

1, 2, 3, Once Again

Directed by Vasco Diogo

Country: Portugal

Year of production: 2018

Genre: Experimental Documentary



Synopsis

A group of four elderly in a mental institution are introduced to their 5th group member: Natividade. They are drawn into games of lyrics and songs and along the process of integrating Natividade they find themselves embarked on an almost extra-sensorial journey led by their therapist. Aware or not, their actions seem to vibrate beyond their senses to an almost transcendental realm.

Idea

The film is aiming to tackle the theme of Alzheimer and the case of the elderly diagnosed with it and aims to explore the therapeutic methods of dealing with this condition in a 'ludic' way (as director **Vasco Diogo** himself states), through music, poetry and drama games. This does not only sound original but also sets up propitious grounds for an experimental approach. It also retains a plentiful exploration potential, raising expectations for a dynamic unfolding of the 'story', full of struggles with the difficult character of the elderly and stirring curiosity regarding the original therapeutical methods to countervail them. Despite the batch of documentaries and short films out there taking on the same tangent themes: old age and mental health, be it Alzheimer, Parkinson or dementia, the experimental side of **1,2,3 Once Again** is expected to weigh heavily in setting it apart from its kindreds.

By virtue of this the film takes on a challenging mission requiring a clear plan and high precision when putting it into practice. Is **1,2,3 Once Again** bound to its promise?

RATING: Very Good.

Script



The degree of experimentalism adopted in the film is rather perceivable at a technical level than at a structural or conceptual one. Its experimental side is experienced through acoustical and visual editing effects such as echoed sounds or outline-negative optical video effects. These effects sometimes have a strange impact on the viewer leaving the impression of a third party perspective as if someone else was watching. This is nevertheless interesting but in absence of visually explaining their purpose an unaccomplished sense for a logical

structure is coming through. Applying the negative outline effect is insufficient to create conceptual order and its ambition to warrant for the experimental core of the film might be self-unsustainable.

The above combine with the impression that the film looks like a collection of footage improvised on during postproduction making the chances to read into a well conceived (artistic) plan dim. Hence the narration of the story emerges very slow and knotty demanding for the viewers' full focus.

There are nevertheless elements inspiring the creative mind to look for a structure, a meaning, a decipherable code that will reveal a certain series of explanations or that will at least facilitate some sensorial wisdom that will lead to intellectual or emotional enrichment. A ritual invocation therefore emerges: 'those who love suffer'. It is hard not project this quote onto the case of each of the 5 elderly and contemplate on their lives and beloved ones. Their loneliness suddenly becomes perceptible, almost embarrassing for the viewer stirring compassion.

Another editing effect used for experimental reasons is the 'play backwards editing effect' enabling 'time' as a sub-theme. The empty room with its still chairs is inhabited by the dreamy silhouettes of the elderly walking backwards like ghosts from the past visiting the future. Is it an uprising against time? Or is it a transcendence beyond it? That's for the audience to decide for themselves. A third trend that can be noted in **Vasco Diogo's** film is repetition. Each of the 5 characters are encouraged by their therapist to repeat certain lyrics until eventually songs and poems emerge as tools for learning and detachment from old age and hardships that come with it.

Despite these hints and stimuli the exploration of the idea seems to have been brought at a still; except for the editing effects applied during postproduction the audience witnesses the group of elderly sitting in the same room for most of the time and trying to follow the instructions of a therapist they barely see. The purpose of the spoken words or their logic is obscure in the beginning but they nicely shape into poems and games before the end of the film, this however takes a rather very long time nurturing a bit too much imprecision and fuelling the sense of absurd. This doesn't help the film's dynamism inspiring a rather still mood that risks to turn into difficult viewing experience. It also reverberates over the pace of the film making it tedious.

The script doesn't manage to elucidate what happens in the artist's mind. It's ultimately a game of guessing which the public might or might not buy. While experimental films are not always narrative - and don't need to be - they need to have a certain degree of aesthetics and/ or symbolism attached to validate them.

RATING: Satisfactory -.



Cinematography & Editing

Cinematography is straightforward. It has suffered no grading or aestheticising process whatsoever. Framing is also often quite basic exploring too few of the benefits of depth of field and taking little advantage of the visual compositional rules.

Some occasional empty frames however have a peculiar hypnotising effect on the eye looking like a present abandoned to the embers of the past. An active reminiscence of the silhouettes of these old people that once existed. No one remembers them but their memory still haunts the chairs as if they had passed into another existence and briefly return at times afraid to be forgotten.

RATING: Satisfactory.

Dialogue

Dialogue is characterised by repetitions. From voice off the therapist trains the elderly to repeat the same lines, the same short verses over and over again.

It's a training for memory... it helps them stay focused and connected to the present. A song, a poem, it is an apparent tiresome and chaotic learning process but in fact it helps them find order and purpose. If only it hadn't been so slow in revealing its function dialogue has an indisputable role in making sense of the psychological puzzle of these old comrades.

RATING: Good - (good minus).

Production Design

Production design would've helped considerably should it had been taken into account. Brown, beige and grey are dominant colours casting a brownish-orange hue over the cinematography. This imprints quite a dull mood to the film. It is important to remember that production design has a vital impact on the cinematography and the look of a film: a bucket of red flowers next to a blue window through which we see a yellow dress... Of course this is to be adjusted to each context and each film.

In this case there is only one shooting location a room with plastic chairs dominating the image.

RATING: Unsatisfactory.

Music & Sound

Music is scarce and most of the times it is represented by the elderly's improvisations and sounds or by the songs they sing together with the therapist. Whenever the characters improvise or exercise sounds this is very much in accordance with the experimental nature of **1,2,3 Once Again** despite it not being proper music; however the sound recording is rather echoey and unprocessed which is not in accordance with the cinematic rigour. This is rather a drawback and should at least suffer revision.

RATING: MUSIC - Satisfactory.

SOUND - Unsatisfactory.

Directing & Director's Vision

The director's creative vision is rather difficult to spot. It is not clear what he was after. But there are hints that something is going on.

Whatever lacking at a visual level and whatever dynamism is abolished by the confined shooting location and the lack of movement on set they are both compensated - to some extent - by certain interesting 'inserts' that undoubtedly stimulate imagination and



incite the viewer's... cognitive side of the brain.

Therefore, even a dull prop like a chair can easily emerge as a symbol - especially when you've got used to it being occupied by someone and shortly after you see a full row of them... empty. Something is going on in director **Vasco Diogo's** head with all the negative effects and peculiar sudden empty shots that suddenly start playing in reverse. There is a parallel dimension we are almost sure it is invoked and this shouldn't be overlooked or disregarded.

Vasco Diogo's vision might often pass as hermetic or might fall a bit 'heavy' on the viewer, but at some level something galvanising takes place in the brain pushing it to intellectual and sensorial exploration.

RATING: Satisfactory -.

Film's Ending | Array of Meanings

Vasco Diogo's 1,2,3 Once Again leaves the impression of an unmet opportunity to explore an otherwise common idea in a unique way. The editing effects and some sub-themes used by the director encourage to a meaningful exploration of the subject matter.

Trying to get along with each other and with their therapist, in this enclosed saloon, the five (5) elderly look as if they had been sentenced for their old-age; ostracised and marginalised where they can be coped with.

(continued...)

Film's Ending | Array of Meanings (continued)

But the experimental direction the director is trying to install suggests they might've just involuntarily been guided to the right place - one where they are actually about to meet their supreme purpose (despite having been classified as purposeless). The space they've landed conforms to different laws governed by games and songs which have a cathartic effect upon those who embrace it. This is an almost inner initiatory journey: one where magic spells and invocations - 'those who love, suffer' - will provoke memories and stimulate introspection leading to self-knowledge. The repetition of games and poems will instil self-acceptance and lead to inner peace. The first step is to give in to the process and trust your guide, your initiation: in our case the therapist. To achieve 'enlightenment' one must respect and follow the ritual. It might seem that it is all chaotic and pointless but every small action reverberates like a prayer reaching a dimension beyond senses - which is suggested to us, the public, by the use of the negative-film editing effects throughout the project. Persistence is the key: 1,2,3 once again!; until it becomes a way of living, a



reflex until it treads by itself. And then order suddenly arises where before there was only chaos and oblivion; a new sense of existence is revealed to these old and tired pawns of faith. Right there and then in that moment they have stopped resisting the introduction into their new condition as old people, they have accepted the new procedure required by tis and they have stepped across a temporal and spatial border into a space that will accept them; they have all transcended subjugating time and swapping places with the present, turning it into a recollection which they will revisit as a statement of their own victory.

Something sublime is unveiled at this moment; being it accidental or a premeditated outcome of the director's creative process this small reward confers a feeling of liberation.

RATING: Very Good.

Final Conclusions

While contemplating on [1,2,3 Once Again](#)'s structure and final embodiment, this final, conclusive majestic apprehension of its meanings, described above emerges as a forged grandiloquence, an overestimation of value. Too long in order to be sustained by its linear unfolding, its stiff and still expression and its prosaic look this experimental doc gets dangerously close to the border of self-indulgency. There is a risk that watching it the viewer might judge it for its disregard for pace, cinematography and storytelling.

Still it would be unfair to deprive the film from its sense of meaningful grandeur may it so be that this is deeply hidden in its DNA or even more so: purely imagined. The fact that the brain might get stimulated enough to spark such judgements perhaps points to the unconscious velleities of the artist that crave to surface. It is practice and knowledge that will help them meet their superlative artistic manifestation.

Vasco Diogo's film lays itself out as a rather unrefined show laborious to view but those least judgemental about experimental film making might just find an unexpected way to read into unforeseen and unexpected under-layers of significance. What [1,2,3 Once Again](#) delivers is a hunch, an instinct, a premonition and has a strange way of mirroring back one's patience with themselves face to face with sensorial exploration.

Reviewed by Vlad Dorofte



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