Universiteit Antwerpen
Faculteit Letteren
en Wijsbegeerte

Creativity in documentary AD –
The case of the Flemish documentary *'Beest'*

ARSAD – 21/04/2023

Gert Vercauteren

University of Antwerp – TricS Research Group

Contents

I. **Background**

II. **(Why) Creativity in documentary AD**

III. **The Case Study**

    I. Approach

    II. Results

IV. **Conclusions**

Background – The documentary *Beest*

- Story of the Flemish strong man Walter Arfeuille
- Funded by VAF (Flemish Audiovisual Fund)
  => AD & SDH required
- Too late for AFM approach, but director agreed with some experimentation

Universiteit Antwerpen
Faculteit Letteren
en Wijsbegeerte

Why creativity in AD?

Not much research into AD of documentary in general:

- Cámara & Espasa (2011): AD of scientific multimedia
- Villela & Losnak (2016): AD for a photo documentary on Brazilian dictatorship
- Romero Fresco (2013, 2017, 2019): Accessible filmmaking
- Walczak & Fryer (2018): Vocal delivery of AD

Why Creativity in AD?

Various good reasons for more research into documentary AD

- Market of TV documentary: $4,5 billion in 2004 (Aufderheide, 2007)
- Multiple thematic channels devoted to documentary (National Geographic, Discovery Channel,…);
- Considerable offer on streaming services such as Netflix
- + 100 documentaries on the Dutch AD app Earcatch
- Public broadcasters look into (or already provide) AD for documentary (e.g. BBC; VRT; RTV Slovenia…)

Universiteit Antwerpen
Faculteit Letteren
en Wijsbegeerte

Current view on documentary AD

- *"AD is* a continuum from objective description (**that may be achieved in the audio description of a documentary**) to a narration to enable the audience to situate themselves in the fictional world." (Kruger, 2010, p. 233)

- "Explicitly descriptive AD (as in a **documentary**) would be **closer to the clinically objective, descriptive extreme**." (Kruger, 2010, p. 233)

- Walczak & Fryer (2018): "…human-voice AD may be more important for the audience when accessing emotive content, such as drama, compared with **purely informative genres, such as documentary**."

But not only...

"It seems ironic that for a scientific genre that may be thought to require the most objective language, the AD for this documentary [*March of the Penguins*] employs more vivid, and potentially more subjective, language than for most dramas. [...] ."

(Fryer, 2016, p. 111)

Documentaries as (non-fictional) narratives

According to Aufderheide (2007) or Nichols (2017), documentaries:

- Have **clear narrative structures**: they are stories with beginnings, middles and ends;

- Take their viewers on **emotional journeys**;

- Offer sensuous audiovisual experiences that **move the viewers**, **activate emotions** and **feelings**, tap into values and beliefs;

- Use the **same narrative principles and techniques as** do **fiction** films: compelling music, re-enactments, staged encounters

Universiteit Antwerpen
Faculteit Letteren
en Wijsbegeerte

The Case Study - Approach

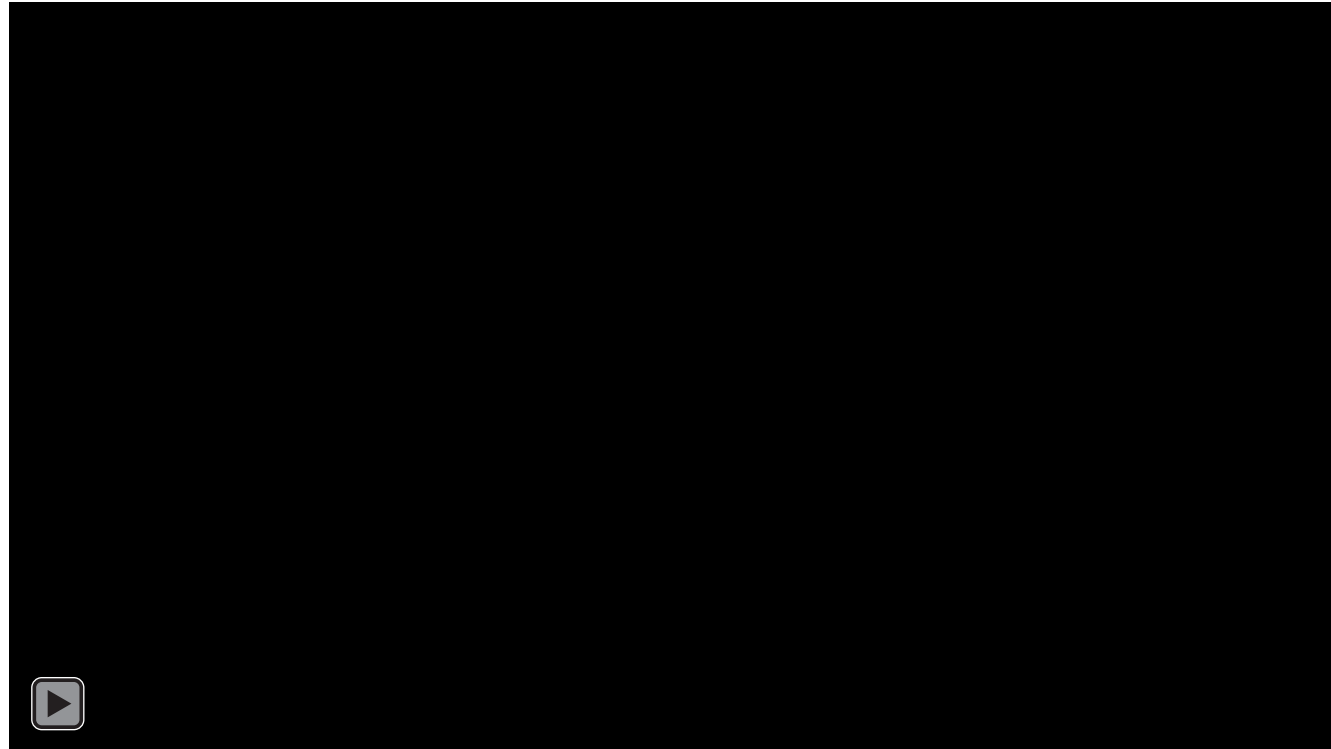- 4 scenes (+/- 1'30" each) => 2 with dialogue / 2 without dialogue

3 different ADs:
1) More descriptive/neutral AD in standard Dutch
2) More narrative/interpreted AD in Western Flemish dialect
3) 1st person AD from the protagonist's POV

Questionnaire (5-point Likert-scale) looking at:
1) Clarity of the language
2) Ease of creating a mental image
3) Immersion

The Case Study – An Example

The Case Study - Results

10 participants:

- 6 F / 4 M
- Age ranging from 25/34 to > 65
- All regular AD users
- 1 speaker of Western Flemish dialect / 1 Dutch

Results – Descriptive AD in Standard Dutch

Clarity of Language	Creation of Mental Image	Immersion

▪ 90% => Very easy
▪ 10% => rather easy
 	
✓ Very easy to follow
✗ language is "artificial" / "not spontaneaous"
	▪ 60% => very easy
	▪ 30% => rather easy
	
	AD is "not spontXaneous"
		▪ 50% => very easy
		▪ 20% => rather easy
		
		✗ Difficulties caused by
		  a) Short scenes
		  b) "Unnatural" language

Universiteit Antwerpen
Faculteit Letteren
en Wijsbegeerte

Results – Narrative AD in Western Flemish dialect

Clarity of Language	Creation of Mental Image	Immersion
• 30% => Very easy • 30% => rather easy ✓ Slightly "polished" dialect so still understandable ✓ Better suited to the production ✗ Language is ok, but very specific words in dialect impossible to understand	• 50% => very easy • 10% => rather easy ✗ Difficult dialect words make it harder to create a mental image	• 30% => very easy • 30% => rather easy ✓ More spontaneous so easier to get 'into' the story ✓ This version "takes you along", is more "engaging"

Results – 1st person AD in Western Flemish dialect

Clarity of Language	Creation of Mental Image	Immersion
▪ 40% => Very easy	▪ 40% => very easy	▪ 40% => very easy
▪ 40% => rather easy	▪ 10% => rather easy	▪ 10% => rather easy
✓ Resembles a radio drama" x Difficult to distinguish between protagonist & AD	x 50% said it was "rather difficult" to create a mental image	Not appreciated very much x confusing x a lot of visual information missing

Universiteit Antwerpen
Faculteit Letteren
en Wijsbegeerte

Participants' Conclusions

- AD in Standard Dutch most appreciated version (60% vs. 30% (dialect) & 10% ('I'))
  - ✓ Very easy to understand
  - ✗ Artificial and less spontaneous

- AD in Western Flemish dialect best suited for the production
  - ✓ More spontaneous & good fit with the dialogues
  - ✓ Good for immersion
  - ✗ Specific (difficult) words in the dialect should be avoided

- AD in 1st person not really appreciated
  - ✓ Nice way to present the protagonist's point of view/emotions/thoughts
  - ✗ Confusing
  - ✗ A lot of visual information gets lost

General Conclusions

- Creative approaches in the AD of *Beest* were appreciated
  - Improved spontaneity/naturalness of the AD
  - Beneficial for immersion
  - Good way of getting 'inside' the protagonist

- Future research:
  - Other (more neutral) ways to improve spontaneity?
  - Effect of version in 'polished' dialect without too specific words?
  - Other (more neutral) ways to render protagonist's physical & psychological POV?
  - Other research methods (tests measuring understanding / psychophysiological measures)