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RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST THROUGH TV DOCUMENTARIES. VISUAL AND DISCURSIVE APPROACHES IN PRESENTING THE PHENOMENON OF ORGANIZED FAMINE IN THE MOLDAVIAN SSR

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This scientific approach highlights the importance of reconstructing the past through television documentaries - audiovisual products designed to analyze the phenomena and realities that underlie the development of a society. Depending on the theme or subject addressed, television documentaries can cover segments from various fields, such as politics, economics, social issues, culture, history, war, etc. This paper aims to highlight the phenomenon of organized famine in 1946-1947 with the help of audiovisual documentaries. The subject under investigation presents the discursive and visual elements of the documentary film "Killed by Starvation". In addition to theoretical aspects, the results of the analysis also project specific characteristics of television documentary production, starting from the conceptual and editorial thread of the film to the synchronization of the video image with sound and ambient elements in order to have an emotional and cognitive impact.

Keywords: *television, documentary film, audiovisual product, video image, synchronization, visual, tv discourse, reconstruction.*

RECONSTITUIREA TRECUTULUI PRIN INTERMEDIUL DOCUMENTARULUI TV. ABORDĂRI VIZUALE ȘI DISCURSIVE ÎN PREZENTAREA FENOMENULUI FOAMETEI ORGANIZATE DIN RSS MOLDOVENEASCĂ

Demersul științific de față vine să releve importanța reconstituirii trecutului prin intermediului documentarului de televiziune – un produs audiovizual conceput să analizeze fenomene și realități ce stau la baza dezvoltării unei societăți. Documentarul tv, în funcție de tematica sau subiectul abordat, poate contura segmente din diverse domenii, cum ar fi politic, economic, social, cultural, istoric, de război, etc. Lucrarea își propune să scoată în evidență fenomenul foametei organizate din anii 1946 – 1947 cu ajutorul documentarului audiovizual. Subiectul cercetat prezintă elementele discursive și vizuale ale filmului - document „Omorâți prin înfometare". Rezultatele analizei, pe lângă aspectele teoretice, proiectează și caracteristici specifice realizării documentarelor de televiziune, pornind de la firul conceptual și cel editorial al filmului până la sincronizarea imaginii video cu elementele sonore și cele de ambianță pentru a avea impact emoțional și cognitiv.

Cuvinte-cheie: *televiziune, film-document, produs audiovizual, imagine video, sincronizare, vizual, discurs tv, reconstituire.*

Introduction

Reconstructing the past through TV documentaries is one of the most effective and clear ways to bring a traumatic and difficult-to-access history into the public sphere. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the phenomenon of the organized famine of 1946-1947, caused by the Soviet regime, is a topic of research and collective memory that requires visual and discursive tools capable of conveying both the factual dimension and the human drama of the event. In these circumstances, our scientific goal is based on the analysis of the documentary "Killed by Starvation", whose authors are Dr. Mariana S. Țăranu, historian, university lecturer, and Vitalie Guțu, journalist, author of this scientific article—addressing the phenomenon of famine in the Moldovan SSR in 1946-1947 through the prism of historical documents, the official press, and the testimonies of survivors. The filmmakers succeed in presenting viewers with a complete picture of the greatest humanitarian catastrophe that the Prut-Nistru region has ever known. The film premiered at the National Library of the Republic of Moldova on October 3, 2019, during an event dedicated to remembering the victims of the famine, during which an appeal was made to the

Moldovan government to officially recognize the existence of the famine organized by the Soviets in the Moldavian SSR in 1946-1947 [1, p. 62].

Next, in order to highlight the discursive and visual essence of the film-documentary "Killed by Starvation", we will highlight some theoretical aspects regarding the emergence and importance of the documentary, in general, as a type of reality narrative, its basic characteristics, and aspects that filmmakers should take into account when making this type of film, both from a conceptual or editorial point of view and from the perspective of coagulating the video image into a product that can later be broadcast on small and large screens.

Author Irina Frumusachi notes in *Documentarul – portret televizat* (*The Documentary – A Television Portrait*) that "a documentary film is a cinematic production without actors, based on the filming of people, events, landscapes, or objects from reality" [2, p. 65]. This definition offered by Frumusachi emphasizes the non-fictional nature of the genre and highlights its privileged relationship with the extratextual referent, that is, in relation to the concrete world, not previously mediated by fiction.

In the specific context of television documentaries, researcher Alexandru Bohanțov develops and nuances this perspective, insisting on the intentional and selective dimension of documentary discourse. In several of his theoretical contributions, including the article Classification of Television Documentaries: An Open Subject, Bohanțov emphasizes that "a TV documentary almost always has a referent from objective reality in its sights. It is not a faithful, impartial reproduction of the event or subject transposed into audiovisual language, but an intentional act, more or less subjective, depending on the attitude of the filmmakers towards the subject in question" [3]. This observation is essential because it highlights the constructed nature of any documentary representation: the selection of camera angles, editing, voice-over commentary, choice of interviewees, or even the moment of narrative intervention are subjective choices that structure meaning and influence audience perception. Documentary is not a simple "transparent window" onto reality, but a mediated discourse, ideologically and aesthetically oriented, even if it claims to be faithful to the facts.

Since its emergence as a distinct genre in cinema, documentary film has shown a notable resistance to the processes of tabloidization and excessive sensationalism that have affected other audiovisual formats (especially entertainment television and sensationalist journalism). Emerging as a film genre that reflects reality, the documentary film has managed, from its first public screening in 1922 to the present day, to stay away from this phenomenon of tabloidization, with filmmakers being primarily interested in its evolution within well-defined and somewhat elitist canons [4]. Despite these contemporary pressures, the central thread of the documentary's evolution—especially in auteur cinema and cultural audiovisual media—has remained faithful to the principle of distancing itself from rigorous research into reality in relation to artistic expression aimed at the immediate mass audience.

Thus, the TV documentary transcends the limitations of inaccessible archives, contributing to the consolidation of post-Soviet collective memory. Through visual-discursive fusion, the genre transforms famine from a marginalized episode into a pillar of national identity, opening up public and educational debates of major importance. The TV documentary "Killed by Starvation," produced by journalist Vitalie Guțu and doctor of history, university professor Mariana S. Țăranu, reconstructs the organized famine in the Moldovan SSR (1946-1947) through visual and discursive techniques that combine direct testimonies from famine survivors and archives, highlighting the genocidal dimension of Soviet policy. The production process took two years, involving filming in localities in central and southern Moldova, as well as extensive research in the National Archives, the National Library, and family archives in various localities. These approaches transform the documentary into an academic tool of collective memory.

The film uses black-and-white archive footage from the 1940s, including photographs of abandoned villages, dead bodies, and convoys of confiscated grain, to visually reconstruct the phenomenon of famine. The static frames are energized by slow zooms and overlays with contemporary landscapes, creating a temporal contrast that emphasizes the traumatic legacy. The footage of the famine survivors is shot in natural light, with low angles, to convey authentic vulnerability, avoiding spectacular effects [5].

Context

Access to national archives, vintage photographs, military and administrative documentary films were fundamental landmarks in the visual reconstruction of the famine in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. In the documentary Killed by Starvation, the use of these materials placed particular emphasis on:

- legitimizing historical discourse through primary visual sources;
- restoring collective memory through images that capture forgotten social realities;
- creating an aesthetic of absence, where gaps (the lack of direct images of suffering) are compensated for by visual symbols (personal objects, abandoned places, budget records, etc.).

The interviews with survivors of the famine or their descendants became the emotional focal points of the film. The way they are visualized through close-ups, natural light, and slow pacing emphasizes the authenticity of the testimonies and invites the viewer to empathize and recall memories. The footage shot in the villages affected by famine, together with shots of the current landscape, contribute to an aesthetic of geolocalized memory, demonstrating how places still bear the socio-historical traces of famine, through the use of wide shots of fields, old architectural details, and objects left behind in abandoned households. These frames invite the viewer to connect the past with the physical present of the space.

Four editing techniques were used in the video editing process for the documentary film. These include dialectical editing, in which archive footage is juxtaposed with current footage, such as:

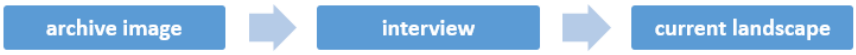


Figure 1: *Created by the author*

This structure emphasizes the continuity of suffering and the temporal rupture between the document and living memory.

The second form of editing used in the TV documentary “Killed by Starvation” is associative editing. Images with no direct chronological connection are placed in a symbolic relationship, for example:



Figure 2: *Created by the author*

This type of editing creates visual metaphors about deprivation and loss, emphasizing the emotional experience of the past.

The third type of editing used in the documentary is parallel editing, a form that alternates between the oral testimonies of survivors and official Soviet documents, generating a confrontational effect that exposes propaganda. The fourth form of editing is rhythmic editing—an effect based on variations in the duration of shots—short and fast for moments of crisis (e.g., descriptions of cannibalism), long for reflections—inspired by classical editing theory [7].

The documentary team spent more than two years researching, talking to historians and witnesses of those times, filming in villages in central and southern Moldova, and interviewing famine survivors in their homes to capture the atmosphere and emphasize authenticity. The research involved access to the National Archives of the Republic of Moldova for primary documents (NKVD reports, lists of those who died as a result of the organised famine), the National Library of the Republic of Moldova for Soviet periodicals and private photo collections. The archive footage was supplemented with re-enactment sequences.

The documentary “Killed by Starvation” deals with an extremely sensitive subject—organized famine—which requires clear ethical decisions in its representation. The film avoids sensationalism, focusing on:

- respecting the dignity of witnesses;
- avoiding the exploitation of suffering for theatrical effect;
- prioritizing authenticity over dramatization.

This ethical approach is evident both in the way the interviews are filmed and in the selection of archival material. From a visual perspective, the film draws on photo and video archives, official documents, maps,

and period press, combining them with interviews with survivors and fragments of oral testimonies. This alternation creates a bridge between institutional memory and living memory, emphasizing individual experience as essential to understanding a collective tragedy. The reconstruction is not limited to a material illustration of the past, but proposes an aesthetic of austerity: static frames, cold chromatic tones, and editing that avoids spectacle in favor of sobriety and authenticity, accompanied by a soundtrack that maintains the serious tone.



Photo: https://www.muzeu.md/expozitia-foametea-organizata-de-urss-in-basarabia-1946-1947/

Discursively, the documentary relies on two complementary registers: the voice of the historian, which provides scientific rigor and contextualization, and the voice of the witnesses, which brings an emotional and human dimension. This dual perspective meets the methodological requirements of contemporary historical research, in which critical analysis of sources is complemented by the study of collective and individual memory. In addition, through its direct title and the rhetoric used, the documentary takes a firm stance: the famine is not presented as a natural disaster, but as a deliberate act of extermination, in line with recent historiographical interpretations as well as documents from the National Archives, documents and testimonies of survivors about the Soviet policy of impoverishing the natives through excessive taxes in goods and money, which culminated in the organized famine in Bessarabia in 1946-1947, ,,the last organized famine in the Soviet space” [8].

In partnership with the National Museum of Ethnography and Natural History in Chișinău and the Association of Historians of the Republic of Moldova ,,Alexandru Moșanu” an open-air exhibition dedicated to the phenomenon of famine was launched, which included the screening of the documentary film ,,Killed by Starvation” and a round table commemorating the victims of the famine organised by the Soviet totalitarian regime in the Moldavian SSR [9].

Contextually, we should mention that this documentary film was screened over a period of five years in several localities in the Republic of Moldova, such as Chișinău, Edineț, Fălești, Călărași, and Ivancea. The screening of the documentary was always accompanied by a round of debates, opinions, and recommendations on how to remember and what actions each of us should take in relation to the famine that struck the Moldovan SSR and how to intervene to prevent such a humanitarian tragedy from happening again.

Conclusions

We can conclude that the case study highlights the role of TV documentaries as a form of “public history,” capable of overcoming academic barriers and reaching a wide audience, engaging them emotionally and cognitively in the process of recovering the past. In the context of Moldovan society, where the memory of the famine has long been marginalized or censored, such productions represent not only a cultural act,

but also a political and ethical one. They contribute to the consolidation of collective memory, to the awareness of historical trauma, and to the affirmation of historical truth against attempts to minimize or deny it.

Thus, the documentary Killed by Starvation demonstrates how television's visual and discursive approaches can become decisive tools for reconstructing the traumatic past. By combining academic rigor with artistic expressiveness and the power of direct testimony, the documentary transforms history into an accessible, comprehensible, and deeply moving experience, contributing to the construction of a framework of collective memory and identity in the Republic of Moldova.

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