is firmly rooted in an attempt to reassess phenomenological themes and problems of space and time. Perception and ethics are in the middle of this existential inquiry. Honkasalo's film provides an ongoing hermeneutic approach to this perspective, and a metaphysical journey into the experience of children in the middle of all this. Honkasalo offers a mind-opening discourse where existential, psychological and aesthetic insights are consciously bracketed into the context of audio-visual display. In this regard, the depicted historical events form a collective history of political and ideological fields of vision, under which lies a history of personal aspirations, and a larger frustration towards these circumstances.

The created image of memory is a mental construction of sites and places that are united through personal memories of the social actors. This indication prepares the way for intensive notions of time and place. As the narration begins, we witness an overview of the happenings in a military academy that is situated in Kronstadt, an island outside St. Petersburg. In this specific place, many of the pupils are children from the streets of Russian cities, aged from ten to fourteen years. They are about to learn the methods and mechanics of war. The fragments of their learning processes are described merely as impressions on their faces. In the next section, the theme opens up more sociologically, depicting the war-effects in a concrete battle of humans, trying to survive in the ruins of Grozny. In the last section of the film, the impressive and sociological perspectives are more or less united, as we approach the aftermath of war in a small community living in Ingushetia, only a few miles away from Chechen border.

Honkasalo's concerns are present, dealing with the passage of time and the conditions to empirically know the reality. These connections, ideas, and postulations are emblems of duration and other existential proponents in order to grasp the continuity and persistence of life. Honkasalo searches for new audio-visual ideas and forms that she can materialize, connected with the belief in depicting the relation-

ship of human beings and their surroundings. The emotional register of the narrative is persistently intimate especially in the first and last sections of the film.

Honkasalo's film marks a convincing point in which aesthetic qualities are presented with an approach to the idea of "figures in a landscape". This cinematographic concern is also a nuanced and atmospheric approach rather than just a tendency to simply restore something. The impressive use of colours, and the carefully choreographed camera movements are deeply enthralling. Moreover, the editing of the film structures the narrative heavily.

The phenomenology of matters contains an intuitive and sensory estimation of audio-visual imprints that reflect the expression of memory and other states of documentary discourse. The aspects of film are inscribed to rearticulate the meanings of framing, editing, sound and narration. In Honkasalo's documentary, these are dramatically refracted signs of existence. Documentary discourse appears as a mediated process where personal and social realms form an interactive reconstruction of matters punctuated by ethical and moral engagement. In hypermodern documentary such as "The 3 Rooms of Melancholia", the state of affairs can appear as a continuous search for the discreet connections of disparate places and times, allowing the possibility for images and sounds to resonate and vibrate suggestively in creating configurations that have no prefixed meanings. The enunciation of such a documentary discourse intensifies and enriches the quality of expression.

### **A phenomenology of appearances**

Consequently, perception is recognition and understanding of spatial and temporal structures, and an understanding of different objects and parts and their relations in the field of audio-visual thinking. The phenomenological description focuses on the analysis of the experience. In Chris Marker's "Sunless" (*Sans soleil*, 1983), the audience is shuttled back and forth between the pre-industrialised landscape of Africa and the post-industrialised economy of Japan. Through the rhythmic counterpointing, we become aware not only of the disparities between the two, but also of the persistence of forms of thinking and cultural expression that link these places and spaces together. These forms of thinking are ultimately utilized in the film as a way of critiquing and challenging Western ideologies, in particular the metaphysics of "presence" in Western thought, concerned with its privileging of what is spoken over what is left unsaid [Valkola 2017: 140–148]. Many images speak for themselves needing no further comment and, in this regard, Marker's film comes close to cognitive understanding, including long sequences of sounds and images that reflect the cineaste's comprehension of specific still and movement aesthetics to emphasise seemingly contradictory views and perspectives. Recognising the "truth" of an event always exceeds the presented facts. Marker's attempt to



locate the contributory subjects of meaning and association, whether these include personal, social, ideological, emotional, philosophical, moral, ethical, cultural or ethnographical dimensions, is worked out through a metaphorical play of contrasts and oppositions that include the spectator. Marker's associative montage offers a nuanced, pictorially multivalent spatial and temporal perspective, and creates an audio-visual experience – an event resulting from the intersection of the everyday and the modern – and an intersection of various filmic forms (stillness, animation, movement, frame-based aesthetics of montage and pictorialism) that takes place across the lines marked by the simultaneity of history and audio-visual memory. and manifested in reflections of the advance of digital technology.

However, one of the most interesting propositions emerges from the investigation of film's power to work as an audio-visual ethnography concerned with the depiction of places and spaces. *Sans Soleil* acknowledges its biases and constructiveness as a systematic and open-ended analysis of the social-historic basis of the camera-based audio-visual process. The narrative meaning of the represented images depends a lot on the commentary. Marker's reflections can be understood on two levels: on the one hand, regarding narration, which is constructed by means of the interplay between fictional and documentary contexts; on the other hand, regarding the historical meaning of the representation, which works more as suggested than revealed by the narrator's notions. "Sunless" combines classical knowledge, eloquence of form, beauty and poetry. Its global atmosphere is so genuinely strong that it affects us immediately.

As this example testifies, the cognitive, phenomenological, and perceptual aspects of image-and-sound combinations are of major importance. They are related to the understanding of these processes, connecting the mental to the pictorial. The scientific study of mental states could particularly bring forth greater precision for the understanding of the subject. The sensitivity to the typology of mental states could help prevent the temptation of homogenising the biochemical expressions of mental states to a narrow type, and give space for the diversity of the phenomenon, for the mixture of feelings, thoughts, abstractions and sensations.

The issue of fragility of memory immerses and saturates the images and sounds of "Sunless", and a single film can appear as a token for the representation of memory. Subjective and collective memories are represented as images and sounds of a universe whose 'reality' forms a constantly shifting perspective. A documentary can have the ability to reform and probe its existential nature, unfolding and reflecting upon connotations that discreetly denote the concretism of the narrative. In the light of this, the audience has its expectations, which are intertwined with metacommentary on film as a medium of representation. Aesthetically speaking, these filmmakers have a special sense of the use of light in their films. They are devoted to the casual fall of light on depicted phenomena and the visibly composed immersion into the flow of

passing experiences, rendering controlled grouping of social characters in significant poses, controlled by a unifying style of appearances. The general camerawork is finely tuned into the dramatics of the described events. The distant views of people and the surrounding landscape are observed from the point of view of observational onlooker, confirming a hypermodern connection with illustration. The notions of socio-historical past colour the expression with careful period details that are subdued to the general atmosphere of narration. This features an elevated form of documentary filmmaking practice, connected with the artistic model of intuitive performances. The camera is attached as an aesthetic medium, associated with pure documentary illustration.

One of the main results deals with the idea that in these films we can find an audiovisually composed style that relies on facial close-ups and bodily presences and poses, and is filtered through a cultural continuity in which the importance of details, such as the flow of passing experiences, is subdued to the general atmosphere of narration. The films are journeys into the past in order to rewrite history in a situation where past and present are inseparable. Another result is that while it is obvious that documentaries can contain a source of truth in recording and reproducing the phenomenal appearance of social characters, they can also revitalise the interest between past and present issues in avoiding mythological and unspecified references. The ambiguity of the content of documentary can reflect the uncertainty of character-decisions under difficult situations, as it happens in these films.

Documentary discourse deals with historical and social realms, complicating the dialogical discussion of representation in a situation where narrative imagination and audio-visual poetics meet. Documentary can establish a common perception since it expresses the filmmaker's point of view and style, which is then offered to the audience. After that the audience interprets it literally, differently, and complementarily, changing and contrasting the emerged meanings. According to Julian Hochberg, the viewer's construction of edited space can be compared to cognitive mapping, since the task of a filmmaker is to make the viewer pose a visual question which s/he answers [Hochberg 1978: 208]. In cognitive mapping, individual and social perceptions are combined. Besides inscription (what the camera can record), my viewpoint deals with reception (how images and sounds can be understood and viewed). These various attributions help us to accentuate the contours of documentary vision, even though they too easily suspend the question of the interplay between the subjective and objective realities of the image.

As Guzmán, Honkasalo and Marker have verified in the context of documentary, the image and its constructions give possibility to a specific dialectic between the narration and its perception. The way these artists understand the creative process opens the doors to the expression of larger perspectives in the whole filmmaking practice.

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