

Chapter 16

Techno-Aesthetic Sustainability in the Audiovisual Praxis*

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Abstract

By considering the debut feature-length documentary *Honeyland* (2019) by Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov, this contribution focuses on the sustainability in the audiovisual praxis. The North Macedonian environmental documentary — which chronicles the life of Hatidže Muratova, one of the last European female wild beekeepers — is an ideal example of the so-called ecocinema that can also be discussed from an ecocritical approach and an eco-materialist perspective simultaneously. Moreover, my contribution aims to show how the ecological side of *Honeyland* relates not just to the narrative of an actual issue, but also to the achievement of a sustainable cinematic practice. By examining the making of *Honeyland* in terms of production, storytelling, and techno-aesthetics, I aim to detect its “film ecology”, i.e., the ways Kotevska and Stefanov, together with cinematographers Fejmi Daut and Samir Ljuma, create a cinematic practice that acknowledges the environment, adapts to it, and is inspired by it: visual solutions, logistic limitations, crew equipment, shooting schedules, cameras typologies, and lighting processes all reveal indeed an ecological and sustainable consciousness in filmmaking.

Keywords

Honeyland; audiovisual studies; ecocinema; ecocriticism; ecomaterialism.

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Technology is the mastery of not nature
 but of the relation between nature and man
 Walter Benjamin (1928: 487)¹

Ecocinema, Ecocriticism, and Ecomaterialism

Following its debut in Literary Studies, a wider range of disciplines including Audiovisual and Media Studies seized the significant contribution brought in by the ecocritical approach in the Environmental Humanities.

Twenty years ago, the publication of the ground-breaking essay *Toward an Eco-Cinema* (MacDonald 2004)² helped to pave the way to an ecological conversation on the cinematic genre of environmental films also known as “environmental cinema” or “ecological cinema”. However, as Stephen Rust and Salma Monani put it, «ecocinema studies is not simply limited to films with explicit messages of environmental consciousness» (2013: 2). The ecocritical approach then encouraged to understand «how media has spoken the environmental movement, and how films have shown the nonhuman natural world and humanity’s relationship to it» (Vaughan 2018: 105)³. Next to the ecocritical approach, the so-called “ecomaterialism” then fostered a further insightful perspective on the «cinematic footprint» (Bozak 2012), since «the making of audiovisual works has an environmental impact [...] in terms of resources extracted and depleted, carbon dioxides dispersed in the atmosphere, and creative and non-creative waste produced» (Bellotti, Cesaro, and Formenti 2024: 17). In other words, the scholarly conversation moved «away from the conventional focus on representation to instead assess the environmental impact of media practices» (Vaughan 2018: 104)⁴.

Ultimately, my contribution aspires to corroborate the premise by Elena Past (2019), who states that in order «to understand the complexity of a film’s engagement with the world, we should examine what happens before the film makes it to the screen» (11-12). Also, whereas D’Angelo (2008; 2014: 11-55) wonders what cinema can do for the landscape, my contribution wonders what cinema can do for the environment.

Approaching North Macedonian *Honeyland* as an ideal audiovisual sample for these issues, I believe the appropriate method of analysis should consider

1 In original German: «Und so auch Technik nicht Naturbeherrschung: Beherrschung vom Verhältnis von Natur und Menschheit».

2 See also Scott MacDonald (2013).

3 For further contributions on the ecocritical approach in Film and Media Studies see, among others, Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt (2013, 2023), and Sean Cubitt (2020).

4 For further contributions on the ecomaterialist approach in Film and Media Studies see, among others, Elena Past (2019), Hunter Vaughan (2019), Pietari Kääpä (2018), Nicole Starosielski and Janet Walker (2016), and Nadia Bozak (2012).

the ecocinema genre, the ecocritical «interpretive approach» (Past 2019: 3) and the ecomaterialist examination simultaneously. All the three paradigms together shape a significant theoretical framework: the conceptual trajectory along which ecocinema, ecocriticism, and ecomaterialism follow one another represents indeed a wider and more effective method of investigation.

As a matter of fact, I aim to acknowledge the ways *Honeyland* either belongs to the ecocinema genre or provides ecocritical and ecomaterialist examinations: *Honeyland* is ecocinema as its actual themes and narratives are ecologically and environmentally driven; it addresses a matter of ecocriticism as it deals with the relationship between the human and the nonhuman in contemporary Southeastern Europe; it deals with an ecomaterialist issue as its visual and techno-aesthetic procedures are consciously concerned with the impact of filmmaking in the natural world.

With this in mind, I focus my analysis on a documentary which, at the same time, represents the narrative, creative, technological, social, and environmental sides of sustainability in the audiovisual productions.

Honeyland

Medena žemja (*Honeyland*, 2019) is the debut feature-length documentary by Tamara Kotevska and Ljubomir Stefanov. Following its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2019 — where the movie was awarded the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize for Documentary — *Honeyland* gradually conquers festival circuits around the world, until, in January 2020, it becomes the first picture in film history to be nominated for the Academy Award in both Best Feature Documentary and Best International Film categories. Besides being a proud occasion for the North Macedonian cinema, *Honeyland's* distinction also includes its global commercial success — rarely reserved to such genre.

Honeyland portrays Hatidže Muratova, a beekeeper of Turkish descent who lives with her blind and bedridden mother Nazife in a remote village in central North Macedonia. While busy with looking after her 85-year-old mother, harvesting honey and selling it at Skopje's markets, Hatidže's secluded life is temporarily either enlivened or disturbed by the arrival of her new neighbors — a large family of nomadic herders. The family man Hussein learns beekeeping from Hatidže and begins to sell honey, but his greed for profit threatens the balance of the local ecosystem. Their eventual relocation and the death of her mother force Hatidže to choose a new future for herself. As Kotevska tells Vittoria Scarpa (2019):

We couldn't predict her mother was going to die, but we knew that it would be the logical conclusion to this story in that village, because from that moment on, Hatidže's life would change dramatically. It turned out that it happened during

filming. It's the end of an era. We don't show where Hatidže goes afterwards, but we know that she's finally free to live her life.

While originally committed to realize a documentary short subject about the rural villages along the Bregalnica river in central North Macedonia, the two filmmakers eventually abandon their initial project after they encounter Hatidže Muratova. Supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and financed by the North Macedonian Film Agency, Kotevska and Stefanov decide then to chronicle the life of one of the last European female wild beekeepers.

While it reminds us of the «anthropo-cosmomorphism» the audiovisual medium aspires to (Morin 2005), *Honeyland* represents a parable of either the tensions between environmental sustainability and capitalism in remote rural areas of Southern East Europe or the concerns about the threats to biodiversity and natural resources.

Visual Procedures and Practices

A series of extreme long shots introduces Hatidže while she is immersed and concealed in the rugged mountainous scenery. A vertiginous aerial shot captured by a drone then finds her balancing on an overhanging cliff⁵. Eventually, a sequence of close-ups and extreme close-ups shows the woman scraping wax from the honeycomb placed inside the cavity of a rock. Back in the village, while framed backlit in a medium shot at sunset, Hatidže recites archaic chants as she places the beehive that will store new honey-filled combs⁶.

Other visual solutions range from fixed long takes of establishing shots or indoor dialogues between Hatidže and her mother, to handheld shots of children playing around the bovines, elaborate artisan process of scraping off, crushing, straining out, and bottling the honey, or train rides and marketplaces. As Chang (2019) recalls: «The heretofore sedate, steady camerawork turns suddenly volatile in clamorous scenes of the kids playing, quarrelling and aggressively handling the livestock».

From the very beginning Kotevska and Stefanov direct a work that is primarily visual, joined by North Macedonian cinematographers Fejmi Daut (M.S.C.) and Samir Ljuma (M.S.C.) — who, as Kotevska herself, both graduated in Skopje at Fakultet za Dramski Umetnosti and are also at their feature film debut. As Kotevska confesses, «we wanted to make sure the movie's narrative

5 For further readings on the revolutionary use of drones in contemporary aerial cinematography see Tara Jenkins (2021) and Steen Ledet Christiansen (2017). Oddly enough, we shall note that the English term “drone” also refers to the male bee.

6 Anthony Oliver Scott (2019) reflects on the opening sequences by stating: «The opening minutes of *Honeyland* are as astonishing [...] as anything I've ever seen in a movie». Likewise, Justin Chang (2019) adds: «The opening scenes of *Honeyland* [...] are wondrous to behold».

is completely understandable even if it is followed visually» (MakeDox 2019). Hence, ranging from the extreme long shot to the detail, the four filmmakers employ every solution available in framing and filming techniques⁷.

First and foremost, they rely upon the visual scope due to language reasons: Hatidže speaks archaic Turkish dialect with her elderly mother and Turkish with her new neighbors. As Ljuma tells Emily Buder (2019):

My colleague [Fejmi Daut] understands Turkish but because the language Hatidže and her mother are speaking is very archaic, most of the time he couldn't understand what they were talking about. And I don't speak Turkish, so I didn't understand anything. I was only there to observe and to shoot their interaction, [...] trying to feel what was happening. Her mother, most of the time, didn't even know that we were there shooting because she can hardly hear. I didn't know what she was saying.

It is only afterwards, in the editing process and with the help of a translator, that the North Macedonian filmmakers examine the recorded dialogues and forge a comprehensive dramaturgy.

The filming of *Honeyland* also presents logistical restrictions: the village lacks electricity and running water; the crew is small and minimum — only the two directors, the two cinematographers, and the sound technician are on set, all of them camping in a tent opposite Hatidže's hovel over the three-year shooting period; and the technical equipment is modest and with a running capacity for just a few days. In this regard, Daut recalls the crew was forced to return to Skopje every three-four days to resupply with food and recharge their equipment batteries (Tizard 2019).

The restrictions are equally revealed by the cameras operated by the two cinematographers, who shoot *Honeyland* using the most common and popular — even to non-professional photographers — digital reflex: Nikon 800, 810, and Nikon D5. As Ljuma tells Buder (2019):

We used all kinds of DSLRs [Digital Single-Lens Reflex] mostly because that was what we had available. Mostly, the movie was shot with Nikon 810 and 800. That was how we started. And then we could afford to buy a Nikon D5 with different lenses — usually, some 15 mm with F1.4, 85 mm with F 1.8, 105 mm macro with F 2.8. And some zoom lenses — 2470 mm, and 8400 mm for some of the scenes. Also, we used Canon for certain times when the Nikons were not available.

All these restrictions define the style and lighting solutions in *Honeyland*. With no power generator available, Daut relies solely on natural light and existing supplies in the village — such as candles, oil lamps, and braziers (MakeDox 2019). Ljuma, on his part, relates such lighting approach for indoor shots to

7 On documentary cinematography see, among others, Peter Delpout (2012).

the seventeenth-century Dutch pictorial mastery — so frequently mentioned in cinematography history:

There was no electricity in the village. The conditions were like in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. We discussed whether we could bring some LED lights to support, but we decided not to use any kind of additional lighting support, except what was there. The big masters of cinematography are always citing the paintings of Dutch artists from the eighteenth [sic] century as an inspiration for how to use natural light. I think that with natural light, you can provide the most extraordinary results. You can easily create a strong sense of mood with window light. And you can create a beautiful contrast when your subject is close to the window. For the day scenes, we only had one little window which gave us this chiaroscuro look. And that was all. For the night shots, there were candles that Hatidže was using, and these oil lamps. So that was the only light source that we were using. (Buder 2019)

Moreover, Daut and Ljuma mostly prefer handheld camera shots. As the latter recalls:

In the beginning we were using the Osmo [3-axis image stabilizer for moving cameras] and drones, like when she is approaching a cliff to one of the beehives. [...] Then we decided that we didn't want that kind of look. We wanted most of the movie to be shot handheld. [...] We decided we wanted the *cinéma vérité* approach with handheld [...] shots as much as possible. (Buder 2019)

Documentary and Sustainability

Regarding the “*vérité*” approach mentioned by Ljuma, *Honeyland* follows the documentary tradition pioneered by Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov⁸. Far from either the investigative style by Barbara Koople and Michael Moore or the observational method by Frederick Wiseman, however, the work by the four North Macedonian filmmakers — who do not interfere in the filmed actions and events — enters the “direct cinema” rather than the mentioned “cinema-truth” by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin⁹, and totally distances itself from the ethnographic cinema¹⁰.

8 For references on the history of documentary cinema see, among others, Bill Nichols (1992; 2001), and Guy Gauthier (1995). For further readings on contemporary documentary cinema see, for instance, Marco Bertozzi (2018), and Daniele Dottorini (2018).

9 Both emerged in the 1950's and 1960's, *Cinéma vérité* acknowledges the French film experience while Direct Cinema affects the Canadian and North American film culture. In the former the filmmaker creates and joins in the action he or she is filming, in the latter the filmmaker documents events which occur independently from his or her own control (Simonigh 2020: 212; Alonge 2008: 312-313).

10 According to Jean Rouch (1988, 2003), the ethnologist must operate the camera as well as the sound technician must speak the language of the people he is recording. That is why, due

Some aspects may seem to loosen the distinctions though¹¹, as Kotevska herself states:

From the very beginning, we wanted the story to feel like fiction, even if it wasn't. In our minds, the line between documentary and fiction should disappear [...]. I was more focused on the people, Ljubomir [Stefanov] on the environmental issues. We were always interested in maintaining a perfect balance between the human story and the environmental side. We didn't want to make a stereotypical documentary with a narrating voice, with interviews, etc. (Scarpa 2019)

The limitations as well as the consequent visual procedures and solutions contribute to document the (un)balanced relationship between the human, the nonhuman, and the environment in such an authentic way that also becomes a sustainable way.

In *Honeyland* authenticity and sustainability, for instance, are conveyed through the spoken languages as well as the natural light. Authenticity results in filmmaking procedures that adheres to criteria of sustainability: neither major equipment nor power generators are placed in Hatidže's village; neither rail tracks for dolly shots are built on-site nor spotlights and lights projector are installed.

We are fully aware of the environmental impact — in terms of waste, cumulation, break down, and stow away — caused by those very same digital and electronic technologies that are often described as clean and eco-friendly but they actually are not, as Jennifer Gabrys (2011) and Sean Cubitt (2017) well documented. However, the use of digital cameras and devices by the four filmmakers reflects an ethical and aesthetic employment, which tries to mitigate their impact.

Honeyland is one of those contemporary motion pictures that engage in a profound interchange with the actual natural world and can provide a cinematic view of the mutual human and nonhuman relationship. *Honeyland* integrates indeed the ecocritical approach with the ecomaterialist concern through visual and cultural insights. In the current «postdocumentary era» which chronicles narratives in a mediocre audiovisual way (Perniola 2014), *Honeyland* pursues an authentic practice of sustainable filmmaking which acknowledges, adjusts to, is inspired by, and coexists with, the environment. The techno-aesthetics features are adapted to the environment the four filmmakers are documenting, not vice versa. It is the environment that inspires and determines technical limitations and creative solutions which then leads to an idea of moviemaking that connects with, experiences, feels, and documents, the environment.

Then again, as anticipated in the opening of this chapter, technologies such as audiovisual apparatuses are sustainable whereas they express «the mastery of

to either the language barrier or the contribution by the two cinematographers previously discussed, *Honeyland* cannot be classified as ethnographic cinema.

11 As Chang (2019) points out: «As the movie is in the venerable tradition of direct cinema, [...] it also takes on the stirring quality of an ancient folk tale or myth».

not nature but of the relation[ship] between nature and man[kind]» (Benjamin 1996: 487). In *Honeyland* both relationships, between Hatidže and the bees as much as the filmmakers and the natural setting, are *de facto* sustainability-driven. The North Macedonian documentary issues an ecological warning while it also represents a relevant yet unconventional type of ecocinema, since it firstly stands out as a conscious praxis of filmmaking and audiovisual production.

Conclusion

Through the techno-aesthetic consideration of *Honeyland*, my contribution has transcended the preliminary notion of ecocinema, which is essentially thematic and narrative, and pondered over theoretical paradigms such as the “eco-critical” perspective, the “cinematic footprint”, and the “materialist” approach in the audiovisual studies.

The environmental documentarism is ecocinema’s mainly audiovisual model, yet *Honeyland* is significantly more than that. It does not just represent ecological issues. It epitomizes its own ecocritical approach, showing the relationship between the human (Hatidže) and the nonhuman (the bees)

Hatidže [...] handles the honeycomb with bare hands and not a moment’s hesitation, and the bees seem thoroughly unagitated by her presence. Her humane, ecologically sound methods are rooted in traditions that seem as old and durable as the majestically photographed Macedonian landscape that surrounds her. [...] That philosophy extends to the way Hatidže treats her bees, whose survival, she knows, is closely tied to her own. “Take half, leave half” is an instruction she repeatedly mutters as she carefully removes what she needs (and nothing more), until the words begin to sound like an incantation. *Honeyland* [...] is first and foremost a graceful evocation of interspecies coexistence, of lives lived in delicate balance with the natural world. (Chang 2019)

The North-Macedonian documentary follows accordingly ecocritical criteria such as considering and understanding the human and nonhuman relationships behind the camera and in front of the camera.

Also, environmental issues and ecocritical interpretation in *Honeyland* are further connected whereas we consider its executive aspects, i.e., its impact on the environment. By assuming that filmmaking does interfere with the environment and eventually does pollute it, the four North Macedonian filmmakers conceptualize not only *Honeyland*’s environmental film genre and its ecocritical narrative, but also its cinematic footprint — or the ecomaterialistic side of its own audiovisual production.

Honeyland distances itself from the environmental-themed narratives of the “environmental cinema” or “ecological cinema”, and becomes a practical model and aesthetic solution to the desirable «film ecology» (Hayward 2020),

i.e., the regenerative understanding of filmmaking as ecological experience and procedure.

Approaching sustainability in audiovisual studies should consider both narratives and their production procedures such as crew equipment, lighting processes, shooting schedules, logistical plannings, and language implications.

After all, the ecological artistry involved in the making of *Honeyland* evokes the similarity between film practice and beekeeping as expressed by Semih Kaplanoğlu: «Film is handicraft. Just like making honey is handicraft» (Verstraten 2012: 56)¹².

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12 This is how Turkish filmmaker Kaplanoğlu reflects on his movie *Bal* [Honey] — which was awarded the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 2010: a film that follows little Yusuf searching for his beekeeper father through the woods of the Black Sea eastern coast.

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