

AGING AND DEATH RITUALS PRESENTED IN DOCUMENTARY FILMS. AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *The concept of **memento mori** is explained and developed by anthropologists and it aims to give the reader a closer look on how rituals are conducted in small societies combining everything with something that is based on experience. This paper aims on adressing the issue of aging, the connection between the passage of time and the gradual degradation of man, but it also focuses on other problems that arise with aging and the transition from life to death. It contains a theoretical synthesis that reveals the role played by the observational mode in documentaries about old aged people and the anthropological way of seeing the transition from life to death of a human being. A selected range of film analysis will give an overview over a Romanian and two foreign documentaries that contain an anthropological insertion in death rituals and aging.*

Keywords: **memento mori** concept, anthropology of aging, transition from life to death, death rituals, observational documentary

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Introduction

Many studies about life transitions have been elaborated along the years which have created the context for studying the genesis of life transitions. There are some precursors of the study of life transitions which are introducing theories about sociological perspective on life transitions. Another two perspectives are the following: the anthropological way of seeing the society getting old, cultural and critical perspectives about old age are reviewed and surveyed by Lawrence Cohen in the book entitled *Old Age: Cultural and Critical Perspectives* and *Death rituals* presented in an essay written by Milton Cohen about an anthropological perspective on death rituals. This paper aims to address the issue of old age, the connection between the passage of time and the gradual degradation of man, but will also focus on other problems that arise with aging. In an anthropological way, with the help of examples of observational documentaries.

First part of the paper will discuss the observational mode of documentary whilst in the second part the theme referring to the *memento mori* concept will be brought forward. The aim of this overview is to understand how observational documentary has been developed and how getting old is presented within certain theoretical studies.

In order to understand the observational style of documentary films, this research focuses on studies made by scholars within the field who have advanced essential concepts for this manner of cinematographic representation.

The observational style of a documentary

In the book *Introduction to documentary* written by Bill Nichols many questions about documentary films are answered and easily explained. The questions involve issues of ethics, definitions, content, form, types and politics. Documentary films are meant to deliver a message about the world in which we live rather than a world imagined by the filmmaker. "Every film is a documentary. Even the most whimsical of fictions gives evidence of the culture that produced it and reproduces the likenesses of the people who perform within it."¹ When it comes to an audio-visual product, no matter what it is, the documentary part of the film can be somehow recognized, even if it is not directly presented, by the culture which reproduced the story it can be seen what it is really meant to be delivered. Nichols explains how both fictional and nonfictional films come closer to the viewer's imagination through the narrative. With the help of these

¹ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington-Indiana, Edit. Indiana University Press, 2001, p. 1.

methods every documentary follows a guideline and has a strict recipe in which it comes to a categorisation and representation.

The difference is explained by Barry K. Grant in the book *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video* in which it is marked out that there is a major difference between the fiction and the documentary films. “Documentaries are not inherently more truthful than fiction films, there are important differences between them. Reflecting on those differences is a major starting point for such reflections, because nearly all documentary filmmakers claim its inheritance, and because it marks a moment before the distinction between documentary and fiction was set”.² After this distinction is set the other one who explores this field is Broderick Fox who has a different perspective on the functions of a documentary film. The main functions of a documentary are confronted by Fox in the book *Documentary Media, History, Theory, Practice*. in which everything is reimagined. The viewer has to see things differently. All the preconceptions that people have about documentaries and their functions are explained. In the first chapter, the preconceptions of documentary are explained and refined. “This involves isolating some core concepts, which far too frequently go unexamined in our daily viewing of media that make claims to the real, lived world around us. We will subject the following assumed “norms” in spectatorship and production to fresh scrutiny”.³ We are used to thinking that reality is presented with the help of the observational documentary, and that is the ultimate way of speaking out the truth with the help of moving images. As an example, the author cites the French critic André Bazin, who has several books written after World War II, about film and culture. “Bazin is making a strong claim for the status of images produced through the lens of a camera over those rendered by the human hand alone. He claims a particular *indexicality*— a direct, one-to-one link between real-world subject and resultant image—that gives the photograph a claim to reality greater than that of other representational strategies, bestowing upon that image a sign of “objectivity” or “truth.”⁴ When it comes to objectivity and truth, the two main characteristics of the observational documentary, Bazin is right when he compares a painting and a picture, this comparison is real and cannot be debated. The objectivity is in the hand of the one painting in this case and the truth belongs to him and the one seeing the end result. Bazin also notes that the camera is not independent from our point of view and that the notion of

² Barry Keith Grant, „Etnography in the first person” Frederick Wiseman’s *Titicut Follies*, in Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (eds), *Documenting the Documentary Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2014, pp. 1–2.

³ Broderick Fox, *Documentary Media History, Theory, Practice 2nd Edition*, New York, Edit. Routledge, 2018, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

objectivity associated with the documentary media is a myth. The choice of what to frame always means turning one's back on something else and the meaning of a shot is given by the syntax of editing and sound design. When it comes to the truth of the events presented in a documentary, the form and content presented in the documentary, as Nichols says, are important, as emphasized in the performative documentary, despite the potential range, all documentaries make truth claims about our physical world and its workings, like, objectivity, this concept of truth is also a myth. "Every documentary has its own distinct voice. Like every speaking voice, every cinematic voice has a style or "grain" of its own that acts like a signature or fingerprint. It attests to the individuality of the filmmaker or director."⁵ Historically speaking the observational mode emerged during the 1960's technological development of the mobile cameras and magnetic tape recorders which could be easily handled. A common saying is that observational documentary films are closer to reality than to fiction films. They are a copy of the reality in which we're living and I might add that it is rather a process in which we're not altering the truth but we as filmmakers are provoking reality and delivering a message which was differently said before and it is something special added every time a documentary film is made, a theme is approached and a message delivered. The *memento mori* concept is present in every observational documentary analyzed in this paper and its aim is to bring a closer look on how death is experienced in real life through the death of others or with the help of thinking back to the idea of the concept of *memento mori* and the way it is transposed objective in moving imagines.

The *memento mori* concept

“*Memento mori* resonates for us. First developed in Ancient Rome, *memento mori* blossomed in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. As the plague swept across Europe, the developing field of anatomy and the burgeoning sense of self contributed to anthropomorphizing death. Skulls and skeletons prompted circumspection and contemplation of the inevitability of death.”⁶ The concept of *Memento mori* was represented in art, music, literature and intended to remind the audience that this is a transience of mortality. The ultimate reminder that a human will die and it is an encouraging reflection, contemplation which is something necessary. Human beings are the only ones who can acknowledge their own mortality. This is a characteristic of humanity first of all, In the past times this wasn't probably something to be acknowledged and people could die

⁵ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p. 99.

⁶ Karen J. Sneddon, *Memento Mori: Death And Wills*, „Wyoming Law Review”, 2014, Vol. 14, No 1, p. 2.

in every moment without warning. Death is something that is faced by every human being, it is an unavoidable fact which is observed by human individuals and experienced through the death of others, whether it is a family member, a stranger, or an acquaintance. This experience of death is delivered with the help of others, through media, by word of mouth, from pen and paper, internet, TV or film. "This observation and experience of death comes immediately and first-hand, by word of mouth, or otherwise by way of some form of media. The limit of life as human beings know it is brought to one's awareness frequently by a number of means in one's life."⁷ Observing and experiencing death is something natural, in every form this is like a negotiation, first of all, art and religion are considered to be the primary ways that individuals and groups have talked about it, "sometimes overlapping and sometimes distinct, sometimes cooperative and sometimes conflicting" explains Benjamin Carpenter in this book *Death in documentaries: the memento mori experience*. In this way explained, it is said that this is a strategy to organize human energies against the threat of a complete unknown, beyond which human individuals are left without nothing or with the power of their own imagination. More than photography, cinema tends to have a more remarkably powerful relationship to mortality, explains the author Benjamin Bennett-Carpenter in his book in which it is pointed out that documentary extends out to moving images and sound.

The relationship between film and mortality is an intimate one because of the ability of filmed footage to be empirical. In the documentary film every convention is accepted, the axis of significance runs from the real to unreal and from the illusory or false, rather than to imaginary. Documentary films are believed to be real and represent a story in the way it happened because of the social context in which a documentary is tied up. This belief helps marking out the distinction in the viewers eyes between what is fact and what is reality and fiction points out the author. Real life can be presented in many ways it's not only a real documentary that could prove that, hypothetically speaking, the idea of mortality can be exemplified in any way when this idea is made conscious to a human being, as it is described in the title of the book, *memento mori*.

Death is also examined by Jennifer Catherine Malkowski in her thesis titled "*Dying in Full Detail*": *Mortality and Duration in Digital Documentary*. Talking about recording of actual death, and the potential it has on the visual culture which has a major impact on this subject. Talking about the limitations that were inevitable in the past and the major impact that they have nowadays when these moments are captured on devices and streamed on social media, the digital age just made this possible, it is affordable and user-friendly. With the help of the

⁷ Benjamin Bennett-Carpenter, *Death In Documentaries: The Memento Mori Experience*, Leiden, Edit. Brill Rodopi, 2017, p. 1.

camera, this process of dying and the moving image is now made simple. Instead of using celluloid-based film (like in the 60's) which is expensive because of the money, the durational capacities, many crew requirements, and the aesthetics which might differ. "It is in its use by activists that documentary death most obviously satisfies the challenging questions that haunt its very existence: *why* should we make and look at images of actual death? What right have we to do so?"⁸ The author examines the activist use of documentary death in conjunction with digital media, considering shifts in the production and distribution of such material, as well as characteristics of politically effective documentary death that remain constant (and, indeed, become more apparent) in the digital age. In this case we can say that small cameras, phone cameras are representing a massive technological shift. With the help of this technological shift the documentary. Every documentary is believed to be a *memento mori* artifact, notes the author because every living human, every living thing presented in the footage is real and will eventually die. The ones who treat real life situations and the fragility of life or the struggle of making it are themes that treat *memento mori*, and the documentaries which present wildlife are mainly about non-human, but their themes run strongly in terms of implicit human survival or non- survival in mortal life. But the most explicit documentaries that make use of the symbols of *memento mori* are the ones in which we may encounter death as our own *memento mori* experience.

The concept listed above, *memento mori*, resonates with us because life transition is inevitable and humans are aware of that. Carpenter in his studies explains that the moment of death can be experienced by everyone; the one denying this concept is Malkowski who says that this moment is unique for everyone and cannot be experienced by someone who is not involved. This idea might be true because in the film analysis made below it is explained how the characters are talking about the idea of dying and the problems that arise with Aging. Some of the characters imagine the moment of their life transition and talk about it openly. With the help of capturing the reality the concept listed above is explained by the characters themselves and give the reader a real opinion about the fact that the moment of dying has to be constantly remembered.

Death rituals presented in small societies

When it comes to life transition presented in observational documentaries, as the process begins, everything must be captured in the same moment. The author Milton Cohen of the essay *Death Ritual: Anthropological Perspectives*

⁸ Jennifer Malkowski, *Dying in Full Detail Mortality and Digital Documentary*, Durham, Edit. Duke University Press, 2017, p. 88.

describes the way societies react when a person dies, family, neighbors and friends tend to respond in patterned ways to death. Depending on the cultural guidelines, the treatment of the dead body can be different, death ritual is considered a human behavior which consists of patterns which are learnt as an individual in the society in which it lives.” The analysis of mortuary practices provides rich data on the behavior of kin and community. It leads to people’s notions of gods, souls, witches, spirits and afterworlds. It promises access to their belief and value systems, to their conceptions of the social and moral worlds. It informs that ritual has consequences for both the individual and society.⁹ In many perspectives life transition is a complex process which is seen and discussed by any human being. The author explains the ritual of death in an anthropological way, the ritual begins when a person stops breathing and is identified as dead. “Treatments of the body, disposal of the remains, and the behavior of close kin and others for a specified period of mourning are spelled out by society.”¹⁰ The body might be washed, shaved, combed, painted or perfumed it can be left naked or dressed, it could be covered or not. As far as I know, in Transylvania, where I live people are putting a coin on the eyelid to keep them closed and tight up the chin with a bandage so the mouth of the dead person isn’t left open. It is a saying that the “bad spirit” isn’t going in the dead body and that’s why the eyes and the mouth must be closed.

Every society has a period of mourning, it all depends on how close the person to the dead is, the closer the connection, the longer the mourning period. During the mourning period, society permits, or requires, an expression of grief. The depth and duration vary from group to group and are contingent on kinship connection. All societies prescribe a period of mourning for close relatives and other kin of the deceased. A beginning and an end are specified. The duration depends upon the relationship with the dead: the closer the connection, the longer the mourning period. The mourners are segregated physically from other members of the group. The “father” of modern anthropology is talking about death and rituals in the chapter *Van Gennep: the rites of passage* from the article *Death Ritual: Anthropological Perspectives* written by Milton Cohen in which he explains the themes of separation, transition, and incorporation which make a different cycle. Mentioning that every rites of passage follows a standard pattern. A rite of separation is followed by a rite of transition and concludes with a rite of incorporation. “Rites of separation are important in death, transition in death, pregnancy, betrothal, and initiation, and incorporation in marriage. Separation means to relinquish a previous social status, a requisite for movement into a new

⁹ Cohen Milton, *Death Ritual: Anthropological Perspectives*, in Philip A. Pecorino (ed.), *Perspectives on Death and Dying*, New York., https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialsciences/ppecorino/deathanddying_text/Death%20Ritual.pdf, accesat in ianuarie 2022. p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

social position in the social structure. To be born is to move from the world of the unborn to the society of the living. To die is to depart the world of the living, and to enter the home of the ancestors. To mourn is to detach as a wife, or husband, to become widow or widower.” explains Milton in his essay. The movement from one stage to another is gradual, the period in which a person enters is called transitional or liminal, a period which is considered dangerous, in this time every ordinary activity is interrupted. It is considered that the individual is suspended between two worlds, the past and the future, between an initial condition and a new social destiny.

A new social existence is shaped and everything is changed. “All are united to all, so that a complete and profound union is affected among the members of the group.”¹¹ As Milton explains Van Gennep’s theories about death, it can be seen that the ritual of death subsumes elements of separation, transition and incorporation. “Symbolic of separation in death is the deposit of the corpse in the grave, coffin or cemetery; burning the dead person’s tools, jewels, house and other possessions; killing wives, slaves, and favorite animals of the deceased.”¹² Van Gennep’s theories explain that the themes of death and rebirth recur periodically during the life of an individual, it is all about the physiological death that occurs when a person stops breathing. It happens once. A person can die many times, socially, on these occasions he undergoes transition from one social station to another. Related to my own experience, the Rituals of Death from Transilvania were not different from the ones explained above by anthropologists, they were strictly held by all the my family members because this is the last wish of many old people and all the rituals are held by the close family.

Old age and death presented in documentaries

There are a series of Documentary films which present Old Age and Death in different ways. The Romanian observational documentary *Constantin and Elena* directed by Andrei Dăscălescu, a Romanian filmmaker who filmed his grandparents and made a movie out of what he’s been shooting at his grandparents house in a small village near Piatra-Neamț, Romania. *Constantin and Elena* is a warm documentary about an elderly Romanian couple. Each day they still manage to enjoy life and each other, but grieve over the finiteness of it all. Shot in an observational style, the documentary also includes the other forms of representation detailed and explained by Bill Nichols. In every part

¹¹ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage, Second Edition*, Chicago, Edit. University of Chicago Press, 2019, p. 170.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 170.

of the film, *the memento mori* experience is emphasized with the help of visual images which help create the story. A closer look at the rituals is also taken in the main moments of the film in which every ritual is explained and accompanied by visual images combined with dialogue. It is a documentary filmed with a less professional camera in which the director is trying to show the viewer the way an old couple looks in rural Romania and the way this old couple gets to survive together after 55 years of marriage without showing their weaknesses and highlight their happiness behind their eyes. The director shows us a personal point of view while exposing his two main characters slowly.

As Milton Cohen explains in his thesis, people tend to respond in patterns when it comes to a serious fact like the one treating death. The conversation between them is also about the moment of separation which is a different life cycle and it has a link with the transitional concept explained in the theoretical part. It can be noticed from the many scenes of the film that even if something isn't working they aren't complaining and seem happy with what they've achieved. They seem to complete each other when they are having a dialog, with the help of the montage we can notice that when someone is talking about a funeral the other one completes the sentence with a positive phrase. Because they're completing each other in every situation their marriage can be seen as a scale that is always well divided and balanced.

Another example of documentary comes from a short documentary made in the US. When we think of old age, we might imagine spending our golden years enjoying retirement with our loving partners and being surrounded by our adoring grandchildren. Sadly, that just isn't the case for Mary.

Junk Mail, a short, emotional documentary that uses camerawork to show a piece of the 98-year-old Mary's life. A woman who lives alone and goes day by day to a senior center. In this film the expository mode is used when the character is presented and has a logic and includes verbal commentary, there is also a part in which the camera people are interacting with the main character and participate in the action. I might add that this eleven minute short documentary made by the Voyager team was simple and touching, the imagines captured and the details combined with Mary's words made me love the character and not laugh about her work after she's home from the senior center spending her free time in an unexpected way – shredding junk mail. "Don't laugh," she says. "I have to do something." While Mary's story of growing old is moving, it may not be so uncommon among the elderly. It might seem funny but this is the way old people find things to do to make the time pass easier. The concept of *memento mori* intends to remind the audience that humans are dying and they have to be aware of that and acknowledge their own mortality. There are many similarities between this film and the Romanian documentary explained above which can be found and are meant to show how old age is perceived in two different parts of

the world. Mary from the US is not worried about her own death and about the fact that one day she will be gone, she's sad because her friends die and she will never get to see them, while in the Romanian film the male character is worried about what will his family do when one of the two passes away.

The third example of a documentary entitled *Alternate Endings: Six Ways to Die in America* directed by Matthew O'Neill and Perri Peltz present six new ways of how people are facing death and how they wish to die in the US. The film explores new ways of how people in the US are changing their opinions and rituals, talking about the way death is seen and perceived. Topics also include choosing to use health care, unique ways to celebrate life, and different modalities to honor the memory of loved ones. The 68 minutes long documentary has an introductory story and six particular cases in which people see the transition from life to death, the way they celebrate it and the way death seems to be something we need to come to terms with. The film presents in an observational style authentic, passionate, and realist people and their stories. Even in the short period of time the film features each family, the viewer gains an understanding of why they want to die or be remembered in a certain way. The way people treat this transition is also linked to the second part of the paper in which the *memento mori* concept is explained and the life transition is explained anthropologically and sociologically.

Conclusions

As a conclusion, when it comes to life transition in documentaries, it's all about the process and the way everything is captured in one moment. It describes how a person reacts when someone dies and the fact that it is all a patterned response to death. In the traditional and pre-modern society death is seen in a religious way; religion forms the basis in understanding death. The authority figure is the priest and the language of understanding is that of organized religion. The life transition and aging can be seen as a long processes; these transitions are seen and researched by anthropologists and sociologists and presented with the help of observational documentaries.

Aging is a natural process in which people tend to change and adopt a different point of view when it comes to death which is seen as an inevitable process. The analysis revealed the role played by the observational mode in documentaries about old aged people and the anthropological way of seeing the transition from life to death of a human. The *memento mori* concept resonates with us because life transition is inevitable and humans are aware of that. Yet, it is easy to capture reality but it does not have the same impact as being involved. With an overview of the documentaries the reader might see how death rituals were presented with the help of moving images through an anthropological perspective.