doi: 10.25038/am.v0i24.425

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# Extension of Avant-Garde Practices towards New Media: Possible Theoretical Readings of Documentary Art Film *Segunda Vez*

Abstract: The subject of this analysis is the 94-minute documentary art film Segunda Vez (Second Time Around, 2018) by contemporary Spanish artist Dora Garcia, whose script consists of six separate sections arranged in an authentic narrative whole. The content of the film material is constructed on the basis of a complex theoretical and practical exploration of archival material and the original writings of the Argentine avant-garde theorist Oscar Masotta who has devoted significant work questioning the societal and artistic context of the Happening in the 1960s, as a marginal counterpoint to the avant-garde developments that deviated from the cultural norms of Western civilization. Garcia's work represents a complex intertextual network of historical, literary, and philosophical data that encompasses the sensory aspect of the viewer's perception, creating a coherent film unit in which the author uses the mechanisms of narration to create a conceptual artwork. The main goal of this research is to provide a theoretical basis for analysis through narratology, editing as a conceptual tool, and final reading according to semiotics, in order to interpret artistic language as a possible domain for absorbing the experiences of art in extension.

Keywords: happening; re-performing; documentary film; conceptual narratology; semiotics.

Dora Garcia's documentary film *Segunda Vez*, establishes a specific relation between *production of a film* and *conceptual art*, creating a complex *structure* that ties different stories into one artistic fabula, where the author is guided by the principles of *editing* as a contemporary method of merging, separating, and creating essential distance in readability of artistic expression, but also unique artistry in the morphological representation of an idea. Parts that are primarily recorded are separate scripts and re-performed happenings: *El helicóptero* (The Helicopter) (1967) first performed by Oscar Masotta, re-performed again and filmed in San Sebastian in 2015; *Para inducir* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Distance in readability is considered essential for the models of conceptual art, meaning that there has to be something to unchain, as information that is communicated through the media, as LeWitt states: "[...] conceptual art is 'made to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye." See Alexander Alberro, "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966–1977," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), xx.

el espíritu de la imagen (To Induce the Spirit of the Image) (1966) first performed by Oscar Masotta and re-performed and filmed in Buenos Aires in 2016; El mensaje fantasma (The Ghost Message) (1967) first performed by Oscar Masotta and re-performed and filmed in Buenos Aires in 2016; adapted scenario by the book Segunda Vez by Julio Cortazar (1974) and filmed in Buenos Aires in 2016; La Eterna, after Museo de la Eterna (1967) by Macedonio Fernandez, filmed at Universiteitsbibliotheek KU Leuven in 2016; and *Lazarus*, a film shown in *El helicóptero*, after *Calling* (1965) by Allan Kaprow. Each film set begins with no announcement of the start of filming and in the process of editing the author introduces original photographs of original happenings, additional historical facts and data to 'connect' the separate elements into a narrative whole and to provide historical linear linkage between the original societal and historical context (the 1960s in Argentina), with the context (present time, 2015-16) in which they are re-performed. The use of a mnemonic collage in the beginning of every section ushers the introduction of sequences of still-unseen parts that subsequently follow in the linear embroidery of the story, as well as through the static photographic frames achieved through the role of the camera position, frame-by-frame pictorial observation, and motion frames in which it is stressed the spontaneity of film-making typical of a documentary genre.

### Happening as a medium?

One of the practices that emerged from avant-garde art is precisely the *happening*,<sup>2</sup> a practice worth wondering: can the happening be interpreted as an expressive art form today as authentically as in its earliest historical appearances? And do we seek *authenticity* when it comes to re-performing a happening?<sup>3</sup> Most of the expressive media forms are not used in their primary form, but they, as well as the variability of time and contexts they are performed in, change their appearance in accordance with the diversity of advances, appearing in multitude forms, contributing towards expression of modernity, challenging the hybridizations, and configurations that exist today as possible approaches in artistic language. Established as an avant-garde practice, it proceeds the continuity of the *new avant-garde* through modernity, and therefore justifiably contemporary art recognizes it as an existing entity (in the present) and adopts it in the construction and conception of *new expressive forms* that create new artistic contexts and meanings. Media convergence opens a new diegetic field of the event, involving the viewer as an active participant in the completion of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> "Although some of their advocates claim they are not, Happenings, like musicals and plays, are a form of theatre. Happenings are a new form of theatre, just as collage is a new form of visual art, and they can be created in various styles just as collages (and plays) are." See Michael Kirby, *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology* (New York: E.P Dutton & Co., Inc., 1965), 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> According to Dora Garcia "[...] how identical to the original can, or should, that repetition be?" See Dora Garcia, "Introduction: How Masotta Was Repeated," in *Oscar Masotta: Segunda Vez Cahier No. 1, A research project led by Dora García*, edited by Dora Garcia (Oslo: Oslo National Academy of the Arts and Torpedo Press, 2017), 6.

meaning. As Lev Manovich notes: "Finally, in the 1960s, continuing where Futurism and Dada left of, new forms of art such as happenings, performance and installation turned art explicitly participational." The performance of the happening is not just a performance of a "theatrical" action recorded through the film, but an event that takes place within another virtual space that has its own characteristics as an event, the event that is created between the trinity: the participant (characters), the mediator (camera eye) and the recipient (film viewer) is an open introspective field. The result of the shooting, i.e. the documentary principle of shooting, is a step towards entering the new interactive space and identifying the viewer with the eye of the cameraman. By the act of re-performing the happenings, Garcia shows an example of an extension of the avant-garde practices, with possible enunciation as new media configuration, re-performing a happening, intentionally filmed and edited into the documentary art film.

# How is the artwork conceptualized?

The main idea of the artwork suggests an antithesis of Allan Kaprow's claim, who has stated that the happening cannot be repeated twice,<sup>5</sup> and it merges a starting point with the essence of André Lepecki's text "Just Again", while the act of re-performing the happenings in a documentary represents syntagmatic structure based on data, descriptions, and photographs, but without the possibility of re-recording. The idea of making a *documentary film* in which can be shot only what is available at the moment represents a conceptual artistic approach, which introduces new *contextual time* and *space* as transformative categories in contemporary performative art through repetition (second time) and event (which will repeat).

This processes and modes in which avant-garde art appeared, characteristics of the medium that transposes the messages of the moving idea in that time got significant attention in the writings of Oscar Masotta.

To put it another way, at this moment in the process of contemporary art, at a time marked not only by the appearance of new "genres" of expression, like the happening, but also by the fact that the very idea of "genre" as a limit has come to seem precarious or perishable (theater mixes its techniques with those of film, dance blends with painting, film shows the strong influence of the comic strip), it becomes increasingly impossible to remain indifferent to this small proposition of all avant-garde work or exhibitions (and difficult, likewise, not to take seriously the very idea of avant-garde). The problems of contemporary art reside less in the search for new content than in research of the "media" for the transmission of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), 71.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> García, "Introduction: How Masotta Was Repeated," 6.

that content. "Media" here means generally what it means in advertising jargon: the information media (television, film, magazines, and newspapers). And if there is talk now of not concerning oneself with content, it does not mean that avant-garde art is moving toward a new purism or a worse formalism. What is occurring today in the best pieces is that the contents are being fused to the media used to convey them.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly he was aware of the *future of the medium* itself, as a hybrid machine that will be the only possible mode of multi-entity that would revive the avant-garde in the contemporary future, and the only urgency that will keep this form alive will be a conquest for content-based art. Here we can align the very idea of Dora Garcia for the revival of the content fundus present in Masotta's work, with the course of the future of the medium and its hybridity.

The (re)use of media as the basic material in structuring and organizing an informative message dates back to the advent of DADA practice, systematization as old as the avant-garde media being appropriated in the new media today. Raoul Hausmann writes about *photomontage* as one of the oldest forms of appropriation in Dadaist practices, but in addition to collages on a flat surface, they created ambient, heterogeneous, and often contradictory structures, figurative and spatial, creating an image of space and image.<sup>7</sup> Photography, as the only medium that freezes time and space in a static framework, through the process of collage and assembly, fuses art and life with the discovery of generic meaning in new contexts. Unlike photography, which remains as a potentially reproducible material, happening is ephemeral act, but documentation (film - based on static and moving images) allows for its appropriation8 as well as new reading in contemporary artistic contexts. What is new about the relation between photography and happening is their appearance in a documentary film (in an artistic context - an art film) that gathers meaningful content present in original contexts but generates new contexts guided by conceptual composition based on presupposed conceptual narratology.9 Memory is an indispensable segment in the creation of the new, which seeks to transcend the old, reshape or undo, it must be historically restored, re-historicized in order to revive the present and supposedly to interact with the present context. So, historically seen in overall contemporary art it

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Oscar Masotta, "After Pop, We Dematerialize (1967)," in *Segunda Vez, Cahier No.2, A research Project led by Dora Garcia*, edited by Dora Garcia (Oslo: Oslo National Academy of Arts, 2017), 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Raoul Hausmann, "Photomontage (1931)," in *Appropriation, Documents of Contemporary art*, ed. by David Evans (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Appropriation means not only selection and representation in new artistic context, but also act of re-performing the original happening according to existing data.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The conceptual here is a category that covers the structural model of project conception, while narratology, as atypical of conceptual projects, enters as a possible naming of this artistic approach due to the understanding of film as language (Jean Mitry), the combination of these two terms is possible due to the introduction of a commentary (in the Brechtian sense of the term) by the narrator-artist, and guided by editing, which regulates the narrative dimension of the film-work, with a certain distance in readability, and hence the possible interpretation of this artistic manner as *conceptual narratology*.

is not modernization but re-imagination, inventiveness. Photomontage is not used in this film in Dadaistic sense, but photo collage, as method for introduction of what follows, <sup>10</sup> breaks the linear narration and implies necessary distance in readability, in order to provide conceptual plane on the visual aspect of the art work *Segunda Vez*.

The *construction of meaning* in this particular *archive-based* material communicates with what is considered as a characteristic for conceptual art, if not crucial, but advocated by conceptualism, where the distance of legibility can be positioned at both *morphological* and *semantic* levels. The composition of the frame of the associative-morphological cognitive field is determined by the *image*, which is directly correlated with the imaginative form of thinking, addressed by *symbolic codes*<sup>11</sup> that appear on the semantic level.

The image serves neither as illustration nor as support for thinking. This is in no way different from thought. Imaginative awareness involves knowledge, intentions and can include words and judgments. And by this we do not mean that judgment can be made about an image, but that in the very structure of the image, judgments can be taken into a special form, namely an imaginative form.<sup>12</sup>

The structure, in this case, was created by a specific expressive language – sublimated into *film text*, which represents convergence on the media and content levels, but retaining the meaning of the semantic plane.<sup>13</sup>

The difference between expressions and content and their interaction in the function of the sign is fundamental to the structure of the language. Any character, any character system, any character-ordered figure system, any language, contains an expression form and a content form.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> In *Segunda Vez* linear narration is interrupted by introducing sequences (extracted from the successive film units) about the following chapter, on the very beginning of the first documentary, and between every following one. Other interruptions of the linearity are made in the moment when the spectator feels that has all the control over the plot, but the story goes back to the beginning and right to the end, suggesting full control of the narrator over the fabula.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> The symbolic picture of the street narrated in the documentary *El mensaje fantasma*, is explicitly described in the writings of Oscar Masotta: "My intention, however, was not only to make a happening, but to point out the difference between two genres of works, to exemplify the difference between the happening and 'media art'. I wanted to point out at the same time that the idea of making works of the latter type was already present in happenings and that the passage emerged as a 'logical extension." See Masotta, "After Pop, We Dematerialize (1967)," 18.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Role of the Image in Mental Life," in *The Psychology of Imagination* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1948), 137.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Construction of the total plane of the visual image (strung images that represent one common image) that makes this specific documentary exceptional, is the syntagma of a film text.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Louis Hjelmslev, "Expression and content," in *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 59.

Regardless of the dimension of the plan on which the encoding takes place (two-dimensional in the photograph, three-dimensional in happening or in the movie frame as a medium for collection), *the symbol* is one that transforms the medium to a contextual level. Symbol creation is one of the hallmarks of postmodern techniques and procedures in the transition from modernism to contemporary art, which today is recognized as a continuation of conceptual art, <sup>15</sup> but symbolism, unlike postmodernism, does not exist on a morphological level; novelty and innovation in the creation of symbolic codes in contemporary art exist on the semantic level.

According to Mieke Bal, the basics of *narrative dimension* are determined by the suggestion of a three-layer distinction: text, story, plot, <sup>16</sup> as a starting point for determining interpretive methodology within the theories of narrative texts. In the overall picture of the narrative context, it does not mean that these layers exist independently of one another, and that is precisely the skill of constructing an artistic statement such as Garcia's art film.

The artistic realization *Segunda Vez* of Dora García, correlates through several media categories, including happening, photography and film image (text), all of which are linked in a *denotational-morphological* structure. While readability takes place through a *connotative* – Brechtian scheme, linking the form of quotations, interruptions (editing), symbolism (synthesis), putting the viewer in tension by direct participation, the construction of the new story takes place through the *synthesis* of denotations and connotations that the author creates on both morphological and conceptual levels.

Garcia uses *montage* as a tool for narratology and a semiotic axis of readability. Editing (montage) is one of the key steps in creating a *dynamic* perception. The *use of montage* as a creative tool, possesses both technical and conceptual potentials to directly mediate between *abstract* content elements and *visible* elements that are combined into a conceptual film image during the editing process.

Neither in the cinematographic medium (nor anywhere) doesn't exist a supreme code that would impose its always-the-same minimal units on all parts of all films: the films offer a textual surface – temporal and spatial at the same time – a weaving in which multiple codes, each for themselves, they set their own minimum units, and they, again during throughout the film's narrative connect with each other, intertwine and overlap, though their boundaries do not have to overlap.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Aleš Erjavec, "Postmodernism and the post-socialist condition: 15 years after (2003–2018)," *SAJ – Serbian Architectural Journal* 9, 2 (2017): 161–2. As described in the writings of Oscar Masotta, the continuation in the 1960s was an extension to avant-gardes. More specifically within the term "media art", that supported re-performing of the happenings. See Masotta "After Pop, We Dematerialize (1967)," 18.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Mieke Bal, Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, Second Edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Kristijan Mez, "Umnoženost kinematografskih kodova," in *Teorija filma*, ed. by Dr. Dušan Stojanović (Belgrade: Nolit, 1978), 498.

The frame of the physical space of the observer (as a window of limited size), is not neutral in the presentation of certain information. It filters, downloads, and deletes everything outside the box. But the skill of using *film frames* as a representative image of the concept of content is the one that establishes the artistic systems of organizing that static, finite, and physically enclosed space in order to establish a *relationship* with the observer at another level of thought, beyond the visible but still in the realm of the perceptual, suggestive, the one which is created by the distance, abstraction, editing, and finally the conceptual framework in which these elements coexist. Mike Bal on narrative readability implies openness to the concept:

In fact, logically speaking, the reader first 'sees' the text, not the plot. The plot is really the result of the reader's interpretation, an interpretation influenced by both the initial encounters with the text and the manipulations of the story.<sup>18</sup>

By using the dichotomy *montage* via *movement*, the project *Segunda Vez* sustains different in-frame motion dynamics as well as different camera movement dynamics. Movement as a *coding element* is essential for the displacement of *connotative* coding as a *signifier* of *denotative* codes by applying two principles of the semiological approach:

- the first refers to the *movement of subjects* within the film frame where the camera is static,
- the second refers to the *movement of the camera* where the subjects are static in a certain scene.

Additional *semiotic editing* of the coding process is achieved by *tonal montage*, that is, by focusing on the faces of the subjects looking somewhere, <sup>19</sup> not displaying the same frame where the views are focused, thereby achieving emotional tension in the recipient, expecting what follows. In film theory, several key names argue about the meaning of close-up filming. Lev Kuleshov believes that the *strongest impressions* are achieved through montage, not through editing whole scenes, but scenes in which every single editing piece shows only what is necessary for the viewer to see, and in the most comprehensive and in the clearest way. <sup>20</sup>

Garcia breaks the sequence of a single film flow (spatial and temporal), by *montage editing (montage via time)*, moving and overlapping the sequence of events from other film entities (separately recorded parts), creating *diachronicity* within the assumed film linearity, at the same time arranging the assembling parts into a coherent

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Bal, Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> This type of filming with the focus on human faces (close-up) is noticeable in the documentary film *Para inducir el espíritu de la imagen* (one of the filmed happenings).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Ljev Kulješov, "Montaža kao osnova filma," in *Teorija filma*, ed. by Dr. Dušan Stojanović, (Beograd: Nolit, 1978), 151.

logical total film whole. When alternately depicting special shots (pertinent units) of the same sequence referring to a temporal and spatial action, then it is an *alternate syntagm*, and this is the case in the narrative extension of individual film entities, but they are also broken by the introduction of segments from previous or subsequent actions, as a reminder to the viewer that the film narrative is actually larger and expanded than is currently told/perceivable in sequence. Displaying a sequence or projection of different frames from the same sequence into the internal structure of film coding represents *denotation* of simultaneity, while the insertion of elements from external film entities and their displacement from the source narratives leads to the structuring of diachronicity, which regarding the whole film time frame, is treated *connotatively* with respect to a synchronous *narrative whole*.

In her conceptual approach, Garcia structures the output from the conventional understanding of filmmaking, film sequences which, according to Lev Manovich, are a series of indeterminate images, a set of signifiers and a set of times that expose individual images, <sup>21</sup> transcending media fixations across a content context, happening, which is structured within film frames, as a series of temporal signifiers of the present, introducing interactivity in the field of legibility into the contemporary artistic context. <sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin writes for Bertold Brecht's epic theater: "To quote a text involves the interruption of its context." <sup>23</sup> The the cited form of a happening, or re-performing as morphology in an expressive element embedded in Garcia's film text, breaks the link with the original context, creating a new artistic context that simultaneously breaks – and also connects – fits, the real link with the original context through repetition in a given space and time. In this sense, this film language represents separation and convergence in a new expressive form, uniting the basic processes of actualization of contemporary methods, extending the thought concept from the past, beyond the present into the future.

Garcia constitutes a *new film time* and *space* that, according to the elements used (happening, documentation, re-performance, film image), creates perceptual material that can be potentially managed through the communication with the viewer. The essence of film expression, according to Vsevolod Pudovkin, is film material, which is not at all a real-time process in real time and space, but parts of a film in which the process was filmed, under the direct regulation of editing (montage). Creating an on-screen image, the author concentrates on splitting the work into action and undoing the action in real time, creating a *new film time*, essential for film expression.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Lev Manović, Jezik Novih Medija (Beograd: Clio, 2015), 141.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Interactivity is about readings, the viewer completes the narration with the help of cognition, because the film itself is not explicitly narrative in forming the overall image of the document, but the interaction is beyond the field of readability, into information that the viewer needs to know as historical facts to complete the story in his head and to understand the new approach as a creative collage of elements of narrative.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (Schocken Books, New York, 2007), 151.

There is a fundamental difference between what happens in reality and the screenplay that defines film as art.  $^{24}$ 

On the importance of editing in the process of film text creation and its possible relationship with cinematic semiotics, Christian Metz is underlined by Pudovkin's theory of film:

That the notion of editing, beyond all the specific meanings sometimes given (end-to-end coupling, accelerated montage, pure rhythmic principle, etc.), is in reality the sum of filmmaking: An isolated shot is not even a small fragment of film; it's just raw material, a real world photo. Only montage can move from photography to cinema, from slavish copying to art. Broadly defined, montage is simply inseparable from the composition of the work itself. <sup>25</sup>

The virtuous capacity to retain the photographic still frame in Garcia's film makes full use of it, showing that artistic choice, even in a specific artistic medium such as film, can be rearranged according to one's understanding or conceptualization of the morphological structure of the film language,<sup>26</sup> creating required distance for determination of conceptual narratology. We are not denying the fact here that editing is important in the process of making film text, but that it is used as one of the elements that are the tool of narrative composition and the mediator in the possible legibility of the text, story, and plot, and that it is a tool through which the artist manages the semantic principles of change the relationship of the signifier and the signified.<sup>27</sup> The process of *creating narratives* through *montage cuts* allows free *reorganization of meaning*. Signifying tends to make precise sections of discontinuous characters that correspond to so many discrete signifiers. By definition, it consists in informing amorphous semantism.<sup>28</sup>

 $<sup>^{24}</sup>$ Vsevold Pudovkin, "Filmski reditelj i filmski material," in *Teorija filma*, ed. by Dr. Dušan Stojanović, (Beograd: Nolit, 1978), 158.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Christian Metz, Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,1990), 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> What does film language mean when used in an artistic context, if, according to Jean Mitry, film language is not just a system of signs and symbols, an image of nothing? The structure of film language depends directly on the narrative dimension the author introduces to create a whole new set of existing images, so the art of film language is a multi-level construction. "By that, the art of film is language; it becomes a language if it is primarily a representation, and then thanks to that representation. It is a second-level language. It is not revealed as an abstract form that we can enrich with aesthetic properties, but just as that aesthetic property enriched with images of language." See Žan Mitri, "O jeziku bez znakova," in *Teorija filma*, ed. by Dr. Dušan Stojanović (Beograd: Nolit, 1978), 435.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> John E. Joseph, "The linguistic sign," in *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, ed. Carol Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 60.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Metz, Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema, 37.

### Conclusion

The methodology applied by Dora Garcia in constructing the film statement is conditioned by altering the sequence of events, creating *internal logic* that corresponds to the *status of the art object*, structuring authentic film time, independent of the quoted chronology of events (original time in performances (happenings) that is the subject of the re-performance).

The Fabula, understood as material or content that is incorporated into the story, is defined as a series of events. This series is constructed according to certain rules. We call it event logic [...] An event, however insignificant, always takes time. This time it has a hypothetical status: in the fabula, events did not actually happen, or at least their actual status is irrelevant to their internal logic.<sup>29</sup>

Garcia doesn't treat the fabula as yet completely fiction, the reality is abstracted from the context from which a significant part of the content material is taken, reworked, put into function of the new *narrative construction*, and the status inherent in the newly constructed content is relevant as a starting point for deconstructed archive material (the sub-context of the original happenings exists as a citation form in re-performed happenings).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Bal, Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, 7.

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Article received: April 21, 2020 Article accepted: July 1, 2020 Original scholarly paper