

A Case Study:

“PERSONAL LIFE OF THE HOLE” AS GESAMTKUNSTWERK

How to benefit from montage in an overall process of filmmaking?

***Personal Life of the Hole* is a poetic-philosophical documentary shot on 16mm film material, dealing with contemporary issues of ecology, economics, and culture. It is the most recent film work by Czech director Ondřej Vavrečka. Two years back Vavrečka together with Petra Virtanen, a Finnish producer, was awarded a development grant from AVEK - Promotion Centre for Audiovisual Culture Finland to examine montage in an overall film process and develop audiovisual elements of the film in the making. In this article the twosome goes through some observations on the process.**

A narrow interpretation of the term montage in filmmaking often refers to a technique of editing. Nevertheless, montage can be also understood in a broader sense - as an encounter of any details, elements or thoughts that produces (new) meanings. The attempts to define the term vary but the basis of montage remains the same. It is a capability to connect different fragments into a unified whole. Finnish researcher Jarmo Valkola argues that the process is not only intellectual but it also carries emotions, sensations, and experiences of creativity which are cognitive in character.¹ Besides that, we suggest the core of film montage can approach the means of integrated arts practice that was common in the past. Montage can contain a grip on physicality. As early as in the mid-19th century visual artists combined photographs and other traditional forms of fine arts, like paintings, and montage was manifested as integrated arts works. The first appearances of montage in fine arts studies consequently go back to the era more than half a decade before the contribution of Soviet film theorists.²

It is stated that one of the latter masters of film montage Artavazd Peleshian “elevated montage into a complete film.” In other words, Peleshian montage is not *in* a film but it is the film.³ The way *Personal Life of the Hole* was created, and Vavrečka’s filmmaking in general, take the thought one step further. In his case *filmmaking* is montage. A difference between these perspectives is demonstrated in bearing elements⁴ of the film: Peleshian’s elements stay in the film while the range of Vavrečka’s elements spreads outside the film itself. In short, his filmmaking aims at composing *Gesamtkunstwerk*, synthesis of the arts.

In development of *Personal Life of the Hole* we followed up the encounters taking place in all levels of the film production process and experimented with montage in this sense in order to create specific audiovisual way of expression. By allowing space for physicality next to intellectual drifts the key elements

¹ Valkola, Jarmo 1999, p.11. Kuvien havainnointi ja montaasin estetiikka. Yliopistopaino, Jyväskylä.

² Huttunen, Tomi 2005. Montaasikulttuuri. <http://www.helsinki.fi/venaja/e-materiaali/mosaikki/fi3/th3.pdf>

³ MacDonald, Scott 2012. Going the Distance. An interview with the Armenian master Artavazd Peleshian. <http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/going-the-distance-20120106> (8.5.2020)

⁴ According to Peleshian his films rely on bearing elements which carry important semantic charge and are presented in the image and the sound. Montage-at-a-Distance, or: A Theory of Distance. English translation published in *Lola Journal*, Issue 6, 2015. <http://www.lolajournal.com/6/distance.html>. (17.1.2020)

include not only shots but also other materials, some of them physical and some of them abstract in character. For example, one of those elements for the film is household metal waste – physical matter which Vavrečka collected from the recycling bins in Prague. This material appears both in the image and the sound in different contexts in the final film. At the same time, it is material he uses for his art objects which are presented in exhibitions, and also material which encounters the film from different semantic points of view such as recycling/rotation, trash poetry, and craftsmanship.

We discuss more closely key elements that are essential for this particular film in the following chapters. Before that, back to the beginning.

HOLE IN A LAKE AS THE CONCEPT OF THE FILM

As film director Vavrečka's preliminary schemes often derive from one strong image with which he starts to play. By adding both scientific and poetic contents to the rough the image turns into a figure which serves as the concept image for the film in the making (see fig. 1). That sort of source for *Personal Life of the Hole* is an image of a hole, a spillway, in a water reservoir in Prague. The spillway is a real strange-looking place where water falls down into the deeps of the hole rounded by a railing in the lake. This hole as the base we started to study a selection of social, economic, and cultural holes in a figurative sense typical of our times.

There are some specific artistic means used in this production which shape the audiovisual expression of the film. Significant methods include, for example, *shooting with a classical film camera on film stock*, mostly *outside*, and *first time round*. Most of the film takes place in different cities, in different types of landscape – forests, fields, paths, and streets. It isn't intentionally shot inside interiors which are often identical to each other, spaces that have no character. The film celebrates nature and emphasizes natural forms, even uneven, deformed forms to mathematically perfect ones. Even so, there's no random shot in the film but everything is based on particular purposes.

Further, important artistic means is *handwork* in all levels of filmmaking. What comes to montage at the very beginning, besides the concept image also the first script fragments of the film were created with collage technique. If the concept image was only pencil-drawn figure more intellectual and informative in character, the fragments, instead of taking traditional written form, were made of materials like pieces of handwritten or printed texts, drawings, and different used papers clued together as small-scale integrated arts works. These colorful collages outlined style of expression regarding visuals and contents. They also created alliances between both material and immaterial, factual dimensions as well as scientific and playful elements of the film. Gradually the style moved on from collages on paper to handwork with other materials, like household metal waste and rags, which evolved into the key elements of the film.

LIDS, HATS, THIN RED LINE – NOTES ON MATERIAL, COLOR AND SOUND

In this chapter we take a closer look at the key elements in *Personal Life of the Hole*, and notes on material, color, and sound in general.

ON MATERIAL

1) metallic lids and collars

As already mentioned, pieces of household metal waste, specifically metallic lids and collars play an important role in building the visual and sonic style of the film. We discuss the visual side first, then sound separately in a later paragraph.

The film starts with a scene looking like some sort of play with metallic lids from the grave candles, soon to be followed with a mysterious collection of bottle lids falling on a floor. Metallic lids and collars are shown to us as they exist as pure material, with no need to hide their origin but quite the contrary. Later we see as in the middle of their recycling circle someone's hands collect bottles from a bin, separate metal parts from glass and turn metal from its original use into art objects. Every material has its history. We would lose a part of these artefacts' features here if we just took a notice of them flashing shortly, for example, in fictional ritual scenes of the film. Every material has its future, too, and that is depended on its inner dynamics and the circumstances it comes to.

Metallic lids and collars can be considered as one of the starting elements for the Gesamtkunstwerk as well. In the spirit of art brut Vavrečka started to collect metallic items from garbage bins as material for his art. His interest in religious images was materialized in iconographic motifs and props like decorative headdresses or masks for the ritual scene shootings. The range of motifs in his works is wide and besides more serious images works often have some humorous elements. In the passage which shows the materials' origin the craftsman builds up a picture of a fly. Montage goes here "behind the scenes" in its very own way. Another funny shot is when small shining holes start to appear out of darkness. Eventually they turn out to be eyes of a crowd. Metallic lids and collars are as material very imaginative suiting well both humorous and holy imagery. Visually the metal elements also play in their peculiar color together with sparks shot in the nature. These parts of the film belong to the ones visually experimental in character.

2) costumes made from rags

We can also find another essential element in form of material in the fictional passages: the series of hand-made costumes from rags. Behind the exquisite craftsmanship it's Vavrečka again. The costumes, shirts mostly, are full of interesting details, colorful mosaic of different clothes and fur. Execution approaches to montage in handicraft and the use in film underlines the particular scenes, making them dreamlike visions. For example, an orchestra of three goddesses lies in the costumes on a grass in an intoxicated atmosphere. Besides the costumes also the instruments of the goddess-musicians are self-invented and self-made. One principle in film production was to use to recycled material but not only because it was thematically appropriate. It points out creativity and prods us into it. All in all, the spirit of art brut runs through the whole film.

3) light blue plastic bags (with or without garbage)

Light blue plastic bags complement the triplet of leading materials in the film. They all are bounded by trash and surplus of materials in the world. Plastic rubbish bags ended up to the materials of the film accidentally in the first place. The first blue bag was caught into the film as a flying bag in the middle of a shooting. As a progenitor of all the garbage in general it grew into an assortment of elements soon.

The invisible character with a black hat follows from the distance a female character hanging plastic bags on a line. The same female character flies an enormous flag made of the similar bags. We see the bags also full with trash in a hole. Two empty bags have wound up to men's heads as a result of aleatory materialism. The choreography of the dance with bags seems unforeseen. The movement reminds us of the inner dynamics of material. The bags dance in pairs with people because they are incapable to do so alone. However, the context pushes their presence out of a category of trash at that moment. Even trash traditionally seen is not dead material. There's always something alive in it.

These plastic bags always appear in blue. Besides the tragic side of a problem that humankind faces in a continuous increase of garbage now, this color itself contains also hope and optimism in the film, thanks to other connotations. Some of these contexts will be presented next in the paragraphs on color.

ON COLOR

1) *Black*

Another important means of expression which contributes to the orchestration of the whole of the „Gesamtkunstwerk“ of the film is color. The special place among colors takes the „non-color“, the black color. As such, it symbolizes the emptiness, the void, and so it expresses the general topic of the film that is the hole. The black in the film stems from the black hat, black shoes and a black square that are shown at the very beginning of the film. These props are derived from the book of H. G. Welles „The Invisible“. The text from this book is used along with these black props.

The black color, black screen is used in two ways in the film. One is more traditional and it serves as an interjunction between the chapters of the film. Black screen divides for example chapters defining metaphoric holes that film speaks about (ontological hole, work hole, cultural hole, time hole, to name some). Another way of using black screen, the visual void is in those places where the missing visuality both underlines the meaning of accompanying sound (voice, music, or foleys) and creates an actual feeling of something that is missing. By this, sounds get more important than image. This usage of black screen physically refers to the topic of the film, to the hole. The usage of black screen demands a viewer to complete the visual part of the film. It makes viewers to be active participants, co-authors of the film. A significant example of this method is a fragment in the second half of the film where the importance of remembering individual key experiences is discussed. Theologist Annick de Souzaenelle mentions repressed children's memories of the experience of god, then a hand of a child in the close-up turns off the light, intertitle REMEMBER that glows in the darkness invites us to remember our repressed experience. Then REMEMBER turns itself off as well, we see only darkness, black void, accompanied by silent and tender music that guides ourselves (viewers) to our own memories.

2) *light blue, red, and fluorescent yellow as symbolic colors*

As the film is often shot in the nature, during all the seasons, the visuality of film is dipped into the green of chlorophyll, or, in the case of winter shooting, into the reductive, graphic white of snow. From this color background stands out (apart from black) three important symbolic colors in the film: *light blue, red, and fluorescent yellow*. The blue color is derived from the color of plastic bags usually used for collection of garbage in the countries where the film was shot (France, Romania, Russia, Czech Republic). The instrumentation of this color is complex and polyvalent. On one side it refers to garbage, to something negative, something we are getting rid of, something we repress. But the same color is used for the balloon, that is intercut in the whole second half of the film and which symbolizes the inner, spiritual path, we are invited to set on. In this the sense the blue color indicates something positive. Then, the same color is used for the glove of an animation of „the invisible hand of the market“, which is the economical concept, that is partially put in question in the film. Further, blue color is also the color of the sky that refers to the ozone hole. This kind of usage of blue color wants to show the ambiguity of key questions, that can't be answered by some definite answers. The blue color indicates the neural points of the film.

Other colors, red and yellow play supplementary roles in the film. Red is the color of the costume of main documentary protagonist, the 96-year-old theologian de Souzaenelle. It appears as a „thin red line“ in the whole structure of the film. The red costume (sweatshirt or jumper) is worn also by two young female figures that meet her. The first figure leads a personal interview with the theologian. She meets her physically and parallel apparition of two red women, young and old, on the screen looks like a mirroring of „old and new but substantially the same“. The second female figure wearing red meets the theologian through filmic means. They meet up through the interposition of two images. The younger woman resembling older theologian resides in the second visual layer, she is in the in-camera shot double

exposition. As the speech of de Souzaelle culminates in memories on her youth, the two young women in red actualize, each of them by its own specific way, the past becoming and being present. They show the intertwining of memory and reality.

A minor role in color instrumentation in the film is played by fluorescent yellow color. It is the color of yellow vest movement in contemporary France which is a movement of people who are unsatisfied with the economic conditions and repeatedly go to the streets and protest against it using both peaceful and destructive means. The protests shot in Paris are full of yellow fluorescent color. One protester leaves the Paris demonstration and appears by the means of filmic editing at the background of another shot taken with Czech philosopher Petr Kužel in proximity to a property of international giant company Amazon. In his speech Kužel provides us a „theoretical fundament“ on yellow vest movement and the movement of economically frustrated masses in general.

ON SOUND

Experimenting with sound and building up a film sound track was a long process which started at the very beginning of the filmmaking and ended up with final audio mixing. The reason for this is the fact that most of the shooting was made with a silent 16 mm camera. Synchronized sound recording was used only in case of interviews. Silent shooting has two big advantages: 1. one can direct with the voice while camera is running, 2. when you build the sound track for silent shots, you have to think about the sound and treat it like a superimposition, layers of different sounds. Building the soundtrack is a highly synthetic process. The aim is not to pretend synchronized shooting, the result is not a sound shot that looks like accompanied with real sound but the process leads to a sound stylization. You choose only sounds and its layers that are important, the rest is omitted. This work is similar to shooting the image in feature film: you put in the frame only things that matter.

Sound effects play important role in the film. There is something we can call the materiality of sound. It is created by the sound of manipulation with metal waste that is used as a material for ritual „saint images“ and as such refers to the ecological problem of waste and what to do with it. It is used to accompany the sea that embraces the whole film, it is used when showing the collection of the rubbish and recycling it, it is used when manipulating with the rubbish, it is used to underline the material substance of ritual shown in film.

Another example is a rhythmic beat of tapping. It is recorded in three forms: 1. tapping of traffic lights for pedestrians in Czech Republic connected with traffic light depicted Karl Marx in Trier, Germany, where Marx was born 2. tapping of a blinking car, 3. tapping of two wooden sticks during the ritual. We are in the car, the driver turns on the blinker, it starts to tap, then the sound continues with the next image that is a heap of cones in an odd apartment of an old man. The tapping sound in the interior of the apartment sounds like a tick-tack of a clock. As different forms of tapping have almost the same beat, it is used in two sound layers and it connects the juxtaposed scene of ritual and sequence with traffic lights. The tapping becomes a semantic gesture with a reference to some kind of „strange waiting“. This usage of sound overgrows from illustrative and connective function into symbolic use.

LIKE WORLD, LIKE FILM – ABOUT AMBITION AND APOTHEOSIS

In conclusion, we focus on general ambitions of the film.

Personal Life of the Hole presents an approach that works as a kind of subconscious in the film. Sometimes it is manifested clearly, sometimes only in a latent way. The approach is represented by the utmost acceptance of the materiality which radically opposes the contemporary course in the world now. We tend to move our lives into virtual sphere: we digitalize artifacts, we are on the way to dematerialize our existence. The film points out the material world which we are suppressing in the psychoanalytic sense by virtualization, digitalization and dematerialization.

As the film is shot on film stock using classical film camera, the shooting dismisses the video technique completely. The materiality of film accents the materiality of the world. This process is distinctly indicated in the film by the philosophical concept of aleatory materialism by Louis Althusser. In the conceptual layer of the film the idea of materiality is directly mentioned and discussed in two parts, „Material hole“ and „Trash hole“. The former one shows how the material, atom, is in fact empty, full of empty space. The latter one shows that our world is full of material that we just want to get rid of. We see here another psychoanalytic suppression.

By several means the film points unobtrusively out the material basis of the world without neglecting spiritual dimension of being. Nevertheless, materiality is not shown as a contrast to spiritual dimension, intellectual realm or digital world. The opposition of material and non-material is not built up. The accent on material in the film shows the roots of our existence that we tend to forget.

The first sentence that we hear in the film is: „I asked myself: what is the world?“ Here, we don't deal with the monothematic film. As we have observed, the film connects heterogenous elements as scientific and political facts, historical blasphemies, personal remarks, absurd jokes, and so on. To compare it with musical structure, the film *Personal Life of the Hole* is not a monophonic song that you can whistle after you have heard it. The film is a complex polyphonic structure, similar to the fugue. The motifs intertwine, they are layered upon each other and they overlap. We have tried to make the film as complex as the world. Of course, this ambition of the film is never to be fulfilled. The totality of the world could never be comprehended. But we can't overlook the respectable attempt to grasp the world. This is exactly what is missing in people's conception of world.

We try to understand the world. The science was initially to help people in understanding it but gets nowadays only more and more special. The process of ever finer analysis should be accompanied by reversed motion of the synthesis, back to the whole. This is what science can no longer do because the scientific knowledge is so vast. No one can put it together and say „what it all is about“. That is exactly the goal of the film *Personal Life of the Hole*. Albeit the authors know that the attempt of the synthesis is silly. Despite the fact, the project of synthesis is not abandoned. So a new model of knowledge or „science“ is introduced. It isn't analytical and precise but synthetic and approximative. And yet one more crucial attribute we can add here: joyful. The playfulness is the fundamental feature of the film.

Finally, to answer the question stated about the benefits of montage in filmmaking. The synthesis deeply uses the discussed method of montage and formally points to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. We have unified different fragments, different layers, different dimensions into the unified whole, synthesis of the arts by using glue, a stapler, a sewing machine, needles, editing tools, thoughts, and aleatory materialism. As a matter of fact, it describes how filmmaking is montage itself here and how we can benefit it in the overall process in order to create the specific style of expression. The montage is the holistic approach to the

world. The overall ambitions of the film, or as Vavrečka puts it, “joyful science” can be encompassed and captured by means of montage.