

# The Observational Aesthetics of *Honeyland* (2019)

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**Abstract:** *The observational documentary has always been under-represented in the documentary genre. Without narrative techniques and editing, the long observation of a subject makes the film lack a climax in the traditional sense. However, this type of documentary, which aims to observe, has become the closest to life itself and the closest to the “truth”. This type of documentary brings an aesthetic of observation that resonates more with the viewer than other types of documentary. The reason for this is the purpose of studying the emotional interaction between the subject and the viewer in observational documentaries.*

**Keywords:** *Observational documentary; Honeyland (2019); Aesthetic value*

## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, the appearance of observational documentary has been considered a revolution in filmmaking, but over time it has become less and less appreciated (Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2009, p.538)<sup>[5]</sup>. There are many reasons for this phenomenon. One of the reasons is that modern society is full of so much information that it is difficult to observe a person, an object or an event for any length of time. Moreover, there are few narrative techniques in observational documentaries. This means that many filmmakers in observational documentaries need to use voice-over, editing and re-enactment to make the documentary more informative. Nevertheless, as Grimshaw and Ravetz say, “[...] despite extensive critique, the genre has neither disappeared nor been superseded by filmmaking styles regarded as more ‘progressive’” (Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2009, p.538)<sup>[5]</sup>. Observational documentaries still have many aesthetic elements to explore. This essay aims to understand the aesthetic role of observation in the documentary *Honeyland* (*Медена земја*, Tamara Kotevska & Ljubomir Stefanov, 2019) and how people understand the subject matter of the documentary through “observation”<sup>1</sup>. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part uses the documentary *Honeyland* (2019) as an example to show what an “observational documentary” is and how it differs from other documentaries. The second part analyses the “observation aesthetics” of the film *Honeyland* (2019) and explains the relationship between the film theme and observation through literature. The third part is to observe the documentary’s critical role in developing documentaries and audiences<sup>[15]</sup>.

## 2. What is an observational documentary?

What is an observational documentary? Bradbury and Guadagno use the metaphor of a “fly on the wall” to describe observational descriptions (Bradbury & Guadagno, 2020, p.341)<sup>[2]</sup>. Observational documentaries record events as they happen, with the camera, focused on a specific subject. During filming, the subject becomes accustomed to the camera’s presence so that the subject appears to the camera as close as possible to their original state of life. The film *Honeyland* (2019) presents a lonely woman’s real life on the edge. The documentary tells the story of “the last of the Macedonian wild beekeepers” (Meloni, 2019, p.315)<sup>[9]</sup>. The filmmakers originally wanted to spend three months making a short environmental film in the Republic of North Macedonia, but there they met a lone beekeeper. It took the director a year to get the beekeeper Hatidze Muratova used to the presence of the camera (Taubin, 2019, p.62)<sup>[13]</sup>. This suggests that Hatidze Muratova’s actions show little sign of acting and that she determines all actions. This is in line with the original intention of the documentary itself to aspire to authenticity and to show the truth. Furthermore, the essential aspects of the observational documentary are the absence of filmmakers in the observational documentary, the elimination of

<sup>1</sup>**Filmography:** Kotevska, T., & Stefanov, L. (Directors). (2019). *Honeyland* [Film]. Apolo Media; Trice Films.

interviews and the “voice of God”. Young notes that after 1963, filmmakers abandoned the interview as a documentary element that could prove the film’s authenticity (Young, 1975, p. 99)<sup>[14]</sup>. This is because the interviewees’ memory would often also be subject to some errors. The memory text generally has an imaginative quality, closer to that of an unconscious work (Kuhn, 2002)<sup>[8]</sup>. This would make uncertain memory texts less authentic for documentaries. In *Honeyland* (2019), the camera maintains a relatively objective and dispassionate attitude, observing Hatidze Muratova’s time with the bees, her mother and neighbours from start to finish without any intervention. This will give more authority to the content of the observational documentary.

Furthermore, observational documentaries are considered to lack creativity. Ward finds that the major problem is that the essentialist of the documentary limits its development and understanding (Ward, 2006, p.23)<sup>[16]</sup>. The core of the documentary, especially in observational documentaries, is objective documentation. Since there are no interviews or voice-overs in this documentary, the only way to portray the film's essence is through visuals and story. With such neutrality, the filmmaker has less freedom to express himself. But according to Derrick, Although it is widely acknowledged that documentaries and false films are different, They are both the result of the same subjective creative imaginative process (Derrick, 2012, P.18)<sup>[15]</sup>. Since most observational films record true stories, the narrative style of this type of documentary is to convey the topic through details. Discovering the details of life, for instance, in *Honeyland* (2019), Hatidze Muratova rescues a turtle. These details reveal the emotions of the characters and the filmmaker, and they are represented creatively through camera language.

### 3. The special features of observational documentaries

In terms of the development of documentaries, the observational documentary is an important genre within the documentary and differs in many ways from other types of documentaries. Documentaries are broadly divided into six modes: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative (Bradbury & Guadagno, 2020, p.341)<sup>[2]</sup>. The main comparison here is between expository documentaries, mockumentaries and observational documentaries. The first is that expository documentaries emerged in the late 1920s and 1930s. The reason for this is that in the late 1920s, there was a heated debate in the feature film industry about the use of sound synchronization, so filmmakers chose to use narration to preserve the storytelling of the documentary, which became the classic Hollywood documentary format (Nichols, 1995, p.1)<sup>[11]</sup>. The advantage of this mode of narration is that it helps the viewer quickly understand the background information and highlights the main points. More importantly, different viewers have different interpretations of the messages conveyed by the images, and the voice-over allows the viewer to understand the documentary’s subject matter better. In the case of observational documentaries, there is little or no off-camera commentary and voice-over. Although documentary footage is mostly fixed shots and long takes, expository documentaries add narration to the long takes to make the documentary more lively and exciting. However, observational documentaries are more about giving the viewer time to think, to empathise emotionally with the object of observation in long takes. Secondly, there is the mockumentary, which, as its name suggests, is a documentary that mimics the documentary model. Hight’s article mentions that mockumentary provides a kind of inherent reflexivity to the documentary (Hight, 2008, p.204)<sup>[7]</sup> and that the existence of fictional plots in mockumentary is often a satire on the current classic model of the documentary. Because mockumentary has all the elements of a documentary, including voice-overs, interviews, Etc., even filmmakers will appear in the documentary to describe the fictional plot in a natural form. Nevertheless, the observational documentary prioritises showing over telling, providing the viewer with the space to witness life in time (Nash, 2011, p.225)<sup>[10]</sup>. Showing actual events with authentic images gives the viewer the real world, which is why observational documentaries have not disappeared.

### 4. The aesthetic value of *Honeyland* (2019)

*Honeyland* (2019) is a typical representative film for an observational documentary. But the narrative style of this film is different from that of a traditional observational documentary. Its story has an intense dramatic conflict, like a dramatic film with a beginning, a development, a climax and an end. “Godard once said, ‘All great fiction films tend to be documentaries, just as all great documentaries tend to be novels.’” (Canet, 2013, p.39)<sup>[4]</sup>. Documentaries are shot on location and live-action. In the opening stages of the film, the tone is warm. In terms of sequences and sound, at the beginning of the

film, a medium telephoto is used to bring Hatidze Muratova to life in the act of contact with the bees. At this point in the documentary, the sunset is shining on them, and the whole picture is a warm yellow. There is no extra background music in it, except for the ambient sound of the bees in flight. Only Hatidze Muratova speaks a language she understands, communicating with the bees and nature, and the images are harmonious and immersive. When Hatice Muratova returns home, her mother is ill, and they occasionally argue together. However, the light from the small candle on the windowsill, in stark contrast to the dimness of the house, is enough to illuminate the whole world of Hatidze Muratova and her mother. The filmmaker's choice of a "spectator" style of filming is an aesthetic one, where the camera replaces the audience and becomes "a third-person observer" (Brown, 2012, p.15)<sup>[3]</sup>. Without the need for voice-over, interviews and other evidence, simple daily conversations are sufficient to show the mother and daughter's interdependence. Furthermore, they show the quiet life that Hatidze Muratova had been living until the arrival of Hussein Sam's family, with their seven children and hundreds of cows and sheep. The sound of a lorry engine and the cows and sheep appear out of nowhere in this quiet village. This noise also represents the impact of modern agriculture on traditional farming.

At the same time, the filmmakers chose to illustrate macro social topics from the aesthetic perspective of marginal characters. Harrah says, "the collective understanding and modification of reality through reflection in a work of art" (Harrah, 1954, p.4)<sup>[6]</sup>. *Honeyland* (2019) then shows the social plight of marginalized characters and human attitudes toward nature through the documentary format. As the camera looks on, the documentary shows us two different attitudes towards bees from two families, Hatidze Muratova and Hussein Sam. In the beginning, Hatidze Muratova lives in an almost forgotten village, maintaining the oldest form of beekeeping. "One half for me, one half for you" (*Honeyland*, 2019). This phrase is also a perfect illustration of the film's theme. It is an agreement between beekeepers and nature. This agreement represents the harmony between man and nature and shows Hatidze Muratova's reverence for nature. Seeing the profitability of honey, the Hussein Sam family also takes up beekeeping. However, the Hussein Sam family has seven children to support, and they are forced to agree to the demands of an unscrupulous businessman under financial pressure to empty the honey. As a result, Hatidze Muratova's bees are so badly killed and injured that the images are shocking. Hatidze Muratova has no choice but to put the remaining bees by the river. But the greedy merchant and Hussein Sam refuse to let go of the honey. They take a chainsaw and saw off the whole big tree and took out the honey inside. The honey is Hatidze Muratova's only source of income, and she has no choice but to discuss it with her mother. The scene changes from the warm tones of the first half to grey and white, representing the desperation within Hatidze Muratova's heart. However, as the camera pans, Hussein Sam's nearly fifty cattle have fallen ill and died. The film captures these intense emotional moments and edits the two episodes together ironically, as Hussein Sam's family arrives noisily in the village and leaves noisily at the end. In these shots, the distinctive techniques and aesthetics of meaningful observational filmmaking are no longer simple-minded scientism or old-fashioned ethnographic realism. Because they have the effect of having a reflexive praxis for the viewer (Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2009, p.552)<sup>[5]</sup>. The endless plundering and destruction of nature by the Hussein-Sam family symbolize the exploitation of nature by humans for thousands of years. Each audience needs to reflect on how to choose and maintain the balance between humans and nature.

*Honeyland* (2019) exemplifies the critical role of observational documentaries in developing documentaries. *Honeyland* (2019) can be seen as a formal story of success. Today's best documentaries do more than informing and educating, raising awareness or telling incredibly true stories, but rather renew our faith in the documentary itself (Orange, 2020, p.163)<sup>[12]</sup>. A review of *Honeyland* (2019) shows how its emergence has pushed the boundaries of observational documentaries further, giving filmmakers confidence. The purpose of documentaries when they emerged was to show the truth. However, as documentaries continue to evolve, they are reverting to the constraints of the film (Allen & Gomery, 1985)<sup>[11]</sup>. But *Honeyland* (2019) blends the best of documentary and drama, presenting an observational documentary that is both dramatic and realistic, without a script, using authentic footage, exquisite audio-visual language and clever editing. For instance, there is a sequence in this film where Hatidze Muratova goes to the market. Although she is not materially well off, she buys hair dye at the market to colour her old mother's hair and her own, and buys her mother bananas, which she loves, and feeds her watermelon, which she has never eaten before. Hatidze Muratova also likes to wear bright ginger-coloured clothes, which reflects her optimistic character. This scenes give the spectator the image of a kind and dutiful beekeeper. Additionally, the filmmaker's aesthetic approach to documentary truth can be seen in this film, which uses the art of film and television to reveal the reality of life and the urgent need for sustainable human existence while giving the film artistic value. This means that *Honeyland* (2019) is a step forward for observational documentaries and offers a new way

of thinking about how they are made. Namely, documentaries can have the same cinematic narrative structure without additional documentary elements, using only the language of the camera to reflect on the subject matter and social issues.

As mentioned above, the significance of *Honeyland* (2019) lies not only in the documentary, but also in the emotional resonance it creates with its audience. The relationship between the observational documentary and the viewer is a powerful one, as observational documentaries rely on a series of relationships between producers, participants and viewers that can serve as a basis for moral reflection (Nash, 2011, p.228)<sup>[10]</sup>. This also means that a successful documentary can provoke the viewer to reflect on social events. Often, viewers are far from the truth, as they are constantly misled by many other messages. The most outstanding value of observational documentaries is that they give the viewer time to “observe” and time to think about what is true. It also gives the viewer the closest video evidence of the truth, and even though there may be some personal feelings of the filmmaker in the editing sequence, the observational documentary is highly credible to the viewer because it is virtually free of outside interference. The reason that Hatidze Muratova’s fate worries the viewer throughout the film is that many of the details in the documentary reflect qualities that make Hatidze Muratova worthy of the viewer’s sympathy. One of the scenes, for example, shows her picking up a drowned bee and placing it on the ground, in stark contrast to the Hussein Sam family’s desperate attempts to collect honey for profit, with some bees even drowning in their own production. When Hatidze Muratova sees the corpses of her own bees, the audience is made to appreciate Hatidze Muratova’s sadness and thus to think more deeply about the actions of the traders who are desperate to extract value and the Hussein Sam family who are overwhelmed by profit. The audience may reflect on their own behaviour and whether they too share the businessmen’s excessive plundering of resources, which could awaken more people to care about nature and the environment they live in.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Honeyland* (2019) is narrated through a plain, orderly progression of events, with a fluid storyline and natural occurrences that make the film more documentary and tightly edited. The viewer gains a personal perspective on the viewing experience and develops an emotional empathy for the object of observation and the overall events, making observational documentaries more valuable and meaningful. In terms of aesthetic attitude, the filmmaker’s use of camera language also meets the primary condition for the existence of a documentary, namely authenticity. Authenticity is the soul of a documentary, and all the techniques used in observational documentaries are designed to highlight the film’s core content - the truth, such as the real story, the real people, and the natural scenes. With these realistic situations, the conflict in the story becomes even more complex, displaying the splendour of human nature and the two faces of desire. In terms of sequences and sound, the editing of the sequences adheres to the chronological order of events and presents the entire event to the audience without embellishment. Plus before and after shots contrast the peaceful village at the beginning with the devastating land at the end, and the use of light gives the images more symbolic meaning, enriching the documentary’s content and giving the audience more visual impact. Thematically, the filmmakers use Hatidze Muratova’s adherence to the spirit of the contract, that natural resources should be taken in moderation, to reflect on the harsh environment of the region and the existential crisis of human society with a humanistic narrative thrust, provoking a more far-reaching reflection for the audience.

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