

Review: *Aquarela* (2018)

Documentary, 89 min.

Directed by Viktor Kossakovsky

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Language: Russian, English, Spanish

‘I wanted, from the very first second, to separate my film from what people call documentary and immediately tell my viewers that they are watching something else’, director Viktor Kossakovsky tells me after the premiere of his latest work *Aquarela* at this year’s London Film Festival. Following the dynamics of water, the Russian documentarian creates a sensory journey through the fourth element’s uncanny, ever-changing nature.

Filmic images often have their own independent lives in the memory of their viewers. Thinking back to *¡Vivan las Antipodas!* (2011), one of the most memorable images is Kossakovsky’s camera lens adoption of a simple water basin as it satisfies a lion’s thirst. In the deadly proximity with the lion’s kiss, we are forced into thambos - a feeling of stunned amazement when witnessing the glory of a phenomenon we know we should not be seeing. In *Aquarela* the Russian cinematic virtuoso achieves similar effects, positioning his camera in spaces at once unlikely and hyperreal. Shooting in a purely observational manner, Kossakovsky delivers a cinematic experience much in tune with the tactile work of the Sensory Ethnography Lab, namely Lucien Castaing-Taylor’s *Leviathan* (2012). Upon its epic opening, *Aquarela* takes us to the frozen surface of Lake Baikal where a few locals engage in the puzzling activity of cutting ice blocks. Eventually, we learn that they are a group of volunteers who dig out cars that have drowned under the melting ice of the lake. The serene slowness of this sequence gradually builds a tension that culminates in an unforeseen tragedy. Kossakovsky’s situational frame witnesses a car driving across the lake when it suddenly collapses under the ice. Within minutes, the serene landscape transforms into a scene of horror as we see the volunteers trying to save the life of a man trapped underneath the ice. Despite the volunteers’ best efforts, the same ice that broke so easily a few minutes ago now takes the man as hostage in its deadly, unbreakable embrace. With no need for commentary, nature’s cruel indifference manifests itself *par excellence*, but Kossakovsky refuses to make spectacle out of this tragedy, and his camera respectfully departs from the scene.

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No piece of fiction is able to create a scene with such tragic and unnerving intensity. Our gaze is granted an otherwise impossible omniscience, making us direct witnesses of an apocalypse that accommodates the paradox of an event documented in time yet set for the future.

Replicating the movement of water, the camera's own movement is dictated by the water flow. Initially a small bubble inside an ice block, the water soon grows into ocean. In its transformation from a bubble to a flow, water transports us to the Arctic landscapes and the colossal glaciers of Greenland. There, we witness the untamable ice juxtaposed with life and civilisation inside a local village, but, as the ice melts into water, landscapes change too fast.

There is a degree of magic in the way Kossakovsky communicates water's delicate truths. Here, on this planet, all waters are connected. If we could continuously ride on a stream, we could travel from one end of the world to the other. Somehow, *Aquarela* manages to embody the idea of such movement. Water creates us, connects us, dictates our lives, but water decides when they end too. Photographing the untamable element, the film effortlessly, yet without preaching, becomes an environmental warning.

The almost megalomaniac soundtrack of Eicca Tompinen occurs in intervals at the beginning, middle, and ending of the film, plotting explosions within this otherwise naturalistic spectacle. In the editing room, Kossakovsky works closely with Molly Malene Stensgaard (best known as an editor of Lars Von Trier's films) to create a sensual montage that lets us ride the waves of this glorious yet deadly journey across the waters of the world. An unacknowledged work of sensory ethnography, this is a documentary that grants us the objective eye we need to see beauty in the midst of an apocalypse.

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