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Visual rhetoric in Romanian documentaries

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SUMMARY

Keywords: documentaries, cinematic language, religious documentaries, visual education, visual symbol, religious visual communication, visual rhetoric

Introduction: This study tries to help the reader understand what elements produce visual rhetoric in Romanian documentaries. Documentaries are media and art products of interest not only for the public, but also for filmmakers, critics or theorists for more than a century now. During the last three decades, both visual communication and visual rhetoric have developed a lot in the documentary films. Given its current topic, it has been of interest to us, especially if we consider Romanian documentaries with religious and cultural themes. Trinitas TV documentaries are traditional, expository and poetic documentary films, and create a certain type of sacred visual message through the visual symbols, and other visual elements that show the characteristics of the Romanian national cultural identity. These documentaries are perfectly suitable for a visual rhetoric analysis.

This paper has three major chapters: *Documentaries, artistic media products, What is visual rhetoric in documentary film?* and *Case Study: Trinitas TV Documentaries*. In the first chapter, *Documentaries, artistic media products*, we try to draw the reader into the beauty and complexity of documentaries, but also into the sacred theme of these documentary films. The beginning of this chapter introduces us to the art of cinema, to the film production and to its specific language, in order to be able to understand what the audience can experience during this journey. There are theorists, like David Bordwell, who see the film as an artistic product, that influences our perceptions and emotions, whether we are aware of it or not, and Dumitru Ion Suchianu said that the film is the "photograph of thought". There are several estheticians, such as Andre Bazin, Morin, Cohen-Seat, Munier, and Merleau Ponty, who have a special vision on the construction and significance of cinematic messages that are in a way inaccessible to the whole public and being slightly unrealistic, according to some authors.

Filmmakers like David McDougall see the film as a tool for collecting and observing data, others see it as an economic product, and for others it is a cultural artifact. In our study,

we talked about the aesthetics of the film and the beauty it encaptures, seen by authors like Alain Bergala as simply art, and by others as a well-structured and defined media product, which gives the theorists, like Zettl, the possibility to analyze the elements of the visual structure. The cinematic language has been developed since the beginning of the last century and over time, it has been easier and easier for us to understand and read its specific codes or configurations of meaning, no matter what documentary school we are talking about. Semioticians see film as a unit of discourse, and there are some authors that made code classifications, such as Umberto Eco or Etienne Souriau, Gilbert Cohen-Seat, Christian Metz or Roland Barthes. From ideological montage to digital film editing, filmmakers have created different messages with different purposes, which have influenced the audience in different ways. Light is one of the compositional elements of the visual image that creates a certain state of viewers, through its intensity or positioning towards the filmed subject, an invitation in that unique space and time, met only in film. As a matter of fact, the film is also called an “art of time”.

It was necessary to write a small history of documentary film, based on theories of historians, from its beginnings, 1880-1919, to the present. Documentary has made its own way on the timeline, from the father of the documentary, Robert Flaherty, to Grierson, from the British documentary film school, to Vertov and Kulesov from the ideologizing Soviet school, to the television documentary or mockumentary, and more recently, to the interactive documentary, and today, to the virtual non-fiction. Then, we considered relevant to our study to understand the documentary genres, to see the definitions of documentary given by a few representatives, from Grierson's creative treatment of reality, to Bill Nichols' representation of historical world or to David Bordwell's tool for transmitting factual information about the world, to discursive formation that presents current facts, by creating a rhetoric of the immediate and the truth, in the opinion of Jane Chapman. This helped us understand some of its specific features, and how it distinguishes from other media products. Documentary is distinguished by its basic functions, according to Michael Renov, to record, to discover, to preserve, to convince or to promote, to analyze or interrogate and to express. Solomon said that the documentary filmmaker is different from the filmmaker by the fact that he has less intervention in the representation of reality, and Barbash and Berkeley say that documentary is unique as a genre and by its relations with the approached themes. Michael Rabiger, in 2004,

wrote that it is necessary to distinguish non-fiction from documentary, because true documentaries are concerned with the values that determine the quality of human life, and not with the sale of a product or service. Going through the typologies of documentary films in this chapter, such as those of Nichols, Bordwell, Bruzzi, McLane, Gaudenzi, and other film theorists, to today's interactive documentary and non-fiction virtual reality, we try to present the specifics of each type of documentary. A first typology created, depending on reflexivity, was that of the classic documentaries, which are realistic, as in direct cinema, but also of the contemporary ones, which are reflective. In 2001, Bill Nichols made a classification of documentaries, starting from the observational, performative and reflexive representation and identified the following types of documentaries: poetic, expository, observational, participatory and reflexive. David Bordwell talked about the compilation film, a subgenre of documentary film, which we could call "the ancestor" of today's interactive documentary. Also, considering the themes of the documentaries, he distinguished among documentaries of nature, art, science, social, and others too. Film historian John Barsam distinguished between factual, instructive, persuasive and propagandistic documentary and Stella Bruzzi spoke about docusoap, a subgenre of television documentary, which films ordinary people for a certain period of time, with an omniscient eye. Another genre is pseudo-documentary, with digital effects and which questions the truth of all documentaries, but it is a fiction. We also mentioned the first documentary generated by users in 2011, "Life in a day", appreciated at Sundance Film Festival, the interactive documentary of the author Sandra Gaudenzi, which allows the user to participate directly in the narrative construction, and nowadays, the virtual non-fiction, seen by some authors as a different technology than that of the cinema, which respects the three elements of virtual reality: 3D space, live interaction and user self-projection in the virtual environment.

It was relevant for our study to also talk about the specifics of Romanian cinema in this chapter, a cinema appreciated, according to American authors, since the premiere at Cannes of the film "The Forest of the Hanged" by Liviu Ciulei in 1965, and about the characteristics of Romanian documentaries. Two of the Romanian film festivals exclusively dedicated to documentaries, Astra Film Festival in Sibiu and DocuArtFest in Bucharest, annually host the best Romanian documentaries, according to Călin Căliman. The documentary "Collective" (from 2019) by Alexandru Nanau is something new for the Romanian documentary. It is the

first Romanian film in history that was nominated for the Oscars last year, and which was also appreciated in London this year.

In the last part of this first chapter, we try to show the context of Romanian religious documentary films in the Romanian Orthodox religious journalism. The Orthodox press started more than a century now, somewhere in the 1830-1840s. This type of press was developed by both theologians and experienced journalists and since the day the television Trinitas TV of the Romanian Patriarchate broadcast, it has been accessible to an entire world through the online distribution, with its specific messages. One of the things worth mentioning is the fact that, in 2005, in Romania appeared the first daily paper in the Orthodox Christian world, called “Lumina”, and since 2007, Trinitas TV television started to broadcast in order to promote Romanian history, culture and faith. Documentaries made by the public television Trinitas TV can be assimilated to films with sacred themes. We are talking here about a genre that is less liked by the public, but much appreciated by critics and awarded, especially in recent years in the USA, where researchers developed new theoretical lines about this film genre (which we also consider worth taking into account when talking about Romania, if we appreciate the prosperity of documentary productions that could be made here, starting from our national identity) or at The Cannes Film Festival, for instance, where filmmaker Robert Bresson was awarded several times with the grand prize for his films, in which we find Byzantine iconography.

In the second chapter, *What is visual rhetoric in documentary film?*, we have started with the visual construction of the image in documentaries, the visual image and the meaning produced by it, what the image is composed of, what substrates has and what levels of understanding it has, in order to understand the message of the visual image, according to various theories of semiotics. Eliade spoke of a representation of images within man, according to his faith and values. Charles Peirce, who laid the foundations of semiotics, saw the image as a subcategory of the icon and distinguished among three types of: the image itself, the diagram and the metaphor, and Gilles Deleuze identified four types of images: the perception-image, the action-image, the affect-image and the time-image. Christian Metz, another pioneer of film semiotics, saw film as an act of communication, that takes place in the bilateral exchange between the receiver and the transmitter, through a well-defined code and context, and the well-known semiotician Roland Barthes distinguished between the denotative

level (this first meaning is accessible to a wide audience) and the connotative level of the image (this level uses a more specific code, like in the ideological messages of the film). However, more recently, new theories choose a different direction, especially the cognitivists, who no longer take into account the levels of significance in film or certain codes that the audience could identify, but they rather say that film can be understood through the logical construction of filmic visual discourse.

Next, we went through some important concepts in order to have a better understanding of visual rhetoric in documentary and more specific, in religious documentary, such as *visual education*, *visual intelligence*, *visual communication*, *cinematic language*, *symbolic code*, *ritual communication* and *religious communication*. According to an author, the visual education is the ability of a person to distinguish and interpret in an appropriate way visible actions, objects or symbols in his environment. Cresskill, one of the new researchers in visual communication, said in the last decades, studies in visual communication show that: the new visual product is also used as a practical tool; in order to understand the visual message in film, the cinematic language studies start from the basic language studies and how images are used to create visual rhetoric in film. As for religious language, it is defined as one of personal experience and personal participation, which cannot be reduced to objective formulas. Like any other language, the religious language is a specialized one, created according to the cultures with which it had been in touch, a language of confession, of the particular affirmation of faith, which goes beyond the language of sciences or philosophy. An American theorist and media critic, James William Carey, talks about communication as a ritual, which values more the symbolic meaning and the lived experience, than the simple information of these media products.

Some other relevant aspects which we have discussed in this chapter were: symbols, the role and functions of symbols, according to some of the representatives of semiotics and art history, as well as the specific symbolism of Christianity, in the conception of Eliade, Cojanu and Todorov and its distinction from the ideological symbol in the film. We looked at the symbol in the visual arts through the eyes of art historians and we showed the specificity of the symbol in iconography, very often present in Romanian religious documentaries. Eliade said about the study of symbolism that its ultimate goal is to help the knowing of humankind. Gilbert Durand said that symbolic imagination has these functions: biological, psychosocial

and humanistic, and he considered that symbol can restore psychosocial balance. Semioticians Tzvetan Todorov and Max Schlegel created a history of the symbol, starting from antiquity. Lorenz Dittmann was one of the art historians interested in symbolism, in psychology, Jung blamed the unconscious for symbolic interpretation, and the semioticians Ferdinand de Saussure, with his classification of signs into actual signs, clues and symbols, and Charles Peirce with the distinction between icons, clues and symbols and his composition of the sign from the representative, performer and object, had a great contribution in this regard. Eliade saw in the symbolism of Christianity, a wealth of symbols, a thesaurus that has preserved useful symbols from ancient civilizations and beliefs, but which do not cancel out the old ones, but fulfill them in the new faith. The Christian symbolism of a local history is later the symbolism of an entire world. The central symbol of Christianity is Christ, “the sign of all signs”, as Eliade calls it. Eliade talks about the role of intercultural communication of images and symbols and considers them an opening to the transcendent, without which cultures would be dead. The Bulgarian semiotician Tzvetan Todorov considers that the first semiotics book that should be considered so, is “Christian Doctrine” of Blessed Augustine, in which he divides the world into signs and things, signifiers of signs, and the ultimate meaning is God. Some art historians who treat the symbols of Christianity are: Gilbert Durand, who talks about the ritual symbol of the Holy Sacraments of Christianity and the iconographic symbol, in painted or in sculpted images; Erwin Panofsky, an art historian concerned with iconography and iconology, as well as Ernst Cassirer. In 1981, Martin Marcel classified the symbols in film into: plastic, dramatic and ideological. NJ Cresskill, in 2006, said that the visual language is the most powerful and effective way to communicate, due to its integrative process of creating meanings, and he stated that symbolic communication in film occurs through the elements of visual aesthetics and meanings created by the public, from the cultures they come from.

In the last part of this chapter, we have created a short story of rhetoric in time, from its beginnings, more than two millennia ago, a more rigid rhetoric, and until the last decades and now, when the visual rhetoric in the documentary is part of the field of visual communication, which is of great interest both for specialists and for critics or the public. Tzvetan Todorov talks about the end of the classical rhetoric, at the end of the 18th century, and in the middle of the 20th century, how rhetoric was reborn. The old rhetoric was built around the compositional structure of the discourse and the style and the arguments were important, drawn according to

certain rules, and the new rhetoric focused on rational arguments from the human sciences and lost its rigidity. To understand visual rhetoric, according to NJ Cresskill, it is important to understand terms such as “visual meaning” or “visual argument”. He identifies several visual arguments: argumentative flags, visual demonstrations, visual metaphors, visual symbols and visual archetypes, whereas “visual symbols” are those images used to refer to what they represent. Michael Renov talks about the four rhetorical functions of the documentary: to record, to convince, to interrogate and to express. In 2012, Schoen said that the rhetoric of the documentary film is produced by the visual symbols, by the filming and editing techniques of the film and by the created message and the social change achieved by the visual product of the filmmaker. Most of the theoreticians show that visual rhetoric in documentary film is produced both through the meanings created by both the authors and the public, depending on their experience and their cultural background.

These chapters, in which we tried a critical analysis of theories, led us to visual rhetoric in the Romanian documentary with cultural-religious themes. This represented a minimal theoretical basis for us, from which we started the case study proposed for analysis, the documentary produced by the public television Trinitas TV, part of the Basilica Center of the Romanian Patriarchate. Our research hypothesis was that visual rhetoric, which facilitates the representation of the sacred in these documentaries, is realised through the visual symbols present here in visual images, and other elements of visual image construction, such as light, through religious visual communication, which creates a certain type of message that attracts the public, but also through the meanings given by the public to these symbols. The research questions from which we started were: “What produces visual rhetoric in Romanian documentaries?”, “What are the recurring visual symbols in Trinitas TV documentaries?” and “What is the meaning of symbolic images in the minds of viewers?” and we chose an observational research design. We have analyzed visual data of Trinitas TV documentaries between 2015 and 2021 in the online environment. The methods we have used are content analysis of the visual discourse, in order to identify the elements that produce visual rhetoric and the message created by religious visual communication specific to these documentaries and image analysis of a relevant compositional element of the image here - light, and third the focus group, to help us quantify the meanings of visual symbols and this type of message given by the public, but also the quantitative method, through statistics which illustrate

relevant information, for instance, about the topics covered in these documentaries or what are the preferences in the online environment. In order to understand the public's favourite Trinitas TV documentaries posted and distributed in the online environment (more than 80 documentaries), the typology of these documentaries, their theme and other relevant elements related to the audience, we analyzed the data on the official Facebook page, on the YouTube channel and the website of this television. We also talked about visual religious communication in these documentaries and how the central message influences the visual rhetoric.

Trinitas TV television began its journey in 2007 for two main reasons: to revive the Romanian Orthodox press, through the development of communication institutions in the church, to convey the message of faith and to respond to the needs of the public, who requested this. It has the central message "of peace and solidarity, correct information and free of commercial obsession for the sensational, a friendly and warm word for the lonely or the suffering". It broadcasts 24 hours a day. The program is varied, with live and recorded media productions, an invitation to love Romanian culture and faith. The distribution of Trinitas TV documentaries was at the beginning, of 5 titles per year, in 2013-2014, 10 titles, and in the last three years, over 20 documentaries were produced annually, distributed through Trinitas TV, their YouTube channel and their official Facebook page. Trinitas TV documentaries have a loyal audience, but they are addressed to everyone and promote the Orthodox faith, history and culture, specific to the Romanian space. Most of them have an exclusively religious theme (67%), and the rest are polythematic. Historical or cultural Trinitas TV documentaries show specialized interviews, with professional guests, and characters are real in religious documentaries, people who are part of the Church institution, people who sacrificed their lives for faith (such as confessors in communist prisons) or orthodox believers. It is an atypical documentary of television, with wide frames, overall, in nature, using artificial lighting, but the natural one predominates, often used indoors during daytime, and it also uses closer frames, to show the features of the characters. Aerial filming are in all documentaries, both for the description of the visual narrative space, but also for the symbolization of the communication between man and God, because it alternates with the closest frames, which can symbolize the communication between man and others. Most of them talk about a monastic settlement, Romanian cultural and religious monuments, Romanian faith and culture,

about great clergymen of Romanian Orthodoxy, Romanian history, about the life of a saint, about socio-religious institutions in Romania and their input, about the simple Orthodox life of many of the Romanians, about the martyrs of Orthodoxy and about Orthodox religious tourist attractions in the world.

Here we will present some important data that we found. Out of over 80 documentaries posted and distributed in online, 26 documentaries show a monastic settlement, from a cultural and religious point of view, 17 documentaries present various cultural monuments in Romania, and 10 documentaries talk about Romanian faith and culture. Starting from several typologies, including that of Bill Nichols, we noticed that Trinitas TV documentaries are cultural, religious and historical, with real life characters, expository, through the narrator's voice present in all documentaries, send the viewer to reflection, considering their themes, and poetic, through the artistic aspects of the visual images in these documentaries, with broad frames, overall, atypical television documentaries, where the lighting is predominantly natural, used even for indoor filming. On the YouTube channel of this television, at the time of gathering information, we found that there were 121.000 followers, with views up to 169.411, for "Ceahlău Massif. Life in the sky", for instance. On the official Facebook page of Trinitas TV, with 372.000 followers at the time of access, the documentaries that had the most posts were: "Saint Pafnutie-Pârvu Zugravul", "The Savior of Condemned Churches" and "Confessors of Orthodoxy in Communist Prisons". The number of their views was mostly up to 10.000, and five of the documentaries had between 100.000 and 500.500 views, of which the most viewed were: "Sihăstria Putnei Monastery" (with 500,500 views), "Father Cleopa" (with 238,000 views) and "Father Paisie Olaru (Part I and II)" (with 174,200 views). Over 95% of the reactions and appreciations of these documentaries were positive, and the most appreciated documentaries in this environment were: "Sihăstria Monastery" (with 119,168 appreciations), "Parents and children in the love of Christ" (with 44,205 appreciations) and "Sihăstria Putnei Monastery" (with 29,394 appreciations).

The categories of symbols that we identified in these documentaries were something new we tried to bring to this study, (which we named "ritual symbols", of which the most common were the symbol of church, cross, icon, candle, prayer, child and water, "artistic symbols" and "cultural symbols"), symbols we considered to be common and characteristic of documentary productions in Romania, by extension, regardless of their topics. The religious

communication created through the visual symbols from Trinitas TV documentaries has a solemn style, characterized by the idea of celebration, of the meeting between man and God, a communication that has in its center the existence of the Creator, accessible to any person, but also good relationship of man with other community members, as well as mutual aid, that help existing societies to develop. We also found that the visual language of these documentaries is coded, understood only by the educated public, a symbolic language that transcends the meanings given by various theorists, that is revealing through its essential message. The results of our focus group showed that the meanings given by the interview participants, who are part of the loyal audience of these documentaries, are very close to those created by the filmmakers of these media products. In the end, we considered that the visual rhetoric in the Trinitas TV documentaries is produced in two ways, both through the visual elements used to build the visual discourse and to create a message that places in the center the image of a man that loves our nation and faith, which mirrors a large segment of the target audience in Romania, an ideal of devotion to God and to the community, to which we consider that any human individual tends.

Conclusions

We wanted to show another facet of the Romanian society, through our study, illustrated by the Romanian religious documentary film, to make a small introduction for this kind of documentary in the first decades of production, but which aims to offer the viewer a message of good, of beauty, a moment of peace, in this current society, which aims to realize a visual rhetoric meant to show other ideas than the most conveyed ones, through which man can contribute to a better life in the community in which he lives.

The research we have proposed is addressed to all those curious about the topic of visual rhetoric, the documentary, the sacred, more specifically here, cultural and religious documentaries from Romania, produced by Trinitas TV television. Visual rhetoric in documentary film is a field that has appeared and developed in recent decades, it is at the beginning of the road, we could say, and also, documentaries with sacred themes. From our point of view, it would be interesting to develop a research direction in this regard, starting from the specifics of Romanian culture and faith. As other authors have said before us, we also

consider that documentary film has a much bigger role than a simple media product, it has the ability to capture the invisible, the abstract, which can make the viewer's life more beautiful.

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