

Multimodal Rhetoric in the Wildlife Documentary, “My Octopus Teacher”

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Abstract : While rhetoric goes back as far as Aristotle who focalised its meaning as the “art of persuasion”, most scholars have focused on elocutio and dispositio canons, neglecting the rhetorical impact of multimodal texts, such as documentaries. Film documentaries are being increasingly rhetoric, often used by wildlife conservationists for influencing people to become more mindful about humanity’s connection with nature. This paper examines the award-winning film documentary, “My Octopus Teacher”, which depicts naturalist, Craig Foster’s unique discovery and relationship with a female octopus in the southern tip of Africa, the Cape of Storms in South Africa. It is anchored in Leech and Short’s (2007) framework of linguistic and stylistic categories – comprising lexical items, grammatical features, figures of speech and other rhetoric features, and cohesiveness – with particular foci on diction, anthropomorphic language, metaphors and symbolism. It also draws on Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) multimodal analysis to show how verbal cues (the narrator’s commentary), visual images in motion, visual images as metaphors and symbolism, and aural sensory images such as music and sound synergise for rhetoric effect. In addition, the analysis of “My Octopus Teacher” is guided by Nichol’s (2010) narrative theory; features of a documentary which foregrounds the credibility of the narrative as a text that represents real events with real people; and its modes of construction, viz., the poetic mode, the expository mode, observational mode and participatory mode, and their integration – forging documentaries as multimodal texts. This paper presents a multimodal rhetoric discussion on the sequence of salient episodes captured in the slow moving one-and-a-half-hour documentary. These are: (i) The prologue: on the brink of something extraordinary; (ii) The day it all started; (iii) The narrator’s turmoil: getting back into the ocean; (iv) The incredible encounter with the octopus; (v) Establishing a relationship; (vi) Outwitting the predatory pyjama shark; (vii) The cycle of life; and (viii) The conclusion: lessons from an octopus. The paper argues that wildlife documentaries, characterized by plausibility and which provide researchers the lens to examine the ideologies about animals and humans, offer an assimilation of the various senses – vocal, visual and audial – for engaging viewers in stylized compelling way; they have the ability to persuade people to think and act in particular ways. As multimodal texts, with its use of lexical items; diction; anthropomorphic language; linguistic, visual and aural metaphors and symbolism; and depictions of anthropocentrism, wildlife documentaries are powerful resources for promoting wildlife conservation and conscientizing people of the need for establishing a harmonious relationship with nature and humans alike.

Keywords : documentaries, multimodality, rhetoric, style, wildlife, conservation

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