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THE POETIC CHALLENGE

About the process of making the short film "Three tenses for thinking" ("Tre tider til ettertanke")

ABSTRACT: Five years ago, when I studied video-production and film theory at the University of Trondheim, Norway, I ended my studies by making two short documentary films. I would like to talk about the process of making one of these films, the challenges I come up against in meeting the reality, in collecting the material, in receiving response from others and the transformations I went through during the process.

THE POST MODERN FILM

Film theory and film making practice in connection to post-modern thinking is both confusing and contradictory. I cannot say if my films are post-modern or not. But I do know that there are not many people working with documentary in the way that I have attempted with these films.

Traditional documentary films are often trying to convince, inform, examine or expose. My intention in working with film is simply to "express", and to try to make film into a poetic media close to music, poetry and painting. A feeling area, not a drama with realistic characters. In other words: to try to find a non-realistic, non-narrative documentary form. In that way, I perhaps have a post-modern impulse.

POETRY

There are others who work with "poetic documentary". But what I think is unique about my intentions is the fact that I want the realistic pictures and sounds to be transformed into an inner world, a soul/spirit world. I want the pictures and sounds to be loaded with a contents that "...point to something stretching out beyond the frame and in to infinity; a pointer to life.", like the Russian director Tarkovsky says in his book *Sculpting in time*. (Tarkovsky 86/89, s 117). For me, this is true poetic expression.

But is it possible to avoid the narrative form, and still experience a nerve centre in the work? How do I find a living poetic expression? When is the work only a dead construction and when is it something of value? And how do I

know the difference? This appeared to be my main question during the creative process. I intend to tell you a little about these challenges.

THE STUDY PERIOD

When I was studying film, I was engaged in some questions around film and narration. During the theoretical period we learned a lot about the classical, dramatic way of building up a story: a conflict-orientated form of narrative where you build up from the bottom to a climax, and then it calm down. But I was looking for something different. I was looking for an expression that was nearer to music, poetry and painting. A non-narrative expression. Why was this so important for me? Because I wanted to find a way to use film media so that new experiences could be given, experiences that challenge the traditional way of creating meaning and content, a way that is not so fixed and closed, not so “written down”, that is more open. I was looking for a poetic, non-realistic film, where “how” you form the film is more important than the “what” you are saying. The question was: how could this be done?

Many of the directors from the period of modernism (The French new wave 1950), broke with the classical way of shaping and forming a story, and some filmmakers also worked in a poetic way, like the Russian author Andrey Tarkovsky. But I was still not satisfied; I wanted an even more poetic expression, shorter, tighter, more like a poem. I didn't want a film built on realistic characters and their problems, but a film where the human beings are more examples of a she, he or me, just like in lyrical expression

Part of the film history, the early twenties, was strongly influenced by artists from the other arts – mostly painters – and the result was experimental film which was often surrealistic and futuristic in style. I looked at the best known

of these films. They were really non-narrative, but I could not see any poetry in them. I looked for a sensitive, non-spoken feeling that appears when the pictures and the sounds point out to other pictures, deeper and wider: to a soul, spiritual level. Also the structure of these experimental films was difficult for me to grasp, they felt very accidental and formless, and that was far from my artistic ideals. The forming, the time-structuring is for me the essence of filmmaking. As Tarkovskij says, film is “sculpting in time” So the question is: How does one sculpt a non-narrative film? I still had not found the answer, but I was getting closer to the question.

Later in my study we had a period concentrating on documentary films. All documentaries are concerned with telling something about “reality”: to show, inform, examine or expose reality. Of course this reality is given a subjective and creative form, often shaped in a story, but still it relies on our common understanding. In the book *Å fange virkeligheten* by Bjørn Sørenssen, he says with reference to Bill Nichols’ theories, that in dealing with documentary there are always two worlds, one common “*the world*” outside, and the other, the world found in the film. In fiction it is only one world, the world between the public and the film. The limit between the two worlds, fiction and reality, is obvious. Documentary has a different contract with the audience, it has to relate to the “the world” outside, and put out an assertion, *an argument* about this common “the world”. (Sørenssen 2001, s 303).

I found one interesting film style, named by Bill Nichols in the book *Introduction to Documentary* (2001) as “poetic documentary” or “the poetic mode” (Nichols, 2001, s 102). It seemed to me that in these films it was not important to have a “premise”, an argument about reality, only an aesthetic aim. As B. Nichols says:

This mode stresses mood, tone and effect more than displays of

knowledge or acts of persuasion. The rhetorical element remains underdeveloped. (Nichols 2001, s 103).

In other words: this mode had nearly the same attitude as I was looking for. In the book *Å fange virkeligheden* by B. Sørenssen, he claims that these aesthetic films also have an argument, they argue that ordinary daily life can give aesthetic experiences (Sørenssen, 2001, s 304). According to my opinion, the role of the aesthetic is not to show a nice surface, to make the world prettier, an aesthetic attitude is the need to *transform* the world, and give it a shape, a new form. I cannot see this as an argument, but rather an artistic need for expression and a possibility to create a new experience of reality.

Anyway, I now felt I was really close to something. I looked at some of these poetic documentary films: many of them had a nice atmosphere, either a nice visual appearance or a rhythmical, impressionistic feeling. Or they used poetry to expose a message. Not exactly what I expected and hoped for. But there was one or two of them which had something close to what I was looking for. Still I felt there was a missing link, a lack of deeper meaning. I wanted a poetry which could lift the pictures and sounds up to a higher level or down to a deeper ground: a spiritual, existential, poetic expression.

It was time to create a film myself, time to try to find this poetic, non-narrative structure and expression.

I want to tell you about the process of making my first film, because it seems to me to be an image of many creative processes: development and change through a great idea, fall, give up, and rise again.

MY FIRST FILM

I had this idea to make a trip back to the place where I had studied twenty

years previously, a place called “Rudolf Steinerseminariet”, an anthroposophical study centre in Järna, Sweden. I wanted to make a film about going back: to see how it is to meet something you have left a long time ago. Has the place changed? Have I changed? And what happens in the meeting?

Luckily I brought a friend with me, without her the film would not have been made. She had been working in theatre and had a sharp eye and a creative attitude. And she had never been to Järna before, so she had an open mind. This was my first lesson: Never try to do it alone; film is a process involving others, a constant dialog with others.

MEETING REALITY

When I reached the location I had with me a brief script, but much of the film had to be formed during the three days we were there, because it had to be built on what I experienced in meeting the place. This was a place that really meant a lot to me in my youth. Here I had my first real meeting with anthroposophy, and I was curious about seeing it again.

My first shock was that the entire environment seemed much smaller than how I remembered it, and except for a new building, it had not changed or developed as much as I had hoped. But my biggest shock was that I did not feel *anything*. I felt totally empty inside. As if you meet a friend from the past, and there is nothing to talk about anymore, because both of you have developed in different directions. Of course it is possible to make a film out of this feeling too, but I was so confused about not getting any inspiration from the meeting that I went through a kind of collapse. I ran around in despair with my camera, shooting all kinds of pictures without knowing what I was looking for, or what I wanted to express. I felt blind.

Then my friend talked honestly to me. She thought the project was too big, “You have to choose some concrete, limited elements, it does not help going around like this, without any aim and direction.”

So I decided to start from zero, give up the original idea, and find a totally new one. We decided to limit ourselves: only shoot rooms, different rooms, and let them represent different stages during a lifetime from birth to death. And then shoot trains, letting them represent time and movement running through these rooms. So we had a space – time subject.

Now it was much easier to work. We suddenly saw opportunities that we did not see before. It was now obvious to me that *without a limit, nothing will open up*. In fact, the more limited your task is, the easier it is to find a mode of expression.

Still, it was a risky process, because we did not know if this would be interesting enough, and we did not know whether we would find rooms that fitted into our plan. But I think this is something characteristic of the creative process, once you have an idea, a limited and concentrated one, you have to trust that it will lead you in the right direction, but it assumes awareness, and a willingness to risk failure.

After shooting rooms for two days, I shot trains on my way home, and, after coming home, I shot more trains, both from the inside and outside.

MEETING THE MATERIAL

I had all the material, both pictures and sound. My task was now to put this together to make a film, a wholeness, and to find a non-narrative structure.

I worked very abstractly, putting the different trains and rooms together in a

way that I thought would give an impression of time running through life, through rooms. I was playing with these elements and thought it would be very interesting to watch. Then I showed it to my teacher and he responded differently than I had anticipated. He felt it was totally chaotic. He didn't see any meaning at all. Then it was clear to me that I had been working *symbolically*. The rooms and the trains worked only as symbols of time and life, they were not *experienced as an expression of life*. They were dead pictures. There was no life in them. There was no poetry. I had been working only from the head, putting meaning into the material, but it had no expression of its own.

And then my teacher said "Don't you have any pictures of human beings?"

I had always looked at human beings in art as a problem; my idea was to make the film as "clean" as possible. But now I saw how stupid this was. Of course it is possible to make a film without people, but my idea was not to make that kind of film. Without humans it was difficult to understand the relation between the rooms and the trains.

Again I had to start from zero. I had to put human beings into the film but only as examples, without getting into a drama of realistic characters with histories and experiences. I wanted specific and interesting examples of human beings who could carry a mood or expression in their very appearance. And I had to find a way of working without getting symbolic. I had to do something with the pictures and sounds to get them to carry an actual expression of experience.

I found some photos which I took when studying in Järna, pictures of students (and buildings), and decided to use them in the film. I also found some interesting sounds on a CD and a perfect experimental music composition – something between sounds and music – which, I felt, would fit. And with a little help from my teacher I came up with the idea of splitting the film into three

pieces: a new constraint that, I felt, could help. Each part of the film should represent different stage of a travel: The start (getting ready), the journey, and the arrival. Now I could begin to work with a clearer intention. So simple, but it helped.

It was now easier to “sink” more into each picture, to open my self into a feeling realm. I transformed the pictures and made new colours and textures. Now, slowly, the pictures and sounds started to speak to each other. They started to be an *expression*. They started to live. I also noticed that without a story, I had to do something to make the film appear dynamic. This non-narrative film needed *contrasts or polarities*. I used two complimentary colours throughout the film, the moving train made an interesting contrast to the rooms and the quietness and the sounds I had chosen made a fascinating contradiction to the meaning in the picture. These elements helped the film to move forward.

But I still had some problems. My teacher told me constantly to slow down, because I was rushing, being afraid that the viewer would be bored. With help from my teacher, I understood that the audience must have time to ask questions, to be active, to breath and to sink into the film, to get into a *rhythm*.

What is rhythm? If we listen to music, it always involves rhythm. Some elements keep returning in repetitive patterns. But if these rhythms are not to be mechanical, they have to change a little each time, but without losing the wholeness. Then we are close to the concept of *metamorphosis*.

Metamorphosis is easily seen in life, such as the passing of days and seasons and the motion of the planets. In short, it is connected to changes in *time*.

I once listened to a lecture by John Wilkes about Flowforms¹. He described the rhythmical metamorphosis that occurs in the forming and flowing of water,

¹ He has later given a thorough description of the principles of the flowforms in his book *Flowforms, the rhythmic power of water*, Edinburgh 2003: Floris Books

and according to my notes, he said something like this: “Metamorphosis is not the same as growing because growing has continuity, metamorphosis is discontinuous, it is a change of form”. By this I think he means that metamorphosis is not just to grow bigger, it is a discontinuous step into something totally new, but still with the wholeness inside. J. Wilkes also said something like this: “Rhythm appears through *resistance*, between ‘too little’ and ‘too much’ opposition the form becomes visible. The shape and rhythm is seen when the water has the right speed”. Transferred to film this would mean that the film can start to live and the rhythmical metamorphosis can show when the right pace is found – not too slow, not too fast, letting each cut have the right tempo. This is close to what Tarkovsky says in his book *Sculpting in time*:

Editing brings together shots which are already filled with time, and organises the unified, living structure inherent in the film; and the time that pulsates through the blood vessels of the film, making it alive, is of varying rhythmic pressure (Tarkovsky 1986/89, s 114).

This was something I experienced more and more when working with the film, it was slowly coming into a breathing process and this breathing led me to new ideas in a repetitive, meditative and constantly changing form. I had to turn my thinking around and around, and, with help from my teacher, find surprising ways of combining trains and rooms – inside, outside, backwards, sideways, trains inside rooms and rooms inside trains – but all with a precise aim and intention. It was surprising how the pictures and sounds found each other, and loaded themselves with meaning and expression. Pictures we had shot suddenly acquired new meaning from the structure emerging in front of me.

A theme or a mood started to run through the pictures that I had not anticipated at the start of the process. It seemed like a hidden possibility

inside the material slowly began to emerge that could be expressed as the different elements searching for each other to build a new whole. And this happened with the help of the metamorphosing rhythm. *I had found a non-narrative structure, and the structure was in a way “born out of the rhythm”*. It was like I had found the structure of the film hidden within the film itself.

I now felt I had made a non-narrative, poetic film. It had no dramatic story and no characters, but it did have a metamorphic structure and an existential subject – life, time and death – and all contained within a loaded, poetic expression. And suddenly, when I sat watching the film, I saw that it was all about going to a place you once were, looking at how it is now, and then leaving. Without knowing it I had come back to my starting point! An amazing circle had been made. I had come back to my original idea but in a totally different way than I had anticipated. Again a metamorphosis.

MEETING THE PUBLIC

I have told you about different meetings: meeting my friend's idea, meeting reality, meeting the material and meeting my teacher's advice. We have one left: Meeting the public.

The film was screened for a special invited audience of friends and fellow students, and I received a lot of good response. But the most interesting thing was that people asked me questions like: Did the boy die? Was there something criminal going on in Järna? As one can see, people started making a story! It seems that there is a need for this kind of wholeness. Why is this? Is it something hidden down deep in our unconscious soul, a structure we are born with – or into? This need for narrative, is it impossible to escape it? And if we try, do we lose all meaning and interest? Will the communication collapse?

Maybe my film is also a story, but a different one. I do not know for certain, but I think a non-narrative structure needs a different kind of will in order to be entered into, and this is because of a *difference in the experience of time*.

This time-structure is close to how the post-modern philosopher Gilles Deleuze describes modern cinema in his book *Cinema 2, The time-image*:

...The modern image initiates the reign of “incommensurables” or irrational cuts: this is to say that the cut no longer forms part of one or the other image, of one or the other sequence that it separates and divides. ... The interval is set free, the interstice becomes irreducible and stands on its own. The first consequence is that the images are no longer linked by rational cuts, but are relinked on to irrational cuts ... (Deleuze 1989, s 277).

This modern structure, with its non-chronology, jumps and breaks, demands a different reading and understanding - opposite to the classical, dramatic films. As Deleuze says: “...A new logic has to be invented, just as earlier a new psychology had to be....” (Deleuze 1989, s 275).

Films connected to post-modern thinking are not so easy to define, but post-modern fiction and documentary are both often connected to the concept “reflexive” or “self reflexive”. In fiction films it appears as a playful, ironic and self-referencing attitude, in documentaries it can be seen in the attempt to “wake up” the viewers to questioning “the truth”. Both in form and in content they try to make the audience conscious and reflective by breaking the classical, realistic narrative.

For me, this reflexive and non-narrative element is more an artistic effort. An attempt to give the reality an artistic, non-realistic, non-narrative, self-

conscious signature, and hopefully this challenges our normal understanding of time and reality in order to awaken a more poetic experience of reality. A poetic time-structure built on careful listening, sensing and questioning – without expecting an answer. An experience that is more in the rhythm, the mood and the style, the “how” more than the “what”. A time feeling that is meditative in its appearance, not built on actions or events.

Of course film in itself is a media that challenges our ordinary experience of time. It breaks up and splits our normal understanding of time. Things are not shown in the order we are used to in daily life. Film moves quickly from day to night, from one place to another, from one action to another. There is often discontinuity, but this is done in a smooth way, the cuts are hidden, so we do not notice them. The means is made invisible by following the logic of the dramatic story and the events. Some filmmakers protest against this smooth style of filmmaking. In 1940-60 the neorealism and modernistic style showed up in film history. These film-makers were either doing “long-takes” (Italian neorealism) – shooting film for a long time without stopping the camera, they wanted to show the “real” time-experience – or letting the discontinuity show, as the authors in the French new wave. This wave represented a modernistic style where the cuts are made visible, so we do not forget that there is an artist behind, and the narrative is often elliptical, jump cutting in time and space. Today all these styles exist, but often in new appearances.

So what about the poetic film? Poetic, non-narrative film has a lot in common with modernistic films, specially the first modernistic impulse in the early twenties discussed above. These art films break up time and space and the pictures are fragmented with only loose associations. But it is also possible to be poetic in a slow, long-take style with wholeness and unity. The non-narrative film first of all challenges the realistic story mentality. It confronts our traditional way of thinking about “reality”. I think it insists on getting the viewer

to put more of themselves into the experience, more of their conscious, questioning, active, lived-in-soul experience into what they see and hear. And it offers a possibility to change our normal expectations about time-structure. It is more like listening to modern music, the public has to dwell more in each note, and let the space “in between” make the structure – a more invisible structure made out of breath and rhythm. In the book *Flowforms*, John Wilkes describes how the narrative of metamorphosis manifests.

... Metamorphosis is then to be understood as a dynamic formative process ‘external’ to the physical manifestation. As an example, *we can think of something vital happening* between one leaf and the next, which leads to a change in its shape ... (Wilkes 2003, s 16, italics in original)

As I see it, a poetic non-narrative form is a structure built on such a metamorphosis. A narrative made of *something happening in-between*.

MEETING MYSELF

But there is still one meeting left: the meeting with myself. Five or six years have passed since I made my film or even looked at it. Preparing for this presentation I had a new shock. The film did not speak to me! I once thought that this film really was something, now I didn’t see anything. This was the same shock as I experienced in Järna.

Also during working with the film I had this constantly worrying question: Is this something worth while or is it not? Am I a genius, or is this just garbage? Standing in front of this abyss, I think I am indeed close to something, because you experience a sort of threshold in to some unknown area. But you can never know for sure if this is an illusion or not, and that is especially obvious when you work with film, because it is only flickering light and fleeting

sound in front of you, it is nothing “real”. It is only electronic impulses on a screen. The only ones who can give these flickerings meaning are the artist and the audience. And it seems like this can not be a constant meaningfulness. It changes all the time. The public changes, time changes and the environment changes. There will always be new experiences connected to meeting the film. So it is not surprising, after six years break, that in meeting my film again it does not speak to me in the same way that it did before. Making meaning seems to be related to time, people and circumstances. But I trust that if there is some meaning of importance, and if this meets the right people at the right time, a communication can take place.

THE PROCESS

As you can see, making my first film has been a long journey. And I think this is a picture of every life process or creative process. If something of real value, something with life is to be created, it seems that it often (not always) involves a period of feelings of loss, confusion and blindness, and then, from this pit, a new horizon can emerge. It seems as if one has to go into a sort of death or giving up, and out of this is given the possibility to rise up again. This can happen many times during the process before new meaning can appear. Strange, then, that the film itself also touches *this* subject: to look back and make an end, and then to go on further.

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