

Information, education and entertainment are all the same. They really are. You cannot educate without entertaining, that is the first lesson for a teacher (...) and information is what education is about. Really it is all the same.

3.3 Dramatic Techniques

Since the beginning of the genre, there have been some documentaries that have represented reality using techniques that are characteristic of works of fiction. In the notion of the documentary as proposed by Grierson – the creative treatment of actuality – is found implicitly the use of dramatic techniques. In fact, the programmes produced within the movement he started quite often use reconstructions, which bring the documentary closer to the field of drama.

This use of dramatisation reached one of its high points when the documentary unit of the BBC, directed at first by Paul Rotha, a close follower of Grierson, was established. At the time, in the range of programmes which this unit produced, were those which were called “dramatised documentaries” that dealt with real events, using actors who performed according to a previously written script. An internal BBC document (Wyatt 1983: 3) on these “dramatised documentaries” states that “the more convincing they are as dramas, the fewer objections the audience have and the less importance they give to understanding, omissions, or imaginative padding out”. This claim suggests that the public accepts the use of dramatic techniques in programmes dealing with real situations, the deciding factor being their success as drama.

Similarly, science broadcasting on television tends to adopt determined dramatic forms. As Aubrey Singer, director of scientific programmes for the BBC, (in Silverstone, 1986: 140) points out, science television “is subject to the principles of structure and the demands of the dramatic form. Therefore; the decision-making process should give priority to the medium, rather than to scientific pedantry”.

Professional journalists also refer to the dramatic component which is found in some reports. An internal document from the

North American television channel NBC (in Berger, 1990: 120) makes the following recommendations:

Each news report should possess, without sacrificing authenticity and responsibility, the features attributed to fiction or drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and development, increasing action and decreasing action, a beginning, middle and end. These are not only the essential elements of drama; they are the essential elements of narrative.

With regard to the use of dramatic techniques in audiovisual communication, other authors have discussed this from a theoretical point of view. García Avilés (1990: 610) believes that these techniques give news reports "greater clarity, interest and narrative force" because the viewer is already familiar with fiction programmes and easily understands narrative that is structured in this way.

Documentaries and fiction programmes can even have a similar gestation process. There are those who call for the suppression of the false dichotomy; documentary film versus fiction film, given that both categories share common elements in their discourse. This is better understood if we consider that, as Zunzunegui (1989: 150) suggests, "every fiction film documents its own narrative (through the analogous act of filming) and all documentary films fictionalise a pre-existing reality, by choosing which point of view to take". Furthermore, it should be remembered, along with Bill Nichols (1991: 107), that sometimes the documentary is converted into fiction with a plot, characters, tension, conflict and resolution; from which it can be deduced that documentaries are, in fact, constructions which are used to refer to reality, rather than to reproduce reality itself.

Nichols (1991: 15) reminds us that works of fiction are also usually set in such a way that they are clearly connected to the real world, by the use of costume, furniture, scenery, etc. However, fiction has greater artistic licence in other respects; for example, the audience accepts the fact that historical characters of any nationality speak English. In any case, it is important not

to forget, as Nichols points out, that the essential difference between a fiction film and a documentary film is the representation they use, given that "in the heart of the documentary there is not so much a story and its imaginary world, as an *argument*, about a historical world" (1991: 115).

The use of dramatic techniques in news programmes and documentaries has been criticised, because they can create a certain degree of confusion in the viewer. In this regard, García-Noblejas (1990: 54) mentions that in contemporary communicative texts there is an increase in "the ambiguity between what is natural and what is artificial, between the reality of fiction and the fiction of reality". Arruti (1991: 412) adds that the biggest danger that threatens structured information with dramatic criteria is that reality is falsified so that the story becomes interesting. Although Arruti acknowledges the difficulty of representing reality objectively, he believes that programmes of this type jeopardise the objectivity of information.

In a similar vein, Roger Silverstone (1986: 89) criticises the fact that, in the move from the laboratory to the communication media, scientific texts are converted into "fairytales". Elsewhere, Silverstone (1985) carries out a detailed study of the gestation process and the final outcome of a BBC science documentary for the *Horizon* programme. In this study it is clear that the documentary, which was analysed, undertook a search for dramatic elements, such as heroes and villains and a story with a strong emotional charge.

For his part, Lyotard (1984) deals with the relationship between science and narrative, from the standpoint that, in its essence, science, not only does not use stories to legitimise itself, but instead enters into conflict with them as they have, at their heart, fables. However, in the midst of the fragmented culture of the post-modern world, science has needed to resort to stories to legitimise itself; that is to say, to present a series of conditions that allow it to be recognised as science and form part of everyday knowledge.

Silverstone responds to Lyotard's statements by analysing scientific texts and highlighting that these also contain dramatic elements. In principle, science uses *mimesis* (imitation of reality), as a means of construing arguments and appealing to reason. On the other hand, everyday knowledge uses mythical categories to formulate stories that are aimed primarily at our emotions. However, according to Silverstone, on occasions science also uses mythical categories, just as everyday knowledge uses *mimesis*. The scientific communication which was analysed in the study used the problem-solution approach, in the midst of which the author was portrayed as hero (helped by other scientists). The enemies were those scientists whose research results the author challenged and the solution to the problem which was posed constituted the desired aim.

David Attenborough (1987: 12) is openly in favour of using certain dramatic techniques in his documentaries. In his opinion, if the aim of these programmes is to communicate the mysteries and wonders which lie hidden in nature, then the film producer should have the "maximum flexibility in production in order to achieve it (...) and should allow the introduction of fiction into natural history programs". In his work it is in fact possible to identify some dramatic techniques. They are used, above all, in some sequences whose only purpose is to illustrate the narrative. In this sense, it can be said that Attenborough uses a dramatic structure which is less marked than that used by other documentary makers such as, for example, Cousteau and Rodríguez de la Fuente.

Of the dramatic techniques used by these and other authors, particularly important are those which are related to the use of stories, the consideration of characters involved in conflict situations and the search for suspense.

3.3.1 Story construction

The idea of the journalist as "story-teller" is widespread. However, when this concept is examined more closely, the idea that all information discourse tells a story does not hold. It seems

appropriate, therefore, to define the concepts of story and narrative. Generally speaking, a story is a set of real or fictional actions or events which took place in the past, with respect to the time of narration. A narrative is the coherent representation, in a sequential form, of a story.

The kind of representation that uses a narrative is appropriate for discourse in which the aim is not to present all the details of reality with "exhaustive mechanics", as is the case with history or science, but in the form of "quick and essential totality". As García-Noblejas (1982: 203) points out, this quick and essential totality is not exclusive to fiction:

(...) it is not univocally associated with fiction, to the degree that it presupposes the presence of (...) maxims or affirmations which are veritable, orientated towards a necessary knowledge of things, prior to judgement on these.

The ability of man to tell and understand stories was understood long before documentary makers came along. Since time immemorial, people have considered the ability to tell stories, and numerous authors have written about this. Alastair McIntyre (1987: 266) states that man "as much in his actions and customs, as in his fiction, is essentially an animal that tells stories". Similarly, Forster (1983: 332) says that the act of telling stories "goes back to the Neolithic period, perhaps even the Palaeolithic. Neanderthal man listened to stories, as far as we can tell according to the shape of his skull".

With the aim of understanding the construction of stories in science documentaries, it is worthwhile remembering, beforehand, some of the approaches carried out in this regard by other documentary makers. It is also appropriate to summarise the thoughts of some of the many authors who have written about this subject, in particular Aristotle, originator of the poetic and dramatic tradition which continues to today.

Some kind of narrative can also be found in numerous news items. In English news items are called *stories* and often adopt

the structure of a short narrative, in which a protagonist carries out a series of actions. As López Pan (1997: 50–51) points out, the term *story* does not exactly coincide with the term “narrative”, as it often refers simply to the theme or matter being dealt with. However, it is not uncommon for English and American journalists to write their items as a *story*, while in other areas of journalism (newspapers and television) this structure is not predominantly found.

Within the documentary genre, even from its inception, many of the prominent documentary producers have structured the content of their work so as to tell a story. Flaherty organizes his documentaries following the actions of specific characters, such as the hunter *Nanook* or the main character, the young adolescent, in *Moana*. British documentary producers also frequently use specific stories to structure their work, even though they are not always centred on people.

However, there are times when the documentary is not structured around a story, in the above sense of the word, but instead limits itself to a thematic organisation of the subject. When this structure is used, it is common practice to start with an introduction to the subject, to continue with a development of the details and to end with some type of conclusion. The aim, therefore, is to give a representation of past events, given that the subjects chosen are also often abstract ideas, for example, tendencies, which are not strictly speaking concrete facts. Furthermore, in these cases the information is not structured following the development of events, but instead follows the criterion of thematic proximity between the different subjects considered, i.e. in these cases, the documentary does not tell a story.

Within the category of documentaries structured in the form of a story, it is important to distinguish, along with Feldman (1990: 56–7), between those that follow a linear narrative of events and those that tell a story in dramatic terms. In the linear structure, which is frequently found in the tradition of eastern countries, events are described linearly, like that of a journey or path.

during, or on which, different events take place. In the dramatic story, which stems from the Greek tragedy, the narrative is structured around the start, development and closure of a conflict (beginning, middle and end).

The use of a linear dramatic narrative aims, in short, to highlight the difference between a story on the one hand, and a straightforward chronological narrative or succession of events, on the other. According to Claude Bremond (1966: 62), to produce a story there should be a "succession of human interest events, within the unity of the same action". In the event that the action is not unified, viewers find themselves before a broadcast comprising successive events.

In the tradition of Western civilization, the first reference to the concept of unity of action appears in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1451, 30–35):

The truth is that, just as in the other imitative arts one imitation is always of one thing, so in poetry the story, as an imitation, must represent one action, a complete whole (...).

According to this Aristotelian tradition, still valid today, action, which should comprise of more than one event, should be complete and have a certain "magnitude". For the action to be complete it should have a beginning, middle and an end. For an action to have magnitude it should not be so big that it loses unity or so small that the vision is confusing. Finally, from the point of view of the structure of the action, magnitude implies that the "transition from adversity to happiness or from happiness to adversity" should take place and be noted without difficulty.

In the context of science documentaries it is also common to structure the content around stories, whether they be dramatic or linear. According to the British writer and director Hugh Falkus (1976: 169), the entire production procedure of nature programmes should always begin with a story. The presence of a story serves as a narrative thread and fulfils the function of

guiding viewers and helping them to understand what is being told. As Boswall (1993) points out, the viewer "should know, at any given moment, where he is, if this is not the case it should be because of choice, not error". In agreement with Boswall, producing a nature documentary by means of story has as its aim the transformation of a series of scientific facts into an artistic broadcast imbued with unity and variety. In these types of documentaries, Boswall goes on to say, unity is more difficult to achieve than variety, given that science pursues facts and is constantly branching out its reasoning. Therefore, it is especially important that a documentary follows a story, through which it can construct a unified whole.

Both linear stories and stories based on drama have the same aim, which is to interest viewers in what is being told, so that they want to continue watching the programme, to see what happens next. This is more easily achieved using drama, as it is easier for the viewer to feel involved in the story given that it deals with a unified, human-interest action. This approach also allows for the emotional involvement of the viewer as the programme can play on feelings. Furthermore, conflict is usually presented in such a way that its resolution presents viewers with doubts, thus creating moments of suspense, which encourage more attentive viewing of the development of the programme.

Nature documentaries, generally speaking, have in their background, stories based on fables that are used as *leitmotifs*. As Barbara Crowther (1994) points out, the three most characteristic stories are "the life cycle", "the search narrative" and "the triumph of science over nature".

"The life cycle" fable does not follow, as would be expected, the process from birth to death, but instead, usually follows the process from birth to reproduction. The second type of fable which underlies these programmes is that of the naturalist as hero, a man on an expedition in search of something. This story, also found in many children's stories, has been adopted by nature documentaries in the form of a naturalist or researcher on a

scientific journey or expedition. Good examples of the use of this type of fable are the programmes made by Cousteau that generally follow a journey made by the naturalist and his team. In his programmes, the journey the scientists take becomes the backbone of each programme, and onto this are added sequences of animal life. In this way, each programme tells a clear story with a few characters (Cousteau and his team), with a common aim (the scientific mission), who overcome difficulties (the forces of nature), to finally reach their goal.

The three types of fables which have been highlighted can be found in many programmes made by documentary producers. Rodríguez de la Fuente usually resorts to the fable of the naturalist as hero and also to the triumph of science over the mysteries of nature. For example, in the previously mentioned episode of *Fauna Ibérica* on the masked dormouse (I sequence 2) this animal is portrayed as a character "that has the appearance and perhaps all the subtlety of a little elf". The narrative envelops this small rodent with a mysterious environment, which is revealed, in part, when the camera focuses on the tree trunk where the animal is hiding.

These fables tend to reinforce the dramatic feeling of a programme and therefore bring the content closer to viewers' everyday means of acquiring knowledge. However, as Crowther (1994) suggests, they are stereotyped formulas that close the door to other narrative modes which could perhaps better serve the aim of disseminating "hypothetical and interpretative aspects of science and allow for a greater freedom in the endings, more varied perspectives, and different voices".

David Attenborough (in Langley, 1985: 21) is in favour of organising the content of his programmes by following a story which acts as a "narrative thread". This thread can be found as much within sequences as in an episode as a whole and throughout a complete series. When there is a strong narrative thread in a program it is considered by the scriptwriter as a treasured "gift from heaven", because it is "not enough to have an easy or

logical succession of images." Attenborough (1997) adds that, in this way, it is possible to keep the viewer's interest in what is being said.

The best programs are like stories; they all have a narrative in which you want to know what is going to happen next. This is just as valid for a detective novel as it is for a science programme, given that science is interesting because it throws out a question and the viewer wants to know the sequence of events that will finally lead to the answer to the question, which will, in turn, lead to another question.

In his opinion, the search for the story should not be taken "to the extreme of distorting the truth of what is being told, but if the elements of a story are there, then they should be used" (1977).

As has been shown, one of the main concerns of broadcasters and journalists is finding "good stories" as raw material for their work. This notion, frequently imprecise, often leads to the choice of material that lends itself to a story-telling format, in terms which are close to fiction.

However, one should not lose sight of the fact that the story is not the only tool available to documentary producers with which to keep the viewers' interest. In some cases the strength of the subject is such that a simple guiding thread can achieve this aim. This is the case of the film *Winged Migration (Le peuple migrateur, 2001)*, by the French director Jacques Perrin. In this case, the visual strength of the film is enough to keep the viewer's interest, although no conventional story is told.

Furthermore, it is easy for the search for stories with a strong narrative potential to distort reality, by applying certain narrative categories. This danger is well pointed out by Arruti (1991: 412) for whom the biggest risk facing information structured according to this model is that reality is distorted to make the final story more appealing.

In some cases, the report or documentary is narrated using terms that are so similar to the discourse used in fiction that it can lose

credibility as a broadcast dealing directly with the real world. Experience suggests that there is a point of proximity to fiction, from which the viewer no longer believes that what is being told is true.

3.3.2 *Considering Real Beings as Characters*

From the beginning of this genre, some documentary producers based their work on characters. Robert Flaherty was one of the first to structure his films following the actions of a central character. The first version of *Nanook* was structured following a thematic order, in the style of the documentaries of that period. When the first version was finished a fire destroyed all the footage. When, years later, Flaherty managed to again make his film about Eskimos, he decided to do so by following one single person: the hunter Nanook. His later work also used a similar format and after him many other documentary producers "converted" real people into characters, around whose actions the story, which constituted the documentary, would develop.

This approach becomes almost inevitable, given that when a documentary aims to tell a story it has to do so through one or more characters. For this reason, it is no surprise that some authors, like Miller (1980: 119), recommend personalizing stories, as a human face helps the viewer identify with the subject matter.

In the field of the nature documentary, there is a well-known technique of making animals and plants into characters. For example, in one of his programmes, (*The Masked Dormouse I*, sequence 6) Rodríguez de la Fuente explicitly refers to the dormouse as "the protagonist of our story" and refers to the animal as "an elf, that is going to begin one of the most wonderful adventures of his life". In the same programme one of the enemies of the masked dormouse is presented as a "master vixen", thus giving it a clear portrayal as a literary character.

The characterizations used by Cousteau are less explicit. However, the animals which appear in his documentaries are also

presented, to a certain degree, as characters which take part in a story. Cousteau refers, for example, to penguins as being faithful to their spouses during the mating season (*Submarine Adventure*, "The Flight of the Penguins", sequence 7). In this way, it is suggested that these animals are capable of taking moral decisions, eclipsing the fact that they act according to instinct.

It is in these types of characterizations that some authors have seen ethical connotations, for which reason they are linked to the moral rating of these actions. Quintero Meza (1991: 394–5) refers to this issue as follows:

Information as a narrative transmits an ethical standpoint, for which reason it situates the protagonist within a world with a sense of finality, where actions are related to the idea of good or evil, in accordance to the final goal which is proposed in each case.

In the same vein, Roger Silverstone (1985: 170) criticizes the fact that certain television programmes carry out a search for heroes and villains. According to Silverstone, documentaries tend to look for characters that can be included in one of these two categories, so as to adapt the programme to what viewers are used to.

David Attenborough (1994) is in favour of using this technique because, for him, a good script is "a good story, in which you worry about who is in it and what is going to happen". From his point of view it is totally justified to consider animals as characters who take part in a story:

Not only do I justify thinking of them as characters, they are characters. I mean, these are animals I can identify. To give an example, in a sequence with a whale and a sea lion, I know her, that she is female, that she has been coming here for the last 10 years, that she had a son last year, who is right by her side, and that she always behaves in a certain way. That is what happens, there's no exaggeration, I don't make it up. How else could I tell this story? Of course they're characters.

This approach becomes evident in various sequences in which some animals and plants take on roles as characters, whose desires trigger the actions shown. In general, characters appear to be cast as beings equipped with a tremendous ability to solve the problems or conflicts that nature presents to them. And, as has been mentioned when discussing the anthropomorphic approach, these abilities usually produce actions which seem to be carried out freely, instead of being the result of a biological necessity.

3.3.3 Elements of Conflict and Suspense

As discussed earlier (section 3.3.1), some documentaries use a dramatic structure in which one or more characters comes face to face with conflict. This approach is very common, not only in science programmes but also in other documentaries and news reports.

The study carried out between 1984 and 1986 by McCartney (1987: 163) on the content of daily newspapers, magazines, and television news broadcasts, shows that situations involving conflict can be found, usually, in the main news stories and reports published by the media. This study shows that in the media there are, at least, eighteen different types of conflict that are repeated in the news items analysed, and concludes that reports are written around conflict because that is what creates interest.

Many television news broadcasts also tend to focus on situations of conflict. In a study on the reports of the programme "20/20", broadcast on the North American channel ABC, Idrovo (1991: 619) points out that these present a structure in which conflict is presented in the format of man versus society or the individual versus the institution. In documentaries it is also common to aim to keep viewer interest by positioning a series of obstacles or conflict situations in the path of characters, as they move towards their goals. As Feldman (1990: 83) points out "without obstacles, there is no conflict and without conflict there is no interest".

In his typology of documentaries, Nichols (1991: 19) differentiates between four modes of representation: expository, observational, interactive, and reflexive. The expository mode is that

which is used in traditional documentaries (Flaherty, Grierson, etc.), in which an omnipresent voice completes the information presented through the images. The mode based on observation, as used in *direct cinema* (Leacock, Pennebaker, etc.), is that which aims to record reality, trying to make the presence of the camera interfere as little as possible, if at all, on the subject. The third mode, termed interactive, was used by documentary producers in *cinema vérité* and aims to find people's reactions in front of a camera, thus highlighting, at the same time, the role of the film producer. Finally, in the reflexive mode, as can be seen in work like *Man with a Camera*, by Vertov, the role of the film maker forms part of the documentary. Expository documentaries usually present a problem that is later analysed and finally solved. On the other hand, documentaries based on observation present structures which are closer to those of a conflict that has to be resolved. However, according to Nichols, the dynamics of problem-solution is always present. The point of view presented by Nichols suggests that, independently of the narrative mode used, the presence of conflict is the very essence of many documentaries.

In the case of nature documentaries, conflict always appears to be related to the struggle of living things to survive. These conflicts are of three types: an individual facing a hostile environment, an individual against a predator, and finally, an individual face to face with another from the same species, in order to defend territory or compete for females.

Given that these three types of conflict are present in nature itself, the role of the documentary producer is simply to record them, in such a way that the representation reinforces his or her admiration for the reality of nature.

A clear example of the importance of presenting a strong conflict can be found in the documentary *March of the Penguins* (*La marche de l'empereur*, 2005) by Luc Jacquet and Yves Darondeau. This film follows the annual journey of the penguins to their traditional breeding ground in Antarctica. The conflict of

surviving under extreme condition is one of the fundamental elements that keeps the viewer's interest.

The aim is not, therefore, to represent conflict through the action of the narrating subject, as occurs, for example in the works of Cousteau. In the latter, conflict appears frequently in the relationship between the scientific team and nature or, in general, between man and the natural world.

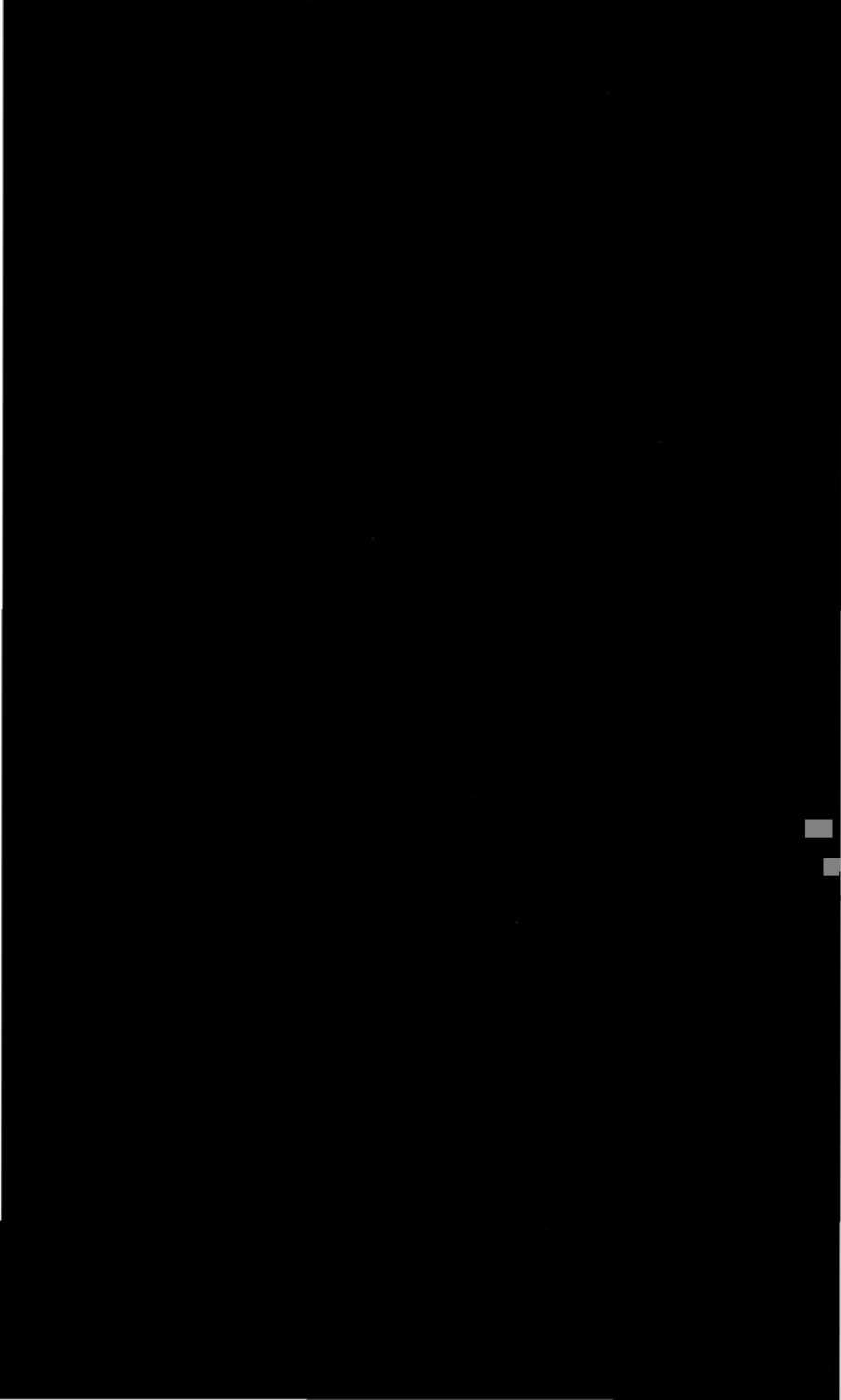
When an audiovisual narrative is set up around one or more characters that try to reach certain goals, the possibility arises of using dramatic techniques, similar to those used in the construction of fictional narrative. One of the most important is suspense.

As Eugene Vale (1992:124) states, suspense is the uncertainty produced in the viewer in terms of the character's capacity to reach, or not, his objective. In order to achieve this, it is necessary that the viewer clearly understand the aim of the character and the obstacles which prevent the aim from being fulfilled.

According to Alfred Hitchcock, (in Truffaut, 1974: 59-60), suspense is the most powerful means available to audiovisual narrative to keep the viewer's attention. For this film director, considered to be the master of this technique, suspense is not the same as fear, nor is it comparable to mystery. In a detective film, for example, the mystery as to who the murderer is cannot be considered to be true suspense, as it is more "a curiosity devoid of emotion, and emotion is a crucial ingredient in suspense".

For Attenborough (1997) suspense is an important element, which he specifically looks for when he is researching subjects, and which he bears in mind when writing the script. From his point of view, this importance is logical, because suspense is the ideal tool with which to keep the viewer interested in what is being narrated.

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they show extreme situations fights which are a matter of life or death. For this reason, they may have a certain cathartic effect, as they represent actions that would otherwise be excessively harsh in man.

A superb example and an excellent sequence of the use of this technique in a documentary film can be found in BBC's *Leopard. The Agent of Darkness. A Wildlife Special* (1999). Using infrared lenses, the film shows a leopard hunting at night. The sequence, which relies mainly on the image itself, follows the difficulties the animal has hunting, creating in the viewer the feelings of doubt and emotional involvement.