CREATING NEW SENSIBILITY IN LITHUANIAN DOCUMENTARY CINEMA: "ACID FOREST" AND "*ANIMUS ANIMALIS*" (A STORY ABOUT PEOPLE, ANIMALS AND THINGS)

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of two Lithuanian documentary films – Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė's "Acid Forest" (*Rūgštus miškas*, 2018) and Aistė Žegulytė's "*Animus Animalis* (A Story about People, Animals and Things)" (*Animus Animalis* (*Istorija apie žmones, žvėris ir daiktus*)) (2018). Both of these films re-evaluate the way animals are being represented in cinema. The analysis will be conducted within three frameworks: Lithuanian poetic documentary, nature or wildlife documentaries and animal studies in the field of film studies. While both "Acid Forest" and "*Animus Animalis*" employ cinematic language that is common to Lithuanian poetic documentary, they both broaden the genre not only with their aesthetic decisions, but also by extending its thematic focus usually limited to human interest. By changing the elements of conventional nature or wildlife documentaries these films manage to question the power dynamics of different species. They create a new sensibility towards nonhuman living creatures by reorganizing the point of view usually belonging to human beings, even by limiting spatial and temporal freedom of the spectator. Interdisciplinary focus on animal studies within the field of film studies sets another important framework that helps us understand why "Acid Forest" and "*Animus Animalis*" become relevant case studies: they widen the field of documentary cinema in the local context and they are also a part of a global shift in documentary filmmakers' approach towards nonhuman beings.

Keywords: *Lithuanian poetic documentary, nonhuman, animal studies, Acid Forest, Animus Animalis.*

This article focuses on two recent Lithuanian documentary films – "Acid Forest" by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė and "*Animus Animalis*" (A Story about People, Animals

and Things)[1] by Aistė Žegulytė. Both films were completed in 2018, premiered in A-class film festivals and travelled to numerous film events afterwards. I would like to propose that, on the one hand, these two titles continue the tradition of Lithuanian poetic documentary cinema in terms of aesthetics, but, on the other hand, they distance themselves from anthropocentric perspective. In addition, these two films emerge within the increasing global efforts of documentary filmmakers to create a nonhuman look into the environment that we live in. In this article, I will analyse "Acid Forest" and "*Animus Animalis*" within three frameworks: Lithuanian poetic documentary, wildlife documentaries, and the recent rise of interdisciplinary interest in animal studies in the field of film studies.

Firstly, I would like to introduce these films and the background of the filmmakers. Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė is a film and theatre director and also a cinematographer. "Acid Forest" is her first feature length film. She also collaborates with writer Vaiva Grainytė and composer Lina Lapelytė on creating performances. Their last work "Sun and Sea" won the Golden Lion award at the Venice Art Biennale in 2019. The film "Acid Forest" is set in an ancient pine forest in the Curonian Spit, which is being affected by a colony of cormorants – their excrement burns the trees, which eventually creates dead forest areas. Many tourists from various countries vacationing in the Curonian Spit usually stop to see this place. There is a special observation deck built for people to properly see the area where the colony of cormorants resides. The film allows us to hear a polyphony of visitors' voices commenting on the situation. We hear 11 different languages in the film, but we don't see people's faces as they are shot from a high angle.

Aistė Žegulytė is a film director. Her feature length debut "*Animus Animalis*" follows a deer farmer, a museum worker and a taxidermist as he prepares for a taxidermy championship, Žegulytė travels with the taxidermists taking their pieces to the championship in Finland. The main criterion in the taxidermy championship is for the stuffed animals to have a good pose and a lively gaze. Along the way, Žegulytė explores the hunters' world and their rituals, and also tackles different relationships people develop both with living and non-living creatures. By showing different practices people developed when it comes to animals – preservation, hunting, farming – the director studies the cycle of life and death.

Dialogue with Lithuanian poetic documentary

Although there are ongoing debates questioning the tradition of Lithuanian documentary cinema and the suitability of the term "poetic documentary", the term is still widely used to set common ground for some aesthetic practices in Lithuanian

[1] Further in the text only the first part of the title will be used: "*Animus Animalis*".

documentary cinema during the Soviet Union, as well as just after the collapse of it. In her article "Desire and Memories of a Small Man: The Poetic documentaries of Lithuanian Filmmaker Audrius Stonys", Lithuanian film researcher Renata Šukaitytė employs the notion of Lithuanian poetic documentary, and analyzes Stonys' films using multiple tools proposed by Bill Nichols, Michael Renov and Stella Bruzzi. In this paper the goal is not to identify the kind of representation used by new Lithuanian documentary filmmakers, but rather, to draw on the existing research of Lithuanian poetic documentary, and then, to identify the changes that films by Žegulytė and Bardžiukaitė bring to the filmmaking tradition in Lithuania.

Documentary modes developed by Bill Nichols are widely known. Poetic mode of documentary could be useful to grasp the style of Lithuanian documentary tradition. According to Nichols, "*poetic mode emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization* [..] *This mode bears a close proximity to experimental, personal, or avant-garde filmmaking*" [Nichols 2001: 33]. In addition, he claims that "*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 poetic mode of representation thus is based on subjective viewpoint and seeks primarily express a feeling or an atmosphere rather than facts or information.

Lithuanian poetic documentaries proliferated in the 1960s and are usually associated with the names of directors such as Robertas Verba, Edmundas Zubavičius or Henrikas Šablevičius. Although they all explored different subject matter and employed different intonations, all of them were looking for ways to resist Soviet ideological framework, common to propagandic newsreels at the time. According to Renata Šukaitytė, Lithuanian poetic documentary, "*is characterized by the aesthetization of the everyday life of small "non-heroes" (ordinary people, usually old, provincial eccentrics, etc.) and a complete refusal to address contemporary issues related to the Soviet government*" [Šukaitytė 2015: 321]. They were making short documentary films without objective voice-over, without ideologically constructed messages.

It is also important to note that the generation that started to make films after the collapse of the Soviet Union, – Audrius Stonys, Šarūnas Bartas, Arūnas Matelis, Valdas Navasaitis or Kornelijus and Diana Matuzevičiai, each in their own way continued the tradition of Lithuanian poetic documentary cinema. This was done by avoiding voice-over, informative approach, cause-effect based dramaturgy, yet their topics and aesthetic decisions became more focused on temporality, marginalized groups of society, abandoned rural or urban spaces, existential topics. As Šukaitytė puts it:

> "*these filmmakers openly acknowledged their interest in aesthetic and philosophical forms of filmmaking and in experimenting with documentary*

> *conventions, telling small stories about the existential experience of temporality and human loneliness, about the importance and the beauty of simple and trivial things, while trying to sound sincere and present their subjects in a non-manipulative way. Their stylistic choices, like static shots, deep focus, long takes, slow camera motion, and synchronous sound (often considered traditional indicators of an indexical/ realist Bazinian ontology), helped to produce such a "reality" effect*" [Šukaitytė 2015: 322].

Lithuanian poetic documentary holds both aesthetic and subjective approach towards its subject matter. Nichols's poetic mode is helping to situate films made by Lithuanian directors in the 1960s and 1990s in a theoretical framework. However, Stella Bruzzi is critical of Nichols's genealogy and thinks it over simplistic. She claims that it "*imposes a false chronology onto what is essentially a theoretical paradigm*" [Bruzzi 2006: 3]. In this paper it is important to state that modes of representation do overlap and are not fixed in any period of time. Šukaitytė concludes that the two generations of the "*poetic documentary (of the 1960s and the 1990s) share the artistic strategy of an aesthete-ethnographer, documenting, revealing and analyzing marginalized cultural phenomena*" [Šukaitytė 2015: 322]. She applies Renov's poetics of documentary and grounds the legitimacy of the notion of Lithuanian poetic documentary. However, I would like to propose that both Žegulytė's and Barzdžiukaitė's films create a dialogue with the tradition of Lithuanian poetic documentary rather than continuing it. They may be situated within the poetic mode, but already exceed? it, and that is precisely because of what Bruzzi states: "*hybrid, eclectic modern films have begun to undermine his* (Nichols's – authors note) *efforts to compartmentalise documentaries*" [Bruzzi 2006: 3].

Firstly, there is a direct influence of Stonys as he was a tutor for Žegulytė and Barzdžiukaitė while they were studying at Lithuanian Music and Theatre Academy. Secondly, they both watched and studied works of the 1960s generation, as well as the works of Matelis or Bartas. In one interview Žegulytė said that "*early films of Stonys, Matelis and Bartas gave the foundation for her own creative path*" [Valiūnaitė 2020]. These films resonate with her own resistance to narrative cinema or to the use of talking heads in documentaries. Barzdžiukaitė also mentions that Stonys's film "Earth of the Blind" made a huge impression on her. Most important for her in Lithuanian poetic documentaries is "*the sensitivity, attention to landscape, overall approach avoiding informative, journalistic way of talking in cinema*" [Valiūnaitė 2020].

Žegulytė in the film "*Animus Animalis*" uses the same pace that the films in the 1990s do – she lets the time pass through each of her shots. Slow pace and long takes which vary from 10 seconds to 2 minutes bring her close to practices used in the

works of Stonys or Bartas. She intentionally avoids interviews with her characters or any voice-over. Static camera shots combined with slow movements of camera and precise framing create poetic style of the film. However, all the aesthetic decisions of camerawork or editing are conceptually put together to raise questions or express complex ideas rather than follow the characters' everyday life or aestheticize it. In addition, Žegulytė and her film editor Mikas Žukauskas did not build a story about taxidermists or hunters, but instead avoided conventional storytelling altogether and in so doing presented a different perspective on human relationships with animals and inanimate objects. Observation and aestheticization of everyday life in this film is changed by developing abstract ideas out of everyday material.

In "Acid Forest" Barzdžiukaitė uses slow pace too and gives the audience time to look around, to linger on what one sees. But the shots, which could seem atmospheric in a poetic documentary, here become a part of a well thought through structure. To use her own words – Barzdžiukaitė tries to work on two levels: "*poetic and analytical*" [Valiūnaitė 2020]. Barzdžiukaitė's film works as a conceptual piece, where the structure of the film and its aesthetic decisions all work to question the hierarchical system of people, birds and trees – she herself calls it "*an ecological triangle*" [Valiūnaitė 2020]. The whole conflict lies within this triangle. Although one can recognize similar temporality and attentiveness to landscape which are all embedded in Lithuanian poetic documentary and might be intuitively used by Barzdžiukaitė, her aim is to awaken or even provoke the audience to think about ecological crisis, human relationship to different living species, as well as the issues of class and race. In a traditional Lithuanian documentary cinema nature is important as a landscape, it primarily serves the purpose of an environment for human beings to exist in.

Even though "*Animus Animalis*" and "Acid Forest" share the features of most of the Lithuanian poetic documentary aesthetic and avoid the informative function of documentary cinema, they turn their focus to a new topic: the relationship between different species. This dialogue between the two modes becomes prolific as it shares the sensitivity inherent in the filmmaking practice while at the same time already creating a different sensibility.

Trajectories of looking: in search of nonhuman perspective

In this chapter I would like to show how "*Animus Animalis*" and "Acid Forest" create a new sensibility by developing a different perspective towards nature and nonhuman beings. For this reason, two other frameworks are necessary. Although Barzdžiukaitė's and Žegulytė's films cannot be straightforwardly put into wildlife or nature documentary categories, one of their main goals is to question the relationship between human and nonhuman beings by changing the traditional practices of

representing animals. To better understand how they create a new sensibility it is worth to look at wildlife documentary conventions and later on to bring animal studies in the field of film studies as the theoretical framework.

In an interesting study Caroline Hovanec interesting study of British natural history films, discovers that: "*Many early-twentieth-century naturalists perceived nature photography and cinematography as a nonviolent, noninterventional alternative to hunting and killing wildlife. In the camera they found hope for a way to shoot, capture, and display without hurting anything*" [Hovanec 2019]. This non-violent (at least in its intentions) way of looking at nature is common to Petras Abukevičius, who was the first filmmaker to dedicate his whole attention to nature in Lithuania. Between 1965 and 1994 he made around 40 films, mostly on local animals and birds. His short films that were made in Lithuanian film studio chose a dual approach – informative yet poetic. In one of his interviews in magazine *Kinas* Abukevičius said: "*It is not necessary to shout about preserving the nature.* [..] *One will learn to love nature by watching and observing it, and then one won't raise the hand against it*" [Kinas 1988]. In this quote, the main goal of Abukevičius is visible – to create such a representation of nature and animals, that would stop people from damaging it. In most of his films he shows animals speaking in human voices. Personified animals are supposed to bring them closer to human beings and to help create a stronger connection based on respect and even love. In addition, Abukevičius tries to show the beauty of nature with the help of perfect framing, shooting in beautiful light and from wide angle lenses or using zoom. However, according to Derek Bousé, "*a shroud of cinematic conventions may help us less, not more, to be sensitive to it*" [Bousé 2000: 8].

In the global context, nature documentaries or wildlife films went through big changes – from explorations of technical possibilities, to showing nonhuman realms, to scientific research, and finally – to entertaining TV programmes. In this paper, it is important to mark some of the codes and conventions that are in use to represent animals on screen. According to Bousé, "*how film and television depict the natural world often has far less to do with science or real outdoor experience than with media economics, established production practices, viewers' expectations, and the ways each of these influences the others*" [Bousé 2000: 1]. Wildlife films created for entertainment purposes have the material edited in to give the impression of a fast pace or to create dramaturgy which is similar to the way action films would be edited. Bousé claims that "*the use of formal artifice such as varying camera angles, continuity editing, montage editing, slow-motion, "impossible" close-ups, voice-over narration, dramatic or ethnic music, and the like should by no means be off limits to wildlife filmmakers, but by the same token we should not avoid critical reflection on the overall image of nature and wildlife that emerges, cumulatively, from the long-term and systematic use of such devices*" [Bousé 2000: 8]. These devices have become

conventional in portraying animals or birds on screen, and they put the spectators into superior position.

Another recent Lithuanian documentary film "Ancient Woods" by Mindaugas Survila uses varying camera angles to bring human beings to a proximity to wildlife impossible in real life. However, he avoids voice-over narration or fast-paced editing. The film has a poetic atmosphere and stands out as work that breaks the conventions of wildlife films. The main goal here is not to entertain or to inform, but to preserve the disappearing ancient woods and nonhuman beings living there.

Unlike Abukevičius or Survila, Žegulytė and Barzdžiukaitė are not trying to show the beauty of nature, instead they want to ask certain questions. However, what they do share with the Abukevičius and Survila is the quiet way of activism. Different formal and theoretical approach of Žagulytė and Barzdžiukaitė brings them closer to the growing research of animals in films. To the contrary of most wildlife or nature documentaries, "*Animus Animalis*" and "Acid Forest" seek to interrupt the superior or anthropocentric gaze towards nature. First of all, the personified voice over which is used in Abukevičius films and in other nature documentaries is annihilating animal agency. Here it is important to mark that the phrase "animal agency" has multiple theoretical interpretations, but here I would like to apply it in a way Jonathan Burt uses it, that "*in film human-animal relations are possible through the play of agency regardless of the nature of animal interiority, subjectivity or communication*" [Burt 2002: 31]. Secondly, Žegulytė and Barzdžiukaitė attempt to disrupt the spectators' safe distance and anthropocentric position by inverting some of the cinematic techniques used in wildlife or nature documentaries.

Researchers Jonathan Burt, Anat Pick, Guinevere Narraway, Laura McMahon or Michael Lawrence amongst others bring two disciplines: animal studies and film studies closer to each other to explore the complex relations between human and nonhuman beings on screen and behind the cameras. Pick and Narraway in their introduction of *Screening Nature: Cinema beyond the Human* argues that, "*the theoretical implications of a nonhuman or posthuman cinema to the field of film studies are profound and challenge the conventionally humanist and anthropocentric parameters of the discipline* [..] *By treating nonhuman environments as mere backdrop or mise-en-scène – at worst as available and expendable raw material – our thinking about cinema divides up the frame between the human and the nonhuman in ways that overlook their essential interdependence and reinforces the culture/nature dualism*" [Pick, Narraway 2013: 6–7]. In addition, there is a growing number of documentaries that try to establish a nonhuman perspective in cinema: Nicolas Philibert's "Nénette" (2010), Denis Côte "*Bestiare*" (2012) or Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor's "*Leviathan*" (2012) just to name a few.

"Acid Forest" and "*Animus Animalis*" are related to films mentioned above in their attempt to create a new sensibility to documentary filmmaking that would interrupt the dominant human gaze. They are questioning the hierarchy of human and nonhuman beings. One of the questions McMahon and Lawrence ask in analyses of Nicolas Philibert film "Nénette" about the orangutan in the zoo is: "*How might moving images resist or refuse the objectification or anthropomorphisation of the animal and instead work to unravel hierarchies of looking and distributions of power?*" [McMahon, Lawrence 2015: 2]. They show that temporality and spatial limitations might be one of the strategies. McMahon and Lawrence suggest that "*the prevalence of static framing in "Nénette" means that spectatorial mobility – and the attendant consumption of species diversity – is refused*" [McMahon, Lawrence 2015: 7]. Spectators in the zoo are used to wandering around freely while the animals are entrapped in cages and observed as if in a window-shop. The same effect is usually recreated in cinema – the spectator has a safe position and their eyes wander freely in the frame. Huge scale panoramic shots are conventional in most films about nature.

"*Animus Animalis*" is shot with 4:3 aspect ratio, which restrains the mobility of the spectator's gaze. Most of the time, the framing in this film is intentionally inconvenient and even feels claustrophobic at times. In an interview Žegulytė says that, together with "*my cinematographer Vytautas Katkus we tried to create a nonhuman look in the film by framing shots from an angle which could be close to an animal perspective*" [Valiūnaitė 2020]. I would add that not only camera position and framing work as a tool to create nonhuman point of view, but temporality and staged shots disrupt hierarchical relation between animals and human beings. As I mentioned earlier, Žegulytė uses long lasting and static shots, which evokes attentiveness. In their analyses of "Nénette", McMahon and Lawrence argue that imposing duration and "*privileging dead (cinematic) time*" in opposition to what conventional nature, zoo or wildlife documentaries practices, allows the film to undermine "*the zoological and cinematic structures of voyeurism, fetishism and surveillance*" [McMahon, Lawrence 2015: 8]. Although Žegulytė does not focus on one specific animal and the focus of film is constantly shifting from living to non-living beings, she applies temporal and spatial limitations in order to question, as Philibert also does, the power relations between different species and the dominant gaze.

As Žegulytė says, "*this film started from her interest of thinking about how dead eyes affect human beings*" [Valiūnaitė 2020]. In one scene Žegulytė shows a sequence of shots from a showcase in Kaunas Tadas Ivanauskas Museum of Zoology – in each shot different stuffed animals are exhibited in their natural habitat, when finally, a fox steps out from the showcase and starts wandering around the space looking at all the stuffed animals. The gaze of the spectator is disarmed by the revived fox. The ability to recognize what is real and orienting oneself in the frame is taken away with

this unexpected twist. Žegulytė plays with the trajectories of living and non-living eyes within the shot and also in the editing, thus escaping the anthropocentric gaze.

Jacques Derrida said "*the animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there*" [Derrida 2008: 29]. This idea becomes very helpful in explaining what Žegulytė is trying to achieve with the staged shots and interchanging close-ups of dead and living animal eyes. Constantly turning the animals' gaze towards the spectator, Žegulytė succeeds in provoking thinking about the difference between living and non-living creatures and that is precisely how classic human/animal distinction is put into question. According to Matthew Calarco, "*the classic human/animal distinction serves to block access to seeing the world from the perspective of nonhuman others and seeks to limit in advance the potentiality of the animal and entire nonhuman world*" [Calarco 2011: 58]. This potential is grasped by Žegulytė. She plays with spectators' expectations by including macabre scenes of humans hunting fake animal figures, or the process of making stuffed animals. Shifting between living and non-living creatures' point of views, she questions "*the artificial line society has constructed between human and animal and the violent subjection that anthropocentric subjectivity has enabled*" [Freeman, Tulloch 2013: 114], to use Carrie Packwood Freeman's and Scott Tulloch's paraphrasing of Derrida: In addition, by constantly turning animals' gaze towards the spectators, this "*gaze exceeds the "thingness" of a nonhuman being and penetrates the human sphere*" [Lippit 2000: 169]. Animals and human beings start to belong in one realm: that of the living as opposed to that of things.

Barzdžiukaitė in her film "Acid Forest" questions the asymmetric relationship between human beings and animals through reorganization of gaze as a tool of power, too. In the interview she says, that for her it was "*very important to invert the conventional practice of nature documentaries, where the cameraperson uses an extreme zoom lens to shoot animals from far away. The subject does not know that it is being filmed, allowing the audience to enjoy its natural behavior*" [Brašiškis, Shpolberg 2020]. In "Acid Forest" human beings are the ones being watched as the cameras were installed in the trees to observe tourists from the birds' point of view. In this way, to quote Barzdžiukaitė: "*the usual interspecies hierarchy of the cinematographic gaze is re-organised*" [Brašiškis, Shpolberg 2020]. Freeman and Tulloch's analysis of activists' undercover footage is helpful here. They incorporate Michel Foucault's panopticon theory. They argue that undercover films develop a reverse panopticon. Something similar is done in "Acid Forest", where tourists do not know that they are being watched and listened to. According to Freeman and Tulloch, w*hile* "*the traditional structure enables the privileged gaze of one or several individuals, the reverse panopticon undermines this privileged perspective, inviting all viewers willing to bear witness*" [Freeman, Tulloch 2013: 116]. Here the witnesses are not only the spectators, but also the cormorants.

Barzdžiukaitė reverses the anthropocentric position towards other species. It is an ethical movement expressed within the structure of the film and carried out through precise aesthetic decisions. She is not willing to create an activist film, which would bombard spectators with big statements. However, by turning the birds' point of view towards the tourists and listening to their conversations, then structuring them with smart editing, she questions human dominance over other beings. The sound is very important in "Acid Forest", too. Barzdžiukaitė plays with the localization of sound in its relation to vision, and she manages to structure points of view and points of hearing in a precise choreography that slowly builds the impression of cormorants being the ones listening to the stories about their existence and their effect on nature. In this way, the spectators are encouraged to identify not with the tourists' voices, but possibly with cormorants or maybe even with the trees, which silently participate in this ecological triangle.

Conclusion

Until "*Animus Animalis*" and "Acid Forest", Lithuanian poetic documentary filmmakers took as their main concern topics related to the human interest: existential questions were followed by social and historical topics. By incorporating cinematic tools that are usually associated with poetic documentary mode, Barzdžiukaitė and Žegulytė are both questioning the dominance of human beings over the nonhuman. They create a new sensibility towards nonhuman living creatures by limiting spatial and temporal freedom of spectators, or reorganizing points of view that usually belong to human beings in documentaries on nature or animals. These films bring a new topic to Lithuanian documentary – reevaluation of anthropocentrism and its role within ecological crises. These urgent topics resonate with the wider global interest of documentary filmmakers that seeks to change the arrogant and ignorant position of human beings towards other species. The global interest in "Acid Forest" and "*Animus Animalis*" affirms their interesting formal decisions and topics that go beyond the local context and tradition.

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