

Title: *fleur de sel: étude numéro 2*

Format: Documentary Film (24 minutes 45 seconds in duration) Author: Dr Keith Marley

Year of Production: 2020

Link to Film: <https://vimeo.com/442074012>

Research Context:

In 1991 film theorist, Bill Nichols, developed a typology of documentary film, which aimed to identify the different *types* or *categories* of documentary, by identifying the aesthetic tropes associated with each individual *mode*. For this project, emphasis is placed on what he called the *poetic mode*.

The poetic mode has many facets, but they all emphasize the ways in which the filmmaker's voice gives fragments of the historical world a formal, aesthetic integrity peculiar to the film itself. (Nichols 2001b:105)

The major aim of this project is to explore the ways in which the adoption of certain aesthetic filmmaking devices, can shift the focus of documentary film away from *exposition* and more toward one of *expression*. Poetic documentaries are more concerned with creating a lyrical impression, rather than imparting knowledge or information about specific events, people or places. The way in which the editing structures the images in particular ways, can be called an *associational form*, whereby images are sequenced not for the purpose of continuity, rather are sequenced in particular ways, in order to explore patterns and associations based on their spatial, temporal properties. It is a style of documentary filmmaking that appeals to the sensorial over the cognitive.

As such, *fleur de sel*, does not aim to give insight into any particular aspect of life on Île de Ré, rather it aims to evoke a *sense of atmosphere* associated with the island. So, for example, in order to signify the rather calm and still atmosphere of Île de Ré, the filmmaker uses long dissolves between shots, offering a more gentle way of transitioning between them, as opposed to the more harsh, direct cut. Here, the use of long takes and extended transitions between shots, alongside the general minimalist aesthetic in terms of the compositional elements contained within the scene, acts as an invitation to the spectator to fully observe the landscape, and, in essence, immerse themselves within that landscape. The duration of shots and their precise compositional qualities, thus act as poetic device. The sonic accompaniment does not aim to carry with it any particular meaning, rather it is there to encourage this more contemplative mode of viewing, whereby one is able to *connect knowing to feeling and hearing to viewing* (Corner 2002: 366).

Here the filmmaker is aiming to encourage a *re-seeing* of the world, in order to create new forms of knowledge, very much in the same vein that Dziga Vertov used documentary film as a way of altering perception. The difference being, rather than *assault* the viewer with a kaleidoscopic montage of images, as Vertov did, in order to produce a *kinetic* form of cinema, the filmmaker in this instance aims to *becalm* the viewer, with a focus on stasis, rather than kinesis.

The overall impact of this project is to encourage the spectator to adopt a mode of viewing not normally associated with documentary, whereby the appreciation of aesthetics becomes the focus of engagement, rather than merely engaging with a documentary film for its expositional potential.

#### References:

Corner, J. (2002) 'Sounds real: Music and documentary' *Popular Music* Volume 21, No. 3, pp. 357-366

Nichols, B. (1991) *Representing Reality* Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Nichols, B (2001) *Introduction to Documentary* Bloomington: Indiana University Press

#### Response statement to the peer reviewers from Dr Keith Marley (Liverpool John Moores University)

I would like to first thank the reviewers for their learned reviews of my film and accompanying research statement.

I am pleased that both reviewers found the film engaging and were, on the whole, complimentary about the techniques on show.

With regard to the project being 'let down by an artist statement that does not engage with sufficient theory' (Reviewer 2), I offer the following defence of the original statement:

When writing the statement, I was more concerned with explaining my artistic intentions, rather than providing a theoretical context for the piece. My intention was to create a film that produced a degree of spectator transcendence, achieved through audio-visual aesthetic devices. This was not a film that was to operate on a *cognitive* level, rather it was a film that aimed to operate at the level of *feeling*. Therefore, at the time of the submission of my statement, I felt that any kind of attempt to *theorise* my artistic intentions would not be particularly constructive, nor illuminating for the reader. Attaching any kind of research question or hypothesis did not feel appropriate at the time – the phenomenological viewer experience was what counted to me as the author. Thus, the film itself was to be seen as *practice as theory*.

I accept that Reviewer 2, in particular, may see my approach as unscholarly, therefore with that in mind, I have produced a new research statement below.

With regard to the film, I have made some changes as a result of some of the comments made by Reviewer 1, especially with regard to music during the final shot of the film – a whole new soundtrack has been written for the entire film, which it is hoped provides a more immersive experience than the first iteration. I have also added a new visual section toward the end of the film, linking this section to what Schrader (2018) calls *a decisive moment* in *transcendental film*. This is discussed further in the research statement.

Title: *fleur de sel: études numéro 2*

Format: Documentary Film set on Île de Ré, France (35'40")

Author: Dr Keith Marley

Year of Production: 2020

Link to Film: <https://vimeo.com/442074012>

#### Research Questions:

How can particular film techniques capture a sense of place?

Can a film's aesthetics produce a transcendental experience?

Is the slow dissolve an effective aesthetic device with regard to the *transcendental style*?

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The poetic mode has many facets, but they all emphasize the ways in which the filmmaker's voice gives fragments of the historical world a formal, aesthetic integrity peculiar to the film itself. (Nichols 2001:105)

The major aim of this project was to explore the ways in which the adoption of certain aesthetic filmmaking devices, can shift the focus of documentary film away from *exposition* and more toward one of *expression*. Poetic documentaries are more concerned with creating

a lyrical impression, rather than imparting knowledge or information about specific events, people or places. The way in which the editing structures the images in particular ways, can be called an *associational form*, whereby images are sequenced not for the purpose of continuity, rather are sequenced in particular ways, in order to explore patterns and associations based on their spatial, temporal properties. It is a style of documentary filmmaking that appeals to the sensorial over the cognitive.

*fleur de sel* loosely follows in the tradition of the *city symphony* makers, however where it departs from this canon of documentary film is in the style of editing. The city symphonies of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, created by the likes of Vigo, Vertov, Cavalcanti and Ruttmann, all used montage as an aesthetic device for capturing the *rhythms* and *kinesis* of the city. However, montage editing is implicitly *disruptive* and *distracting*, therefore it would not be suitable for capturing the tranquillity of the island. My aim here was to allow the viewer to *feel*, rather than *know*, the island. In order to do this, I adopted aesthetics associated with *slow cinema*: shots were minimal in terms of composition, with an emphasis on the mundane and the use of long takes. I also adopted extremely long dissolves as a non-disruptive style of editing, in order to allow the viewer to absorb the changing landscapes without distraction.

In essence my film attempts to create what Schrader calls a *transcendental style*, which he argues has the ability to transport the viewer to a place outside of themselves by creating ‘an alternate film reality – a transcendent one’ (2018: 3). He cites Tarkovsky as being one of the masters of the transcendental style, whereby his use of time, both within the frame and between frames becomes an important *distancing* device that can evoke such states in the audience. Tarkovsky argued that the most important element in film is rhythm, however he rejected the idea that rhythm is dictated by editing, as the city symphony makers would argue, rather it is ‘the distinctive time running through the shots’, which determines the rhythm, ‘by the pressure of time that runs through them’ (Tarkovsky 2012: 117). It was this *time pressure* that I attempted to encapsulate through the use of slow motion and slow dissolves, supported by the score, which was composed in a way to ‘connect knowing to feeling and hearing to viewing’ (Corner 2002: 366).

Afterword:

To ask why I was trying to do this would be a fair question, however the answer is quite simple: while sitting in these locations on the island, seeing the sheer beauty and feeling the absolute tranquillity of the place, I felt an overwhelming sense of transcendence. As an artist, my desire to express what I see and feel, through poetic device, is my way of determining that I do exist in *this* world; a world where the *actual* and the *spiritual* become one and the same thing. If a viewer of my films can get a sense of that, then I become understood, both as a person and a filmmaker.

Bibliography:

Corner, J. (2002) 'Sounds real: Music and documentary.' *Popular Music* Volume 21, No.3, pp.357-366

Nichols, B. (1991) *Representing Reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Nichols, B. (2001) *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indian University Press

Schrader, P. *Rethinking Transcendental Style*. California: University of California Press

Tarkovsky, A (2012) *Sculpting in Time*. Austin: University of Texas