

# The Poetic Documentary as an Affective Configuration of Thinking-in-Proximity

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*Abstract.* This article considers the poetic documentary as a dispositif that does not think in language, but in touch-in rhythms, in auditory tensions, in visual suspensions where the image does not speak but endures. Taking Vid Hajišek's *A Tree Grows in My Dreams Every Night* (*V mojih sanjah raste vsako noč drevo*, 2024) as its central case study, the article explores how a film – when it relinquishes narration and representation – can create the conditions in which thought no longer unfolds as conceptual reflection, but as an embodied orientation in a world that emerges within the frame. Perception is not treated as mediation between subject and object, but as a mode of being in which the body lingers in affect. The key concept is hesitation – as a tension that does not interrupt, but reconfigures the relation between image and body. The film does not ask what truth is, but how it might act – not as explanation, but as presence. Merging a phenomenological framework (Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack, Marks, Massumi, Sontag) with formal analysis (of framing, rhythm, sound, and texture), the article proposes that the poetic documentary does not produce knowledge, but generates the conditions in which thinking can happen – as affect, as duration, as proximity.

*Key Words:* poetic documentary, dispositif, hesitation, affect, *A Tree Grows in My Dreams Every Night*

## Poetični dokumentarec kot afektivna struktura mišljenja bližine

*Povzetek.* Prispevek razmišlja o poetičnem dokumentarcu kot dispositivu, ki mišljenja ne utemeljuje v jeziku, temveč v dotiku – v ritmih, zvočnih napetostih, vizualnih zadržkih, kjer podoba ne govori, ampak traja. Na primeru filma *V mojih sanjah raste vsako noč drevo* (2024) Vida Hajiške analizira, kako lahko film – kadar se odpove naraciji in reprezentaciji – vzpostavi pogoje, v katerih mišljenje ni več konceptualna refleksija, temveč telesna orientacija v svetu, ki se šele vzpostavlja.

Zaznava tu ni posrednica med subjektom in objektom, temveč način, kako telo vztraja v afektu. Osrednji koncept je zadržek – napetost, ki ne prekine, temveč vzpostavi novo konfiguracijo razmerja med telesom in podobo. Film se v tem okviru ne sprašuje, kaj je resnica, temveč, kako lahko resnica učinkuje – ne kot razlagata, temveč kot prisotnost. Prispevek združuje fenomenološki miselni okvir (Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack, Marks, Massumi, Sontag) z analizo formalnih elementov filma (kadra, ritma, zvoka, tekture), pri čemer poudari, da poetični film ne proizvaja vednosti, temveč pogoje, v katerih se mišljenje lahko zgodi – kot afekt, kot trajanje, kot bližina.

*Ključne besede:* poetični dokumentarec, dispozitiv, zadržek, afekt,  
*V mojih sanjah raste vsako noč drevo*

The film *A Tree Grows in My Dreams Every Night* by director Vid Hajnšek is not a narrative structure that unfolds through the discursive arrangement of meanings, but instead constitutes itself as a sensory configuration of time, space, and the body – one that exceeds the logic of representation. Its form is not organised as the transmission of information, but as a formation of the sensible: it does not seek to say something, but to hold something. The film does not direct attention toward meaning, but toward microtemporal sequences, transitions, and hesitations that do not speak, but pulsate. This distinction – between speech and hesitation, meaning and duration – establishes the central premise that the poetic documentary, as exemplified by Hajnšek's film, functions as a perceptual-epistemological dispositif, in which reality is not reproduced as representation but reorganised as a sensory, affective, and material presence.

In the interplay between perception, the body, and the image, the question that arises is no longer one of representation, but of the very conditions of thought – how a film that neither narrates nor interprets can nonetheless structure an epistemologically relevant experience of the world. This article proceeds from the premise that the poetic documentary, when it consciously renounces narration, explanation, and the symbolic organisation of meaning, does not reject reality. Still, it reorganises the conditions under which reality may be perceived – not as an object of representation, but as a structure of sensory relation. *A Tree Grows in My Dreams Every Night*, the case study explored in the following analysis, does not unfold as a text but as an event – an event that structures experience through light, sound, touch, hesitation, and rhythm: through parameters that do not belong to symbolic analysis, but to perceptual con-

figuration. In this sense, the article approaches the poetic documentary as a dispositif that does not operate on the level of semantic articulation, but within a field of material, affective, and embodied relations. The central thesis guiding the discussion is that a poetic film that forgoes the symbolic economy of meaning establishes a mode of thought that does not ground knowledge in interpretation, but configures it as a constellation of sensory conditions. The epistemology that emerges from this is not an explanation of the world, but its effect. This effect occurs within the viewer's body, within their capacity for perceptual reorganisation, and it realises thinking not as content, but as an event.

Within the phenomenological tradition articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, perception is not treated as a psychological interface between subject and external world, but as the mode through which both subject and world become possible in their relational co-emergence. The subject does not precede perception, but is articulated within it as a situated, embodied perspective; and the world is not given as object, but unfolds as a horizontal appearance always already conditioned by the possibility of being perceived. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2002, 169) repeatedly emphasises that the body is 'the general medium for having a world.' 'The gesture which I witness outlines an intentional object. This object is genuinely present and fully comprehended when the powers of my body adjust themselves to it and overlap it' (p. 215). Within this framework, the image does not function as something to be understood, but as a mode through which the world comes into presence through affective intensity and material tension. A film that enacts this structure does not depict anything – yet it transforms everything, as it reorganises the bodily conditions of the viewer's emplacement in the world. In this sense, there is no longer a distinction between perception and thought: perception becomes thought when realised as a constellation of light, time, duration, and affect that structures experience as a sensory configuration rather than as a symbolic order.

Such perception is never static but processual, multidirectional, and embodied. Its temporality is not linear but rhythmic – what is experienced in the image lies not in what is seen, but in what is withheld. Hesitation, which will be developed further as a central conceptual figure, is not an aesthetic effect but a perceptual tension that suspends the automatism of interpretation and enables the emergence of thought. When the viewer can no longer follow narration or translate the image into meaning, a moment of pure perception occurs – one that does not produce

knowledge as resolution, but as suspension: hesitation is not absence, but a structure of resistance that enables a different orientation of thought. A film that operates through hesitation does not reduce meaning but suspends it; it does not reject knowledge but reorganises it. Its affect is not an expressive device but a structural force – a tension that does not lead to explanation but demands persistence within the sensory field. Its aim is not to explain the world, but to create the conditions under which the world may become perceptible as a state, not as an object. Such a film affirms nothing – yet makes possible everything that happens within a body that does not understand but is already affected.

It is at this point that Sontag's (1966, 4) remark enters: 'Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art,' and her call that 'in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art' (p. 10). This is not an anti-intellectual gesture, but a warning against the reduction of art to a symbolic economy that excludes its perceptual, affective, and embodied dimensions. In this sense, the erotics of art is epistemological: not an aesthetic stance, but a structure of thinking that does not unfold into meaning but persists in presence. Persistence here does not imply passivity or immobility, but a cognitive activation within a field in which the image does not narrate, but endures; does not represent, but pulsates; does not explain, but tenses the structure of the body that sees. Sontag's point is not to abandon thought, but to reconfigure it within a perceptual regime capable of withstanding the complexity of affective presence without the need to translate it into meaning. The erotics of art is thus a form of thought that does not speak about the world, but endures within its conditions.

When considered in the context of the poetic documentary, an epistemology emerges that does not rest on narrative explanation, but on a sensory configuration: film does not signify the world but shapes it as a possibility that materialises, sure of the perceptual. Every image that holds the gaze, every sound that resists translation into words, every rhythm that does not resolve but intensifies tension – these are epistemological moments that do not produce knowledge as content, but as a structure of thinking. A film that operates in this way requires no statement, because it is already a dispositif: a structure of relations between the material, the embodied, and the affective, within which thinking does not emerge from concept, but from contact. Film is not an object but a world, not a meaning, not a story, but a structure of thought that occurs when the image persists and meaning withdraws, when the film becomes configuration.

If the image does not communicate meaning but reorganises the conditions of perception, then it becomes essential to rethink those elements of film form that do not represent, narrate, or encode, but persist as withheld presence. Among these elementary structures, hesitation – that is, a duration that does not lead to explanation but creates a tension that does not resolve into symbolic meaning – is one of the central concepts through which the dispositif of poetic documentary film can be thought.

In this epistemological configuration, hesitation is not necessarily linked to slowness or silence, although it often manifests through such expressive parameters. It may emerge through a regime of editing, a gap in sound, an unusual spatial articulation, or a blurred optic. The viewer does not perceive hesitation as an aesthetic decision, but experiences it as a reorganisation of their own rhythm – as a temporal displacement that leads nowhere, yet nonetheless acts. This action is not the result of interpretation but an experience in a field where the body does not know, yet is aware that it is there. The image in hesitation does not narrate but endures – and it is precisely this endurance that enables the possibility of epistemological articulation without a statement.

Within the field of poetic film, the image exists as a surface that emerges in relation to the viewer's body: it does not convey meaning but rather structures proximity, within which thought arises from affect. This affect is not emotion or mood, but, in Brian Massumi's words, 'prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act' (Massumi 1987, xvi). Affect is thus the movement between perception and thought – not an intermediary stage, but a temporally non-synchronous intensity that reorganises the body's position before the body can formulate a response. This reorganisation is not linear but dispersed: thought does not follow the image but unfolds in its duration. A film concerned with affect does not structure narration but a regime of exposure, in which the viewer's body becomes a field of configuration – a space where thought occurs as response, not as interpretation.

Laura U. Marks (2000, 163) extends this logic through the concept of haptic visuality, which she defines as a mode of viewing in which vision is no longer a function of distance but of proximity – one that touches the surface of the image:

While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the

image. Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality. [...] Touch is a sense located on the surface of the body: thinking of cinema as haptic is only a step toward considering the ways cinema appeals to the body as a whole.

In this shift, the image is no longer an object of perception but a space of contact – not in the literal sense of being touched, but in the way the image establishes a relation in which the viewer's body persists in its texture. Vivian Sobchack further develops these relations as a perception of perception – not as access to an object, but as an embodied experience of the image itself. 'Watching a film, we can see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as see the moved' (Sobchack 1992, 10). Texture, in this context, is not a visual effect but an epistemological structure: a mode through which the image thinks without concept. Every grain, every blur, every luminous tension that resists meaning but persists as a tangible presence functions as a dispositif that is realised not as a product of interpretation but as a configuration of proximity.

It is important to emphasise that such proximity does not depend on physical touch, but on a structure in which the body is no longer separate from the image. At the moment when the viewer can no longer explain what they see, and yet cannot look away, a condition of thinking arises – one that is not reflective but suspended. This suspension does not occur prior to thought, but structures it from within: it is not a transition into meaning, but a pause within contact. And this suspension is not a blockage but an enabling: it means that thought can no longer follow the logic of language, yet it still unfolds – as an affective distribution in the body, as an orientation within a field that does not explain but cuts. A film that realises itself through proximity does not demand anything from the viewer, but organises them – it does not speak, but arranges. This is not passivity but configuration: the viewer does not react but is inscribed into a structure that enables thought as contact. The distinction between reflective and affective-relational thought is essential. Reflection presupposes temporal distance and the articulation of meaning, whereas affective thought – as theorised by Massumi – is realised as a bodily tension, a field of intensities in which perception is already structured as thought, even if it has not yet become conceptual. Rather than interpreting affect as a step toward meaning, Massumi (2002, 27–31) locates it in the body's

capacity to register, modulate, and respond without recourse to signification. What we refer to here as a ‘dispositif of thinking’ is not a fixed apparatus, but a relational configuration – a structure of perceptual and affective tension that enables thought to arise without relying on reflective articulation. In this sense, thinking is not the content of consciousness but the effect of proximity – a configuration that organises perception into an event of thought.

The proximity we are thinking of here is neither psychological identification nor a phenomenon of empathy, but a structure that reorganises the conditions of thought as proximity to thinking. The question is no longer what the image means, but how the structure of the image produces thought – not through statement, but through a texture that sustains itself as affective intensity. Every tension in rhythm, every rupture in duration, every noise in the texture that does not reduce to function but persists as affect, acts as a configuration that does not articulate thought but enables it. Here, thought is not content but tension. And it is precisely this tension that the poetic documentary establishes as its epistemological gesture: a mode of thinking that does not emerge from concept, but from a relation that cannot be explained. The relation between body and image is no longer representational, but affective-configurational. In this constellation, touch is no longer the opposite of vision but the very way in which vision thinks. Seeing is not optical access to the image, but a structured proximity in which the body is reorganised as a condition of thought. Thought, then, is not reflection but rhythm: thought happens when the image is no longer an object, but a surface; no longer an explanation, but a persistence. A film that enables this does not think through language, but through proximity – it is no longer code, but tangible presence: a perceptual texture that realises thought as affect.

The epistemology of proximity does not unfold in the observer’s distance from the image, but in a structure that distributes the body into a tension between what is seen and what cannot be articulated. In this sense, proximity is not a state but a mode of relation: thought does not arise from understanding, but from perceptual emplacement, which is not reflective but embodied. An image that does not explain but persists as a presence does not address the viewer as a subject of meaning, but as a configuration of perceptual vectors. Within this field, there is no longer a distinction between perceiver and perceived; the viewer is inscribed into a current that enables thought through affective tension. This tension is not an aesthetic effect but the basis of an epistemological reorganisation.

It is not a matter of contemplation, but of operative presence, in which the image does not encode but unravels. The blurring of boundaries between elements is not a formal gesture but the way the image dismantles the hierarchy of perceptual layers and introduces a structure in which no component is dominant. Each element – a rupture of light, a textural noise, a sustained sonic disturbance – establishes a field in which thought is no longer constructed through statements, but through spatial and rhythmic orientation. The subject of thought here is not a bearer of reflection but the effect of distribution: thought is not mediated, but structured.

The tension produced by the poetic dispositif does not lead toward interpretation, but forms the condition in which interpretation becomes unnecessary. The film does not open meanings but suspends them so that the relation remains active. The tension without resolution that emerges here is not a blockage but a mode of persistence: not a loop, but a texture in which there is no exit, because any exit would mean nothing other than resolution. This irreducibility is not a failure but a productive configuration – thought materialises precisely because it cannot resolve itself. Hesitation, affect, and proximity constitute part of a structure that does not lead to a result but to a reorganisation of the body in relation to the perceptual. The epistemology that arises from this is not linear but differentiated: the image is not a frame of knowledge but its rupture. A film that enables this does not translate reality but realises it as a condition that thinks. In this lies the poetic documentary as dispositif – not in what it says, but in what it does with the conditions under which the world can be perceived as a tension of thought.

In the theoretical section of this text, I have conceptualised film as intensity, as body, and as a song of memory; in the analytical part, I will trace these dimensions through the case study of the film *A Tree Grows in My Dreams Every Night* (2024), directed by Vid Hajnšek. The analysis will not aim to interpret the film's meaning but will follow its affects, textures, and images – asking how the film operates as an event of embodiment, how it evokes reminiscence and imagination, and how it reorganises reality through its poetic documentary form.

The recent film *A Tree Grows in My Dreams Every Night* by Vid Hajnšek (2024)<sup>1</sup> is a layered synthesis of images – a composition that weaves

<sup>1</sup> The film-poem was woven on location by Vid Hajnšek (recipient of the Vesna Award for Best Documentary and the France Brenk Award), cinematographer Domen Martinčič (recipient of the Iris Award for Documentary Film), and Sara Korošec. The editor, Andrej

together the poetry of the director's grandfather, France Forstnerič, the photography of Stojan Kerbler, and the music of Sara Korošec (Muzikačaka<sup>2</sup>). The film-poem was woven on location by Vid Hajnšek (recipient of the Vesna Award for Best Documentary and the France Brenk Award), cinematographer Domen Martinčič (recipient of the Iris Award for Documentary Film), and Sara Korošec. The editor, Andrej Nagode, who is also credited as the screenwriter, contributed to the structure remotely. All these traces originate from the region of Haloze, yet the film's leading image – a haptically foggy morning, in which fine raindrops resonate within the music, as silhouettes of landscape and people slowly emerge, with an apple tree at the centre – already exceeds Haloze. The film does not construct a narrative but rather a textural field of perception in which image and sound do not aim at explanation but at affective presence. It is therefore crucial to stress that the film does not document Haloze, but perceives it.

*A Tree Grows in My Dreams Every Night* does not operate as a narrative unfolding according to the logic of meaning or discourse, but as an event that happens in the viewer's body – as a sensory configuration of images, sounds, rhythms, and textures that do not aim at interpretation but at awakening bodily perception. It is not about narrative or symbolic understanding of images, but about the way an image awakens touch, how it cuts into breathing, how it alters the tempo of internal time. The film does not mediate the world but constructs it at the level of experience by engaging the viewer's body as the site where the artwork is realised. In this respect, one may affirm that the artwork does not function as a meaning to be decoded, but as an intensity that enters perception and reorganises it (see also Sontag 1966, 4–10). This is not an aesthetics of representation, but an aesthetics of touch – as if the image comes almost too close to the viewer.

In *A Tree Grows in My Dreams Every Night*, the image functions first and foremost as an event of the body. Its images are not neutral representations but material textures that address the viewer directly – the grain of the footage, the rhythmic pulsing of light, the ambient noises accom-

Nagode, who is also credited as the screenwriter, contributed to the structure remotely.

<sup>2</sup> 'The music is inspired by Haloze – the environment that surrounds, births, and nurtures it – drawing from its history, local traditions, songs, instruments, stories, the context of rural life, and the lack of connection to the wider world. These elements are absorbed and reimagined by the musician, shaping new directions and times' (Muzikačaka n.d.).

panying the scenes generate an affective flow that inscribes itself into the viewer's skin and breath. The camera does not operate as an instrument recording reality from a distance, but as a tactile gaze that vibrates, fractures, and trembles. This experience is embodied in the most concrete sense – as eventfulness that is not grounded in meaning but in perception. Vivian Sobchack (1992, 10) describes this as an embodied viewing position, in which film is not merely something seen but something that sees – what she calls *the address of the eye*, a mode of relation that does not unfold through discourse but through a tactile encounter between image and perception. That film is not simply an object to be observed, but a subject of experience, which becomes evident in the way specific scenes were made. As Hajnšek explains, the film was not built from a pre-existing concept, but emerged from a process in which its key elements – Kerbler's photographs, Forstnerič's poetry, and the music of Sara Korošec – were organically interwoven (Krajnc 2025). The camera does not retreat but breathes with the bodies, with the materials, with the fog and the rain. Filming was not mere recording, but dwelling within a space, with people and among the things that surrounded them.<sup>3</sup> This is why the scenes do not unfold according to narrative logic; instead, the logic is assumed by the body in relation to the world.

The film does not establish a difference between past and present, but shapes them together as a state. In the scene where elderly locals hold in their hands Kerbler's photographs from their childhood, what unfolds is not the revelation of a story, but something else: their hands, their body, their skin belongs to today. Janezek stands in a wheat field speaking about the machines of today, while the photograph he holds – showing him as a small boy in a flowering meadow – reaches into the past. Yet this distance is not a difference – it is a continuity. The viewer is not given information about who is who, but the scene still works, because the image is not a representation but a bond. The body holding the image and the image that was once captured exist in the same space – now, not then. In this context, the film's opening line, a verse by the poet, writer, and journalist France Forstnerič (the director's grandfather), plays a key role. Written in the 1960s and 1970s, his poems return to the Haloze landscape and its people. His presence is not acoustic but typographic – the verse is shown on screen, and this constitutes an affective gesture: not a voice, but a trace, a sign that is not spoken but structures the image. The poem establishes

<sup>3</sup> See the conversation with Vid Hajnšek and Andrej Nagode (Krajnc 2025).

a rhythm, an atmosphere that is no longer separated from space, but becomes the space itself. The same applies to sound, which again structures the space. The verses are not a message – they are density.

The dense structure of affect reappears in the scene of developing photographs in the darkroom. We do not know exactly what Kerbler is developing. We observe the calm gestures of hands, the liquid, the movements – without commentary. The process is formal, and its lack of a clear goal enables the dispositif: the process itself becomes a bond with an image that is absent – with something that does not appear but nonetheless shapes perceptual tension, an experience that cannot be explained but only endured. Merleau-Ponty (2002, 239) emphasised that ‘every external perception is immediately synonymous with a certain perception of my body, just as every perception of my body is made explicit in the language of external perception.’ The film affirms this phenomenological logic: the viewer does not watch from a distance but is immersed in the flow of images that overwhelm them. The shots of Haloze are not merely a representation of space but an event that reorganises the viewer’s bodily experience. The landscape is not a backdrop but a presence. The fog, which already set the tone in the trailer, operates as a perceptual structure that reorganises the relation between body, image, and space. Rising from below, from the ravines, like moisture that gathers and slowly dissolves the contours of the landscape, it structures perception – not as a motif, but as a dispositif that distributes the viewer into a perceptual suspension. In this hesitation, the landscape becomes not an object of vision but a state that can only be thought of as proximity. The viewer does not interpret the landscape but lives it through the film. This is the phenomenological truth of cinema: that it does not convey meaning but draws us into an event of sensibility.

The selected photographs from the series *The People of Haloze* – central to Kerbler’s body of work – do not appear in the film merely as aesthetic references, but as material objects: as traces held today by elderly people who appear in the images as children. This gesture does not serve documentation, but enacts an embodied connection: the image becomes an object that transmits affect between past and present. André Bazin emphasised that photography is a direct imprint of reality, a ‘mould of death’ that preserves the object outside the conditions of time and space (Bazin 1967, 14–16). In the film, the photograph of a face does not act as an illustration, but as a *punctum* – a presence that pierces the viewer (Barthes 1981, 27). The face, captured in a photographic instant, becomes a trace

of reality that now returns as intensity; in combination with moving images and poetry, the photograph produces a dialectical effect – the film becomes not merely a flow of images, but a network of presences where different forms of reality converge. This aligns with Walter Benjamin's (1968, 255) concept of a sudden affective flash in which the past inscribes itself into the present, not as reconstruction, but as a sensory rupture: 'The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again.' This moment recurs in the film through micro-scenes that are not content-driven but perceptual. These scenes do not explain, but withhold. And precisely within that suspension, imagination emerges as the space where meaning may begin to unfold.

Other scenes function similarly – not by advancing narrative, but by pulsing as affective intensities. The scene with the cat Martina, helping Robi forage for mushrooms in the forest, acts as a grounded nucleus of slowness, silence, and presence. According to Hajnšek, this relationship carries something 'pure' (Krajnc 2025, 129), something that exceeds anecdote or representation. It is precisely through the observation of the animal that the film's mode becomes clear: it operates as perception that does not require meaning in order to act. It is an event of experiential proximity – not to convey something, but to sustain something.

This is also evident in selected photographs from the series *The People of Haloze*, which are, according to Marjeta Ciglenečki (2003, 27), considered 'the centrepiece of Kerbler's photographic career.' His purpose was to photograph the people of Haloze as they are in everyday real life – he sought them out on workdays and during holidays and rituals, such as harvest and pig slaughter, etc. Foremost in his photographs are the human stories, while the Haloze landscape also plays an important role in this series (p. 28). Because of the structural complexity, his photographs are not readable merely at the level of direct identification of what we can see, and Kerbler is (Kovič 2003, 68):

certainly one of those artists, whose entire production cannot be pigeonholed in terms of realism, either as the so-called 'black' realism, or any other more generic social realism. [...] one would be hard put to find any kind of ethno-folkloristic sentimentality in his photographs, or a confrontation with the rural milieu.

One of his finest artistic achievements involves the people of Haloze, a land that he knows intimately, and Kerbler may have had a close, human

experience with them, 'but he sees no extreme in them. [...] in their apparent singularity, he seeks to recognise above all the universal human being, bringing together the most diverse, intimate and common destinies of the various members of families, social classes and ethnic groups' (Kovič 2003, 68).

France Forstnerič also wrote about Kerbler's photographs of Haloze children in the daily newspaper *Večer* in 1979, describing them as bringing forth a new aesthetic – one that emerges only in the mode of seeing and in the creative process itself. Writing about children photographed in interior spaces, he described them as 'little lights in the dark,' emphasising how these lights are co-shaped by their surroundings (Forstnerič 1979). He did not look at the Haloze children as a cultural observer or critic: 'Grandfather knew exactly what it meant to grow up there, and what it meant to carry a hen in your lap while two cows stare at you from the darkness of the barn. What it means to be a bright dot in the dark' (Krajnc 2025, 130). These are the traces of Kerbler and Forstnerič, rooted in the Haloze region. For Hajnšek, who as a child spent summers at his grandfather's weekend house in Haloze, the (re)entry into this world was made possible through Sara Korošec (Muzikačaka), who, in a small crew alongside DoP Domen Martinčič, took on the role of sound recording. Korošec, whose music often includes field recordings and atmospheric sounds, worked exclusively with natural soundscapes from Haloze in this film. In addition to the train conductor Miha and the forager Robi (all of whom are part of the Banda Haloška), she also appears on screen.

In Korošec's musical work, Hajnšek sensed the same immediacy, authenticity, and deep reflection as in his grandfather's poetry – rooted in Haloze yet universal in tone – and in Kerbler's photography, which is bound to the region in origin but transcends it in expression (Krajnc 2025, 126). Kerbler's approach to the interconnectedness of figure and environment resonated with Forstnerič's poems, which explore the relationship between human and land, between the person and the burden of the soil they come from. Korošec's ambient electronic score serves as a vehicle of continuity between the foggy imagery, the grandfather's poems, and Kerbler's photographs. The music does not 'illustrate' the image but perforates it – organising its rhythm, breath, and silences – and was integrated into the very genesis of the process. The domestic singing scene in the kitchen (with the Banda Haloška) is emblematic: it places the viewer into resonance. This is precisely the kind of haptics that Laura U. Marks writes about: seeing with the skin, hearing with the body (Marks 2000).

In this sense, the film enacts its proximity quite literally through the materiality of sound.

In its aesthetic choice – which is not a matter of style, but a fundamental ethical position – the film enacts what Vivian Sobchack calls *the address of the eye*: not a gaze that merely sees, but a perceptual subject that sees, hears, and feels. The film body is not an object to be viewed but a subject of perception, and as such it speaks to another body – the viewer's – not as a distant observer, but as a co-material being immersed in the flow. *A Tree Grows in My Dreams Every Night* does not state this in words, but performs it through form: through an embodied gaze that is not oriented toward meaning, but toward relation; through a perceptual structure in which the gaze does not dominate, but becomes self-aware – a medium of proximity. This proximity aligns with what Sobchack (1992, 10) defines as the intertwinement between the film's body and the viewer's, a mutual corporeal involvement where, as she writes, we can see the seeing, hear the hearing, and feel the movement.

This becomes especially evident in how the film treats closeness. It is not about close-up shots in the traditional sense, but about closeness as a feeling – a hesitation that resides not in detail, but in the tension between camera and image. A clear example of this is the scene in which women from the Trstenke choir<sup>4</sup> – without any introduction or explanation – board a bus, sing, and gaze out the windows. The camera does not enter their experience but accompanies it. Their glances are not illustrations of a local community, but suspensions that enter our own perception of time. The viewer receives no information, only a temporal shift. The event lies not in what happens, but in the fact that nothing happens – that duration does not generate meaning, but presence. Even though the sequence was carefully staged, it appears authentic. This authenticity is not spontaneity, but the result of a safe relation: because the women knew what would happen, they could look rather than perform. 'Still, little things happened that you can't plan: they sang, the fog came down. The atmosphere emerged entirely organically' (Krajnc 2025, 129). This is not an enactment of identity, but an enactment of a space in which the body can persist as a body – not as a carrier of meaning, but as a surface that breathes.

The montage follows the logic of a poem. Through a sequence of frag-

<sup>4</sup> The group takes its name from a traditional folk instrument made of hollow reeds of varying lengths (author's note).

ments, we sense the interstitial space in which the protagonists dwell. Following Kerbler's method – he 'used a fairly wide-angle 28mm lens, which meant he had to get very close to the subject in order to create interaction between the figure and the space – the kitchen, the vineyard, the field' (Brdnik 2024, 89) – we observe Miha (the train conductor) in the locomotive cabin, which appears as a calm, meditative space. The scene is shot from within the moving locomotive. The camera is fixed on the right side of the cabin, facing Miha, whose hand rests on the vigilance button, which must be pressed every few seconds to keep the train from stopping. The tracks are clearly visible through the window as they disappear beneath the train – the horizon is out of focus, while the emphasis is placed on the mechanical motion below. The movement is not fast, but steady and uninterrupted. The interior soundscape of the locomotive is dense and rhythmic: humming, rattling, metallic noise. There is no music, no dialogue – only the machine's pulse, which structures the experience of space. The rhythm of the sound and the vibration of the image establish a sensation of mechanical movement that is not a central motif but a material texture. Miha is not presented as a character or a figure, but as a corporeal element within the dispositif. His body becomes part of the interior composition, defined by the machine's movement and the framing perspective. The camera does not change angle, nor does it follow any dynamic action. The framing remains restrained and persistent, almost non-participatory. The cabin space is enclosed, linear, but not directed – it does not aim toward a point of arrival but toward an expansion of a state. The train moves forward, the mechanical body cuts through the landscape, travelling through space, yet the camera remains static. In this tension between movement and restrained optics, a relationship emerges in which space does not narrate but organises sensory experience. Despite the dense, rhythmic soundscape of the locomotive interior (humming, trembling, metallic vibration), the space seems imbued with stillness. And the film drifts into another fragment.

Stojan Kerbler's most widely recognised photographic series is Pig Slaughter, in which he succeeded in demythologising a ritual that persists in this region today. According to the author, scenes of the slaughter were deliberately omitted from the film, while a special place is given to the *kurenti*<sup>5</sup> – figures that also appear in Forstnerič's poems. In addition

<sup>5</sup> Kurenti are traditional masks originating from the Ptuj region and its surrounding areas (Drava-Ptuj plain, Haloze, Slovenske gorice). The masked figures wear sheepskin gar-

to the intrinsic interest of the traditional ritual itself, the *kurent* sequence establishes a sense of community – different generations intertwining, masks, children, whip-crackers, and a particularly striking image of a girl dressed in a *kurent* costume... Following the scenes with Miha, Robi, and the cat Martina – scenes imbued with intimacy and familiarity – the presence of the *kurenti* brings the portrayal of community to a kind of culmination. The *kurenti* disturb something and introduce a new energy, ‘which corresponded to the feeling that they bring a certain rupture. [...] In my grandfather’s poetry, you can sense something pagan, something raw. He describes them as a fiery herd. And that’s how we filmed them – as small flames appearing over the hill ...’ (Krajnc 2025, 130).

The film does not restore reality as a content-based given, but establishes it as a sensory duration in which the materiality of sound and image condenses to the point where it ceases to function as evidence and begins to act as presence. What we see and hear is not a referential data set, but an experiential organism, in which the measure of the real shifts from the level of informativeness to that of affective credibility: whether and how the film holds the world (not what it says about it). Within this horizon, the poetic documentary can be understood as an approach that does not abolish referentiality but redirects it.

This reorientation is first evident in the montage, which abandons the hierarchy of narrative functions and replaces it with an economy of suspension and breath. It is not an accumulation of scenes that inform, but a spatial and temporal arrangement of already recorded bodily states: the rhythm of the train, the fog, the silence on the bus, the calibration of gestures. Montage here does not conclude but organises conditions of presence; it does not produce closure but regulates rhythms – synthesis does not imply the completion of meaning, but the configuration of intensities that must remain incomplete to function. Sound operates as a choreography of attention. The music by Sara Korošec is not a commentary on the image, but a sonic dramaturgy that continuously redistributes weight between image and silence, between the inner pulse of space and its visible edge. Just as fog softens optical clarity, sound perforates visual certainty

ments, large cowbells around their waists, and masks with long red tongues and tall horns adorned with feathers and ribbons. Kurenti go from house to house, jumping and rattling, driving away winter and evil spirits with the sound of their bells, while symbolically bringing luck and fertility. For a discussion of the transformation of this traditional ritual see Mateja Habinc (2013).

and thereby draws the gaze into proximity: into the zone where optical evidence falters and we begin to 'see' with our ears, as the skin responds to microdurations. This is where an ethics of presence emerges – the film does not exhibit bodies and places but gives them time in which they may become present without explanation. This marks a crucial shift in relation to experimental ethnography, as defined by Catherine Russell (1992, 21): the encounter is no longer a controlled representation of the Other, but a material interaction in which 'postmodernist ethnographic forms seek to integrate with, rather than represent, the social practices that are their object.' Within this relation, the boundary between 'mine' and 'theirs' becomes unstable – dissolved within the perceptual structure of exchange between what is documented and the viewer's embodied experience.

The scene in which Kerbler calmly and slowly sets up a tripod in front of a tree – with the presence of breath, 'This is how the film breathes' (Krajnc 2025, 125) – evokes the preparatory gesture for a portrait or the documentation of a human figure. Yet his gesture is directed toward a tree – a silent, motionless presence that does not pose but persists.<sup>6</sup> In this scene, photography does not occur; what occurs is a dispositif that does not capture an image but establishes a suspension. The tripod no longer functions as a tool of representation, but as a material gesture of withdrawal: an exposure to light, time, and space without a figure. To photograph a tree means to step outside the history of portraiture, outside the psychology of the face, outside the documentary logic of identification – and to remain in a relation that does not produce an image but enacts presence. In this silence, a different affective configuration is realised: no longer a gaze upon the human, but a proximity with the tree, not as an object of vision, but as a persistence.

At the level of the dispositif, one could draw parallels with Karpotrotter (*Karpotrotter*, 2013) by Matjaž Ivanišin. In 1971, twenty-eight-year-old

<sup>6</sup> The majority of Stojan Kerbler's oeuvre is dedicated to the human figure and the rural environment. His first three photographic series are dominated by images of his native surroundings, particularly the regions of Ptuj and Haloze. The following series is associated with the aluminium factory in Kidričeve, where he was employed for nearly forty years; the photographs depict workers and visually compelling scenes inside the production halls. After retiring, Kerbler turned to photographing the courtyards of Ptuj. A square format and compositional clarity mark this series, as the author deliberately avoided dense vegetation. The photographs were taken in late autumn and reflect the monotonous atmosphere of foggy and overcast days, lending them a subtle sense of mysticism (see Ciglenečki 2008).

Karlo Godina travelled through Vojvodina with a camera and shot the film *I Have a House* (*Imam jednu kuću*, 1971). Forty years later, Matjaž Ivanišin retraced that same route and made *Karpotrotter*, a distinctive poetic homage to Karlo Godina, in which Ivanišin masterfully intertwines his own footage with Godina's images, accompanied by Nebojša Pop-Tasić's voice-over verses (Krajnc 2013, 188). In *Karpotrotter*, Ivanišin does not pursue the figure of Karlo Godina, but his absence, his gaze, his rhythm. The film is not a documentary portrait, but a dispositif of travel, archive, and suspension. 'Karlo's rule was that he would not appear in the film, which I thought was great' (p. 189). The film is built out of gaps and fragments that do not generate meaning, but construct a state. Hesitation here is not an aesthetic decision but an epistemological displacement – a space in which the film does not unfold as explanation, but as a structure of relations. It ends with the thought: 'So that the young man can make a house out of all this – a house that will live inside him' (p. 191). This is not a portrait or a biographical film about Karlo Godina, but a film that follows his gaze, his way of seeing, of travelling, of perceiving, just as Hajnšek does not portray Haloze but follows Kerbler's method.

When poetic film relinquishes the language of representation, it does not lose its epistemological function – it asserts it differently: as the structuring of conditions in which thinking is not articulated but enabled. This thinking does not emerge from a concept but from a configuration that allows the body to persist within a tension that is never resolved. Within this tension, the image is neither transparent nor hermetic – it is a perceptual relation that does not articulate, yet it acts. It acts precisely because it resists closure, suspends velocity, and destabilises orientation without replacing it with another. In this regard, the film does not tell us what to think; it shapes the conditions under which thinking might occur, provided we persist in presence.

The dispositif that is realised in the poetic film is epistemological not because it produces meaning, but because it reorganises the relations between light, body, time, and tension. These relations are not logical but affective; not reflective but textural; not repeatable but singular. A film that realises such a structure demands presence without explanation, thought without concept – not as an aesthetic effect or contemplative state, but as an intense emplacement in a field where thought is not the result of knowledge but its conditional space. This space is not defined by distance but by orientation: it does not ask what the image means, but how the image thinks. The thought that such a film establishes is not a con-

ceptual proposition but a configuration – not a reading but a disposition. The epistemological force of such a dispositif does not lie in the duration of meaning but in the temporary articulation of conditions under which thinking becomes possible. Within this event, understanding becomes secondary: the film asserts nothing, but enables the world to emerge as a state, not as an object. This world is not pre-given – it is not present before the image and does not persist after it, but happens exclusively in the moment of perceptual tension. Within this tension, interpretation becomes impossible; what remains is the possibility of persistence – thinking not as a statement, but as a response.

The film *A Tree Grows in My Dreams Every Night* organically aligns itself with a current of audiovisual practices that reject documentary as a vehicle of knowledge transmission and representational transparency. Rather than conveying meaning, the film explores perceptual and affective regimes in which reality does not appear as information but as a temporally sustained inscription into sensory experience. The film does not mediate reality; it establishes the conditions under which reality may be perceived – not as a closed entity, but as an open configuration of bodies, spaces, and temporalities. Meaning is not the goal of the image; instead, it unfolds from materiality – from rhythms, sonic resonances, and pulses of light. This is not a narrative documentary, but a poetic form that grounds its epistemology in perception and in the bodily responsiveness of the viewer.

The affective power of the image is directly tied to its temporal structure. Sequences – such as those with animals or with the Trstenke choir on the bus – are not inserted to convey information, but as waves of experience that create a new temporality. The effect unfolds in rhythm: in the duration of gazing through the window, in the cadence of Robi and the cat Martina walking through the foggy wooded landscape, in the auditory layers of raindrops, ambient noise, and the music of Sara Korošec. Here, sound is just as corporeal as the image – it does not complement the image, but co-creates with it an affective totality. Sound is not a backdrop but a tactile force, penetrating through the auditory system and acting on the level of breath and heartbeat.

When the image ceases to communicate and begins to endure, we enter a field of thought that unfolds through suspension – not as the arrest of meaning, but as its material delay. A film that does not mediate but structures the conditions of presence is a film that produces a perceptual configuration of the world – a world that cannot be read, only

felt. This is where the poetic documentary becomes radical: because it does not reduce the world but configures it; because it does not produce representation but a constellation of tactile points, from which a relation may emerge – an epistemological relation not *as knowledge about*, but as knowledge itself.

*A Tree Grows in My Dreams Every Night* does not unfold as a narrative about a specific place, a particular voice, a grandfather, a poem, or the Haloze region. The film does not depict Haloze – it enables it. It does not tell a story, but places the viewer into a rhythm, a light, a resonance that does not manifest as information, but as a world that does not exist outside the film but emerges within its rhythm, its cuts, its texture. Hajnšek's film is not a document of time – it is time itself, structured through a duration that does not resolve. The camera does not reveal – it persists. Light does not illuminate – it condenses. Montage does not connect – it organises the conditions for affective resonance. In this sense, the film becomes a philosophical instrument: it does not think *about* the world, but thinks the world as a perceptual effect of form. And therein lies its epistemological status: truth is not what is revealed, but that which cannot be said – yet nonetheless reshapes the body.

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