

INVESTIGATION OF HOW POETIC MODE DOCUMENTARIES WORK AS A CATALYST FOR
INFORMATION IN SCIENCE AND NATURAL HISTORY FILMMAKING

By

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ABSTRACT

Poetic mode storytelling comes in the form of a new, unusual, and abstract means of expressing information and conveying emotion in media narrative production. When used in the context of science and natural history filmmaking it is a double-edged sword; it can induce intrigue or instigate bewilderment. When the poetic mode elements are used in conjunction with science and natural history filmmaking, there is a defiance in the expectations of what both conventional cinema and experimental cinema are trying to convey. These differences come in the form of producing films that visually and emotionally express features of poetic mode storytelling techniques while still creating a film that is about a real process, person, and place. Through case studies of poetic mode science and natural history films *Samsara*, *Sweet Grass*, and my film "Flourish," this paper will examine how the use of poetic mode film techniques in science and natural history films are utilized, and the accolades and critiques that come as a result.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

There is always a bit of pleasure in discovering two “things” that pair well, when under standard social conditions they would be labeled as “not complementary” like goat cheese and strawberry preserves, or even French fries and milkshakes. Seamlessly further playing off the gluttony of this metaphor, I propose a combination that further blends and progresses the expression of contemporary teaching and abstract-poetic mode filmmaking: the amalgamation of science communication and experimental filmmaking. This notion of experimental art and scientific reporting could be defined as cinema that envisions communicating the ideas of science and the natural world through alternative storytelling methods about visual, acoustic, and emotional adaptations.

Furthermore, the conjunction of science communication and experimental filmmaking is a hypothesis of a synthesis that aspires to broaden the scope for teaching and learning science, while also expanding the artistic qualities of both forms. As optimistic as the idea may be presented, it does not stray, however, from the reality that change is difficult and has aspects that can either engage or deter.

The understanding of science communication is a vast and vital concept that has always existed. As communicative technology progresses it will function as a catalyst that further conveys messages of scientific significance. A contemporary standard that provides an entertaining and efficient means for communicating science and natural history topics is documentary films (Kapucu, 2015). These cinematic narratives utilize the marvel of filmmaking to spread wonder to a specific real-life scientific subject.

When classifying what specifically makes up a “science film,” of course, can be difficult with the many variants that exist, but to categorize a few standard techniques that define this domain are films that carry the narrative with the use of interviews and/or narration from a specialist in the field surrounding the topic of the film. This lead will be essential for directing the story from scene to scene and communicating rhetoric, at which point the filmmaker will use a b-roll to set the scene, enunciate on certain features, and cover cuts to an interview. By following this method of scientific filmmaking, an artist will make a documentary that can be categorized by Bill Nichols as “expository.” The expository mode of documentary introduces a point of view with an argument and uses the medium to defend it. Paul Jenkin’s explains that these films, “Usually take a subject and use interviews, archival footage, and other media to present information about it” (Jenkins, 2019). Like the expository mode documentary, a scientific research paper works similarly. It sets out to enlighten a specific aspect of research and share their results as a means of expanding the conversation of intrigue. With this being the standard, what are ways to deviate from the common practice - and why would someone want to?

Whereas expository mode documentaries set out with a goal, argument, or thesis statement to defend, one might think that this is inherently the best means to converse science with the masses: a film that shares information in hopes that it will be received as a truth. This is especially true since commentary gives an impression of omniscience and therefore causes the audience to associate it with objectivity (Alexander, 2016). What may seem the best workflow for one person, however, may connect less with others. Now, the topic of what interests’ people to learn science is controversial and ever-changing, but instead of arguing about best practices,

there is a great desire to simply experiment with new techniques and see how they work. Specifically, by looking at science-based expository mode documentaries, the immediate question that arises is what would happen if there were a scientific film that sets out to do the exact opposite? Without microscopically picking apart the categorizations of documentary filmmaking, the mode that appears to be the most different from expository mode cinema is “poetic mode” documentary filmmaking, Nichols defines this mode in this manner: “Instead of using traditional linear continuity to create story structure, the poetic documentary filmmaker arrives at its point by arranging footage in an order to evoke an audience association through tone, rhythm, or spatial juxtaposition” (Nichols, 2019). This mode of filmmaking is intriguing in that it interacts in the same medium as any other documentary but diverges into a strongly different ethos than that of the expository mode documentary.

Poetic mode documentaries may not have narrators or even a defined storyline; these films may just be the pure fascination with “art for art’s sake.” With a different mode of filmmaking comes a unique means of critiquing and analyzing the form. In expository documentaries, a filmmaker makes arguments with research, statistics, figures, and appendixes, which are interpreted by the viewer as a film that they may disseminate information or persuade (Natusch, 2014). When viewing a poetic mode documentary, the viewers are no longer asked if they agree or not; instead, they will be invited to view artwork that may inspire bewilderment for visualizations, audio design, or the spectacle that is abstract art; or they may be uninterested or turned away by the techniques used. Though, unlike expository mode filmmaking, the themes of poetic mode films will stray from the necessity of proving a notion as

right or wrong, and instead be a piece that is testing the waters of human emotion and attention on a spectrum that is not polarized as noble or detested.

Furthermore, we no longer live in an age where we are defined by hard facts. Perspective reigns reality, and to create a film that aims to 100% define the best way to live a life is dead before leaving the station. When trying to convince someone to stray from their beliefs with the use of facts and correctness, the filmmaker may further pursue someone to believe in what others are labeling as wrong. This is the information deficit model, which attributes public skepticism or hostility to science and technology to a lack of understanding, resulting from a lack of information. It is not just an information deficit. It has become an ideology. It is associated with a division between experts who have the knowledge and non-experts who do not. (Suldovsky, 2017). Instead of further closing this gap of information between a divided public, one may propose that expository documentaries are doing the exact opposite (Vidal, 2018).

With a desire to communicate science and to expand the ambitions of art, the ideal two birds with one stone will not be to teach “non-believers to believe” but to present themes of science through a style that does not politically polarize. Though, of course, it must be clarified that the poetic mode has its fair share of critiques and disinterests as well. In this thesis, I will explore the ideas in the current state of how filmmakers can use poetic mode to advance science and natural history filmmaking in correspondence with a case study of the f documentary films *Samsara* (2011) and *Sweet Grass* (2009), and then discuss how techniques successfully applied in these films were incorporated into my thesis film “Flourish” (2022), highlighting the critiques and recognition these two previous films and styles have received.

CHAPTER TWO

EXPERIMENTAL FILMMAKING TECHNIQUES

Within the poetic mode of documentary filmmaking, what allows this mode to excel as a deviation from the other modes is the use and acceptance of experimental filmmaking techniques. To define experimental film into a set group of parameters is fundamentally against all ideologies of the avant-garde ethos, though for the circumstances of educating and introducing the topics of this thesis, some attention must be focused on explaining the foundation.

We can begin with the following:

An experimental film is a project that bucks the trends of conventional cinema and pushes the medium of film in unexplored ways. The spectrum of experimental films is extremely broad; this genre encompasses a great many types of projects of varying lengths, styles, and goals. There are experimental feature films, though more experimental projects have shorter runtimes. This is due in part to many experimental films being made for low budgets and/or the fact that most experimental films are never intended for mainstream appeal or traditional distribution. There is a modicum of debate over what exactly constitutes an experimental film, and some projects blur the line between traditional cinema and experimental filmmaking by including elements of each. Experimentation can be found in the editing, in the filming, in the subject matter, or in the manipulation of the camera and celluloid's chemical and mechanical processes. (Kench, 2021)

Examples of avant-garde films that are experimental in their themes and elements include among many Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983), a feature-length film that infuses the juxtaposition of imagery with non-linear time-altering cinematography and editing. There are no narrators, heroes, or main characters, just music and moving images. Another is Dziga Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), which experiments with ideas of reality and what one may capture, show, and feel when altering the use of a camera. In Jonathan Caouette's 2003

Tarnation, to take another example, the filmmaker created a documentary that implemented the use of over 20 years of hundreds of hours of super 8 footage, VHS tapes, photos, and answering machine messages to produce a film that tells the story of his life and relationship with his mentally ill mother (UCLA, 2013). Although representing vastly different styles and films, these films present ideas about the natural world and society with the absence of a standard structure/argument that needs to be defined.

When correlating experimental media to documentary, the fundamentals are the same in that a film will diverge from the format of linear non-fiction filmmaking, but the filmmaking is further enhanced in its storytelling by incorporating the presence of reality. Conventional or mainstream documentaries are causally linear, whereas “poetic” cinema is associative; that is, the unity comes from associations and not one causal progression, i.e., first this happened because that happened.

Additionally, further exploring the domain of poetic mode documentary filmmaking reveals there are various sub-groups of styles and collectives that promote and defy certain standards. One technique of poetic mode filmmaking that stands out for its extensive ambitions to connect a viewer to a location is the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) of Harvard. This group of filmmakers

is an experimental laboratory that promotes innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography. It uses analog and digital media, installation, and performance, to explore the aesthetics and ontology of the natural and unnatural world. Harnessing perspectives drawn from the arts, the social and natural sciences, and the humanities, SEL encourages attention to the many dimensions of the world, both animate and inanimate, that may only with difficulty, if it all, be rendered with words” (Castaing-Taylor, 2010).

To further enunciate the topics of poetic mode documentary and the subgroup SEL filmmaking, one must propose the following question: what are the current benefits and deficits of the genre and can they be overlooked when striving to mend their connection to science communication?

Poetic Mode Documentaries Benefits and Problems

The following lengthy definition provides a good starting point for discussing the poetic mode and scientific communication:

Poetic documentary is a sub-genre of documentary filmmaking that uses avant-garde techniques to evoke a certain mood or feeling rather than prove a point through a traditional linear narrative structure. Poetic documentary filmmakers provide the audience with an emotional perspective on a subject using rhythmic visuals that provide an abstract and subjective interpretation of reality (Burns, 2020).

Playing off these aspects of the documentary comes some underlying characteristics found that are specific to poetic mode filmmaking:

1. Visual rhythm over continuity; breaking from standard editing rules, avant-garde style, in that they are not concerned with maintaining continuity from scene to scene. Instead, the editing goal is to emphasize rhythm, composition, and shot design to create visuals that show the viewer the world through a new point of view.
2. Lack of traditional narrative. Since poetic documentaries are primarily focused on creating a particular mood or feeling, establishing a linear causal narrative is not necessary. This means characters do not progress through arcs and storylines do not move toward resolutions.
3. Subjectivity. Rather than arguing for an objective fact-based truth, poetic documentaries provide a subjective interpretation of a topic (Burns, 2020).

When relaying these characteristics to science communication, the immediate point of hesitation is the topic of “subjectivity” in relaying ideas of objectivity. The concern comes from science being conveyed in a poetic documentary that may not be understood unless it is spoon-fed directly to the audience. That very notion is a fallacy that further engages the science communication deficit model. This “shouldn’t it be obvious” route of communication, or the idea that communities simply need to be “told facts to learn” is just not the case, and only leads to further separating societies based on ideas of what are facts. By no means do I support the expansion of misinformation in the documentary medium. The reality is that if the deficit model is indicating that something different needs to be done, so the poetic mode of documentary seems like a perfect and different foundation to take in structuring a film. One must avoid, of course, the poetic mode from becoming no more than another large umbrella of stylistic ideologies that further nurture the more niche collectives of avant-garde filmmaking. The main point is that poetic does not need to mean untrue or “unscientific.” It is another way of expressing information.

Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) Filmmaking:

As previously described, The Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University is an interdisciplinary center for the making of anthropologically informed works of media that combine aesthetics and ethnography. Production courses associated with the SEL are through Anthropology, Visual and Environmental Studies, and the Graduate School of Design at Harvard (Pennel, 2008). In addition to the many fields that the SEL encompasses, the fundamental theory of their works lies under documentary filmmaking - the further plays off three significant characteristics of the poetic mode: Visual rhythm over continuity, lack of traditional narrative,

and extreme direct cinema. The “extreme” direct cinema takes a vast dive into the idea of trying to show their subjects as directly as possible by stationing a camera to portray a scene for a prolonged period, invoking a sensory response whether it’s visual, audible, or haptic (that is, relating to the sense of touch).

Continuing the trend, the SEL group further stretches the confines of cinema by driving their narratives with the ideas of “Slow Cinema.” Slow cinema is a style that emphasizes long takes and is typically characterized by a style that is minimalist, observational, and with little or no imposed or apparent narrative (Sukhdev, 2012). The school of thought in play here is the idea that an effective way to connect a viewer to a space is by having him or her sit with it. A common notion of standard cinema is that with the power of the edit you may turn a 30-minute process into 15 seconds, but slow cinema steps back and prefers to keep a 30-minute process a 30-minute process, and perhaps a single take.

Slow cinema’s aesthetic features include a mannered use of the long take and a resolute emphasis on dead time; devices fostering a mode of narration that initially appears baffling, cryptic, and genuinely incomprehensible. It offers, above all, an extended experience of duration on screen. (Çağlayan, 2014). Additionally, this aesthetic is a catalyst to the haptic sensation of cinema physically being in an environment: “Haptic visuality is a sense of physical touching or being touched engendered by an organization of the film image in which its material presence is foregrounded, and which evokes close engagement with surface detail and texture” (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012). Though these ideals of slow cinema and haptic integration are ambitious and optimistic, they do have tendencies to potentially influence the viewers into an irritable progression of boredom (Çağlayan, 2016). With the perspectives and foundations of poetic

cinema and some of its characteristics and subgroups of SEL filmmaking and slow cinema, we progress to the implementation of these characteristics in the context of teaching scientific comprehension.

Where SEL-style films encourage communicating scientific ideologies is in its sense of reality. By this, I mean real in the way of being relatable to something such as a landscape, occupation, and climate. These films do intend to teach, but they do so without a narrator, directed interviews, or obvious characters. SEL films like *Sweetgrass*, *Leviathan*, and *Yumen* pursue the characteristic of filmmaking that is “show don’t tell”; what you see is what you will learn. For some viewers that may be a lot-; for some, a little; and for others, by being filmed, envisioned, and edited by an artist, it is inferred that every creative decision was a conscious choice utilized in hopes to relay some piece of reality. When that piece of reality is a rancher working to move sheep across a vast and aggressive environment, or the sensory authenticity of a crab fisherman at sea, it is when the conversation of intended interpretation begins to flourish.

What does a film mean when it does not directly feed information to the viewer? That is perhaps the best part of being a cognizant entity: we decide that for ourselves. The supposition does not need to be one defined thing, such as prescribed reality. It may be the kinetic features of a camera relaying ideas of unpleasantness, or simply a cell phone ad juxtaposing traditional workflows to contemporary technological advancements; it could be a man cursing on a telephone to his mother about being distressed over one’s vocation promoting ideas of pain and conflict in a field where someone works. SEL filmmaking promotes freedom of individual thought while still serving as a transport for information of reality. Perspective reigns reality, which makes it essential to explore how other folks use perspective to share a story.

Another way to approach s this kind of filmmaking is this way: “The poetic mode of the documentary film tends toward subjective interpretations of its subject(s). Light on rhetoric, documentaries in the poetic mode forsake traditional narrative content: individual characters and events remain undeveloped in favor of creating a particular mood or tone” (Nichols, 2001). In life, we learn better by experience than facts, and the poetic mode documentary does not rely on hopes of understanding rhetoric, but by grasping onto an experience. In middle school biology, it is initially taught that the mitochondria are the “powerhouse of the cell.” Of course, there is no power institution in a cell, but at the same time, it is not untrue that the mitochondria produce ATP that will serve as an energy source for our bodies. Without having to go in-depth on ATP synthesis and the various stages of the Krebs cycle, students can start by grasping the idea that energy production in the cell comes from this organelle. In many ways, the poetic mode is metaphoric and can take complex sciences and turns them into more easily understood experiences.

CHAPTER THREE

CASE STUDIES

In this chapter, I will examine three films: *Samsara*, *Sweetgrass*, and “Flourish” that aim to communicate science with alternative techniques and poetic mode characteristics. The films will be examined in aspiration to explore the methods that work toward expanding science communication. Additional emphasis will rely on existing reviews, critiques, and literature.

Case Study: *Samsara*:

Through time, stories have been shared with the use of all media, and specifically, in the film, there is a reliance on dialogue as well as compelling visuals to support one’s rhetoric and stance. Strong visuals can confidently carry a story, but in conjunction with compelling dialogue from a complimentary narrator, this amalgamation of sight and sound becomes the perfect combination to deliver the message of the director to the audience. Though some films take making pieces that work to the extreme by eliminating narrators and interviews and emphasizing visuals, natural sound, and music to tell a narrative. Films that specifically implement this technique are *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018), *Microcosmos* (1996), and *Samsara* (2011). In this case study, I will examine Ron Fricke’s 2011 cinematic experience *Samsara*, how it functioned as an emotional piece for science communication and art, was received, and what it means for advancing the comprehension of scientific topics.

Ron Fricke came to the stage by being a primary collaborator on Godfrey Reggio’s *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982) as the director of photography, which is made extra abundant in that *Koyaanisqatsi* is a notable modern emancipation of the idea of having no verbal innervation in a

film. *Koyaanisqatsi* has no narrator or interviews; it is a film that only uses music and visuals to carry its story. With no verbal element progressing the story, one must rely on key psychological cinema techniques. The abundant principles of this style used in *Koyaanisqatsi* were the ideas of intellectual montage theory, time-lapse photography, and slow cinema. The idea of intellectual montage is shared in Vsevolod Pudovkin's understanding:

Montage theory, in its rudimentary form, asserts that a series of connected images allows for complex ideas to be extracted from a sequence and, when strung together, constitute the entirety of a film's ideological and intellectual power. In other words, the editing of shots rather than the content of the shot alone constitutes the force of a film. Many directors still believe that montage is what defines cinema against other specific media (Pudovkin, 1949).

With this juxtaposition of imagery, a meaning is implied through one thing connecting to another. Further implementation is the Kuleshov Effect. The Kuleshov effect is the idea that two shots in a sequence are more impactful than a single shot by itself. This effect is a cognitive event that allows viewers to derive meaning from the interaction of two shots in sequence. Kuleshov believed that the interaction of shots in filmmaking was what differentiated cinema from photography, as photographs are single shots in isolation that do not allow viewers to derive the same meaning (NFI, 2017, Figure 1).

With the intellectual montage technique in use, *Koyaanisqatsi* promoted a film invested in invoking emotion with a vast focus on its imagery. Further investing in this style, Fricke pursued a future in which he perfected his vision of time-lapse photography and usage of the intellectual montage style with his 1992 film *Baraka*, which continued to lay the foundation for the 2011 epic, *Samsara*. The Sanskrit word Samsara refers to the wheel of life, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

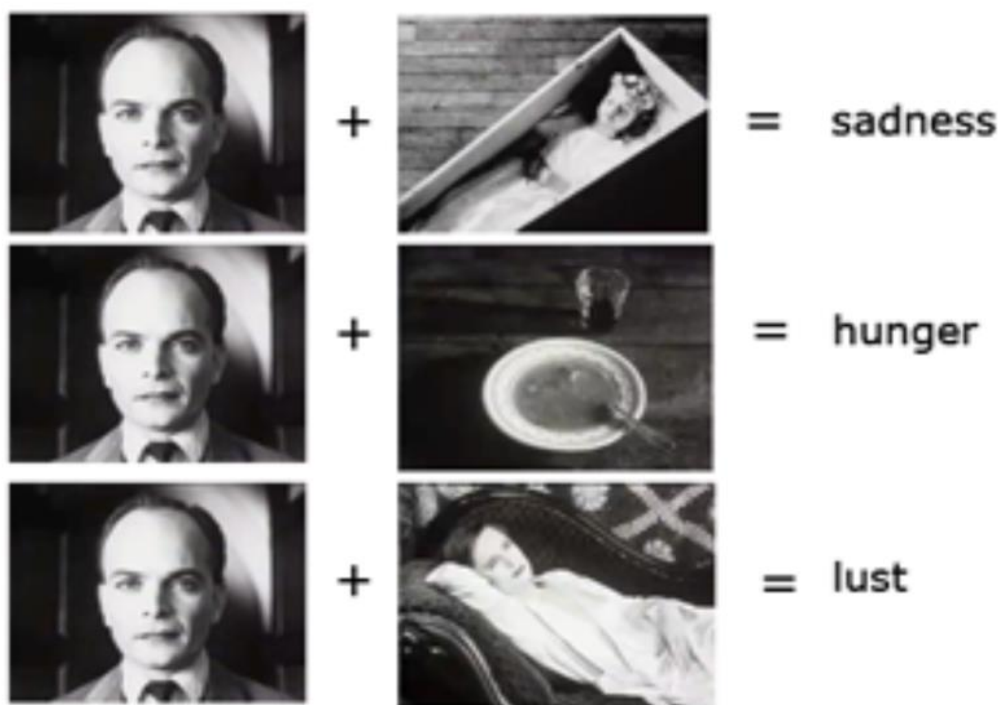


Figure 1. In creating this demonstration, Kuleshov implied that the man in the shot was looking at what was juxtaposed with it, even if that was not actually the case. Even in his earliest demonstration, Kuleshov used the same shot of a man with his facial expression unchanged. What changed was the perception of his expression when paired with another shot that generated emotion in the audience demonstration, Kuleshov used the same shot of a man with his facial expression unchanged.

Coming into the third generation of these feature-length non-narrative documentary films, Fricke took his investigation to 25 different countries and filmed on 70 mm filmstock a narrative that explores ideas around varied perspectives of faith, war, technology, and community. Fricke bases his rhetoric on the use of intellectual montage. Examples include an armed African tribe juxtaposed with an armed United States civilian or a Geisha juxtaposed with sex dolls. The visuals intend to instigate emotive responses in multiple degrees from funny to sad to distraught, all with the change of a shot. Below are two representative examples of the response to the film:

With its guided meditations, its visual variety and beauty, its spiritual and religious messages, its celebration of the natural world, its critique of war and all the factors that fuel hatred and violence, and its subtle efforts to help us see our oneness with the human family and the whole of creations, *Samsara* is a profound spiritual experience. It is not only one of the best films of 2012; it is a film you will treasure for all your life (Brussat, 2012).

Fricke knows that for all his computerized camera movements and time-lapse photography, sometimes resting on a close-up of a Filipino inmate's eyes, a young African mother and child, or the single tear of a geisha slipping down her cheek is more emotionally powerful than anything technologically dazzling. Simply put, "Samsara" tells the story of our world, but onscreen, it is so much more than that (Walsh, 2012).

To be fair, despite all the compliments, the film does not fully land for everyone:

It could be argued that such criticisms are beside the point, that "Samsara" is so clearly a sensory experience that any attempt to parse its contents is futile. This is the "sit back and enjoy the ride" approach, and viewed that way, *Samsara* makes for a fair theme-park attraction. But the thing about roller coasters and Tilt-A-Whirls is that they don't really go anywhere – and can leave you feeling tired and worn out after the exhilaration of the first drop (Nayman, 2012).

To reel in the conversation on how the film was received, we need to examine how the film worked based on sharing ideas of science through this contemporary poetic platform. The most exciting aspect when I watched *Samsara* was the ability of the film to convey a story about humanity on a diverse level without saying a word. This film singlehandedly promoted ideas of sociology, food production, and mankind in a world that is everchanging. This story would be exhausting and hard to hear from a narrator if not insulting in that it is inherently impossible to verbally define each human in the world, so this format proves useful to say more with less.

"Show don't tell" is an essential learning point for any film artist in the domain, and when needing to reference a film that can do this with confidence, there are few examples as strong as Fricke's *Samsara*. The film is a contemporary adaptation of the intellectual montage film style that uses new technology to highlight what it means to be a human living on this planet

today. What is important to note is how this film changes the way information about overly complex concepts of sociology, environmentalism, and faith is shared without saying a thing, promoting fascination around new subjects without the issues that can be associated with the deficit model of scientific communication. Ron Fricke's *Samsara* supports an alternative approach to scientific communication, within the domain of non-narrative documentary cinema.

Case Study: *Sweetgrass*

Let us begin here:

“If you come to expect action, well you aren't going to get it ... Most movies lean towards you. They lean towards you, aggressively with their hands around your throat trying to grab every second of your attention. [Whereas] these types of films lean away from you.”

(Schrader, 2017). You can use subheads for the films and this quote can be an epigraph to start it.

Paul Schrader describes his thoughts on transcendental film style as describing a form that is,

“essentially, withholding the device. You're going to hold on shots too long; you're not going to cut, you're creating dead time” (Schrader, 2017). When thinking about films that best illuminate

transcendental techniques Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) production Ilisa Barbash

and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's 2009 documentary, *Sweetgrass*, is most appropriate. This cinema

verité documentary covers a lot of poetic ground:

Sweetgrass presents a riveting and poetic portrait of the American West just as one of its traditional ways of life dies out. Shot amidst the grandeur of Montana's Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness, the film follows the last modern-day cowboys to lead their flocks of sheep up into the breathtaking and often dangerous mountains for summer pasture. Magnificently photographed and unsparingly candid, *Sweetgrass* discovers a world of harsh beauty and arduous labor, where humans still work in rugged intimacy with nature (Ford, 2011).

In this case study, I will examine the film *Sweetgrass* in terms of what makes it significant to science and natural history filmmaking, how it is a catalyst for education cinema and both criticisms and compliments it has received.

Beginning production in 2001, Castaing-Taylor and Barbash found a lead, built a relationship, and were able to document a family of Norwegian-American sheepherders in Montana. These herders were among the last to trail their band of sheep long distances through Montana's mountains (Castaing-Taylor, 2009). Castaing-Taylor describes the process:

Sweetgrass is one of nine films to have emerged from the footage we have shot over the last decade, the only one intended principally for theatrical exhibition. As they have been shaped through editing, the films seem to have become as much about the sheep as about their herders. The humans and animals that populate them commingle and crisscross in ways that have taken us by surprise. *Sweetgrass* depicts the twilight of a defining chapter in the history of the American West, the dying world of Western herders — descendants of Scandinavian and northern European homesteaders — as they struggle to make a living in an era increasingly inimical to their interests. Set in Big Sky country, in a landscape of remarkable scale and beauty, the film portrays a lifeworld colored by an intense propinquity between nature and culture — one that has been integral to the fabric of human existence throughout history, but which is almost unimaginable for the urban masses of today (Castaing-Taylor, 2009).

The personal excitement that comes to mind when viewing *Sweetgrass* derives from Castaing-Taylor and Barbash's vision paralleling the concept of taking eight years to film the project, constantly evolving the flow of the film with attention to the characters and finding a shared amount of attention and importance in not just the herders but also the sheep while still being a story articulated in the confines of a dying scenscape and vocation. Playing off the duality of characters promotes inspiration within the innovation of story structure. Additional praise comes in the form of relationships and trust built between the documentarians and the subjects. Within the documentary, Kate Nash notes:

The documentary relationship is contested; the filmmaker and participant exercise power within the context of their relationship with a view to influencing the documentary. Trust emerges as an under-theorized aspect of documentary ethics. In this study trust has been found to rely on mutual vulnerability in the relationship and a shared sense of the documentary project as a valuable goal (Nash, 2021).

The concept of trust in documentaries is best visualized when a relationship is well-formed, vulnerable, and honest. Without this foundation, the film can quickly turn into a lackluster production leading to a disconnect in notion and message. For *Sweetgrass*, the idea of trust is not questioned, but perhaps, made more intriguing by the idea of scholarly artists and anthropologists forming this relationship with multigenerational lineages of ranchers and herders from Montana. The end product is a film that can portray rural life through a lens to appreciate the art, life, and story of these ranchers; other science-based documentaries might idolize information over subjects and art – making *Sweetgrass* stand out as a film that teaches and fascinates with untraditional standards of documentary filmmaking.

With the success and reach of *Sweetgrass*, due to its alternative approaches to the genre, there is a promotion of thinking about how this piece can and has acted as a catalyst for education in documentary film. Belinda Small notes the following:

Knowledge of humans and animals is conveyed through the audiovisual qualities of the worlds represented. The synthesis of the empiricism of traditional anthropology and sensory experience is not confined to the work of filmmakers in the Harvard group, but has been theorized more widely as a new modality in the discipline... In these films the observational camera lingers on the environment, the bodies of humans at work, and the animals who exist alongside them, echoing Fatimah Tobing Rony's determination that 'ethnographic cinema is above all a cinema of the body: the focus is on the anatomy of gestures ... and on the body of the land they inhabit. (Smaill, 2014).

Honing and further describing the previous ideas of the importance of altering the documentary style to produce a product that can inspire, teach, and be interpreted over standard journalism of producing a story. Castaing-Taylor goes on to explain the following:

Traditionally, visual anthropology is different from mainstream documentary in [that it] explicitly foregrounds issues of cultural difference. I think it's more that visual anthropology, like anthropology, is really interested in people's lived experience, and cultural meaning around the world. And if there's one thing that perhaps still distinguishes visual anthropology from documentary, or journalistic nonfiction, it's this deep interest in everyday life, and people's subjective, lived experience (Castaing-Taylor, 2010).

Castaing-Taylor fully embraces the individual experience to be subjective and not overarching. "Like all faithful documentaries, this one neither idolizes nor criticizes its subjects, but rather captures a particular moment in time and leaves it up to the viewer to interpret what that moment means" (Westervelt, 2010). Since 2009, *Sweetgrass* has been praised and examined for its rugged aesthetic and alternative storytelling devices that lead to the successful expression and interpretation of American anthropology by the public, which makes it ideal to be analyzed for this paper.

Case Study: "Flourish"

"Only a fool learns from his own mistakes. The wise man learns from the mistakes of others," said Otto von Bismark. And with no hesitation, let me make the note that I am in no way the embodiment of 'the wise man' but perhaps 'the fool' that wants to enlighten others where I could not help myself. The thesis film, "Flourish," came as a drive to explore how people portray concepts of education and enlightenment in documentary films. I did not, however, want to present these ideas from the angle of an expository documentary in which a narrator or "voice of God" provides rhetoric that illuminates the point of the film. The goal was to envision a

documentary film that could teach with the use of alternative storytelling devices and styles, with emphasis on reference to Ron Fricke's 2011 *Samsara* and Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash's 2009 *Sweetgrass*. In this case study, I will explore the production of "Flourish," balancing the development and reality of the final film, and how it works as a means of education with film.

Throughout the summer of 2021, I began exploring the production of a prospective thesis film dealing with ideas of education and youth development. By connecting with past colleagues from the Gallatin Valley YMCA, I spoke with the program's director about their Teen Summer Camp, and the routine interactions they were planning to have with the Gallatin Valley Food Bank (GVFB). From there came the introduction to the manager of the GVFB, Jill Holder, and the garden manager, Evie Grey. After meeting the two members of GVFB, we developed a narrative that was based on documenting Jill and Evie's journey as they evolved their teaching practices to learn the best means to teach gardening techniques to the YMCA camps that were making routine visits throughout the summer.

When filming, I was told by a mentor to always shoot for the edit. By that she meant, capturing footage with the product in mind, and/or always thinking about how something can fit into an ever-branching story. With that keen advice, there was a drive to edit down dailies and selects after each shoot date. The shoot days ranged between two and six hours of footage for each meet-up. By the second shoot date, it became evident in the dailies that the narrative was drifting from the initial plan. After wrapping filming and comparing the original treatment to the selects, came an obvious understanding that to make this film work, it would need to be restructured in a new way.

After sitting on the footage and exploring alternative narrative approaches, the film was peeled back to its foundational theme, growth. By reviewing the 20+ hours of footage, it was apparent that the film explored growth in three different yet connected forms.

1. From the GVFB's perspective of enhancing their teaching methods.
2. The expansion of cultivating the vegetation.
3. The personal and existential development of the teen campers.

With these three interconnected yet contrasting stories came the vision of how this story could be produced as a three-part film in the vein of an alternative approach to documentaries.

Now in three separate parts, came the opportunity of experimenting with telling three short stories about one main subject. These different stories promoted the use of implementing different styles to each one. The first style, investigating the physical development of the plants in the GVFB garden space, utilized a poetic mode aesthetic in its intent to juxtapose, alter, and make mosaics of the changing space over two months of growth. The second story follows Evie Grey's journey to improve her teaching abilities, with a style that matches many expository documentaries: it makes a specific point of view or argument about a subject and a narrator who often speaks directly to the viewer, emphasizing the relationship between the images presented on-screen and offering verbal commentary (Burns, 2021). The third story focused on the teen campers that were visiting the space as part of their summer camp programs. The style that worked best for this portrayal was an observational mode approach that incorporated SEL elements of tying a viewer to a place, and a transcendental film style to allow the audience to observe the variety and spontaneity of the youth. My goal was to induce feeling over rhetoric.

In documentaries, the pieces are usually more than just one mode of filmmaking; they can incorporate styles from all the modes, and even beyond. In “Flourish” the film’s modes branched in many directions but were consistent in coming back to poetic mode elements. Making this film shared three stories and three different styles were all done so in hopes that it could share an enlightening story about the work and growth that it takes to teach and participate in a garden space that is intended to supply the community, with an alternative way to traditional means storytelling. By altering the styles and distribution of information, I aspired to make a piece that would educate by captivating the viewer through wonder and feelings of place and age. I felt that a different approach to sharing the experience of the summer would have more potential to fascinate, as opposed to making a fifteen-minute expository documentary, oriented around sit-down interviews and narration.

The domain of science communication is broad and unique, and there are effective and ineffective ways to do it. I wanted to test a hypothesis that a non-traditional story and style may intrigue wonder for a scientific topic in a way that’s not engrained in rhetoric, but wonder. When originally looking at the footage and trying to connect the dots or build a story, the initial treatment did not reflect what was captured. With a restructuring of the style and narrative and exploration of poetic mode cinema, I developed a new approach to get to the same end goal as where I started. Now with this time to reflect and communicate, “Flourish” was an opportunity to explore new ways to a story about community, sustainable food production, and inter and intrapersonal growth.

CHAPTER FOUR

FUTURE OF EXPERIMENTAL SNHF

In this thesis, the opportunity to examine the poetic mode of documentary filmmaking comes from a place of excitement involving the examination of how alternative storytelling techniques can potentially exist as a successful substitute for the information deficit model. The ultimate desire is to use poetic mode techniques to share information regarding science and natural history enlightenment in hopes it will teach in a way that does not push away people with differing views. Though the poetic mode vastly inspires and pushes the evolution of storytelling in a variety of methods, it has yet to maximize its efforts in the depiction of science and natural history filmmaking.

In documentary filmmaking, there are numerous instances of poetic mode documentaries being successful in the transmission of information to their audiences. With the drive to teach and educate in films, there are multiple ways to do it, and multiple instances of some techniques working in one film but not in the other. Strictly poetic mode documentaries although intriguing might not be the definitive answer, though specific techniques within the poetic domain hold the ability to be used in every documentary.

In my journey of exploring the integration of poetic mode techniques, with this paper and my film “Flourish,” I can conclude with credence that there are benefits to participating in alternative storytelling techniques. Ultimately, changing and adapting Bill Nichols' six documentary modes will naturally occur as filmmakers push the boundaries with contemporary cinema, but recognizing specific methods and vocabulary only improves the foundation of

change. Specifically, in making “Flourish,” the film was originally cut to be a 24-minute observational style film but fell flat in engagement and opportunity to educate. When reassessing how to incorporate change, the poetic mode techniques provided the most useful. Opposed to adding more narration or more facts, the film was in dire need of enhancement through sensation, rhythm, and experience of being in the space. With this understanding, the dialogue was reduced, the use of natural sound was increased, and the garden turned into a space with dreamlike qualities over a space used to write truths, but the ethos of education and growth remained integral to the story. The film’s mission did not come from the expression of information, but from invoking a physical connection to the space and characters.

Adapting poetic mode techniques to other works of the documentary can be easier than it seems. There’s no hard necessity to cancel out the use of a narrator, or to precisely use the Kuleshov Effect in every contemporary scientific documentary. Though what could be useful in the pursuit of enhancing scientific communication in the film could be the director’s intent to connect the viewer to an experience over hard facts as a mean of rhetoric, and to utilize the poetic mode as a metaphor to turn complicated processes into something more understandable. Upcoming scientific documentaries, especially ones under that fall under the expository mode of documentary filmmaking, could be the productions that benefit the most from the implementation of poetic mode techniques. To have narrators and interviews elaborate on complex scientific subjects, to be further enhanced with imagery that places viewers into the experience of what is being explained would be a dream scenario. One leader in the expansion of non-traditional documentary presentations would be Goddard’s Space and Flight Center production team, which works closely with scientists in the creation of visualizations,

animations, and images to promote a greater understanding of Earth and Space Science (GSFC, 2022). Their use of stunning visualizations when referencing stories about the sun, multiband satellites, and climate change lead the viewers to be engaged through awe and astonishment, and from there feed in factoids and information that further enhance one's awareness around the subject. In a sense, the poetic mode can be hypothesized as a trojan horse for science communication.

Poetic mode documentary cinema is a dynamic playground for new ideas in the department of sharing information in science and natural history. Within this niche is an opportunity to advance communication, combat the fallacies found in the information deficit model, and push the evolution of alternative aesthetics. Whether it is the intellectual montage techniques of Fricke's *Samsara*, slow-cinema, and transcendental style in Barbash's and Castaing-Taylor's *Sweetgrass*, or the amalgamation of a variety of similar yet different techniques in "Flourish," there are new hypotheses to test in the effort to advance the distribution of science and natural history communication. In this thought process, it becomes essential to think like a scientist and to experiment like a creative filmmaker. The resources are present, and the reasons to adapt are ever-developing. Within poetic mode filmmaking, science and natural history films have new and effective means for developing rhetoric and connecting to their viewers.

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