

THE
LONG
DISTANCE
RUNNER

THE PRODUCTION UNIT
ARCHIVE

No.

72

Documentary
Uncertainty

Documentary Uncertainty

Hito Steyerl

I vividly remember a strange broadcast a few years ago. On one of the first days of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, a senior CNN correspondent was riding in an armoured vehicle. He was jubilant as he stuck a direct broadcast cell phone camera out of the window. He exclaimed that never before had this type of live broadcast been seen. And that was indeed true. Because there was hardly anything to see on these pictures. Due to the low resolution, the only thing to be seen were green and brown blotches, slowly moving over the screen. Actually, the picture looked like the camouflage of combat fatigues; a military version of abstract expressionism. What does this type of abstract documentarism tell us about documentarism as such? It points at a deeper characteristic of many contemporary documentary pictures: the more immediate they become, the less there is to see. The closer to reality we get, the less intelligible it becomes. Let us call this 'the uncertainty principle of modern documentarism'.

But actually, this principle does not only apply to documentary pictures, but also to their theory. Because a lot of documentary theory is just as blurred as the pictures, which the correspondent transmitted from Iraq. The more we try to pinpoint the essence of the documentary, the less we are able to comprehend. The reason is that the notions used to describe them are just as ill-defined as the pictures. Let us take an obvious example: the role of the documentary in the field of contemporary art. Talking about this is complicated by two facts. The first is that there is no viable definition of 'documentary'. The second is that there is no viable definition of 'art' or even the 'field of contemporary art'. And if we still want to reflect on the connection of both, we have to face the fact that we barely know what we are talking about.

The same applies to most of the notions which are traditionally used to define the documentary. Terms like 'truth', 'reality', 'objectivity' and so on are characterised by the lack of any generally valid interpretation and of any clear cut definitions. Thus, we are faced with the first paradox:

the documentary form, which is supposed to transmit knowledge in a clear and transparent way, has to be investigated using conceptual tools, which are neither clear nor transparent themselves. The more real documentary seems to get, the more we are at a loss conceptually. The more secured the knowledge that documentary articulations seem to offer, the less can be safely said about them—all terms used to describe them turn out to be dubious, debatable and risky.

I do not want to reiterate, like in an exercise of Negative theology, all the definitions that the documentary mode fails to live up to. Most obviously, it is not consistently objective, whatever objectivity might mean in the first place; it contains facts without ever being able to be entirely factual. While it might aim to represent the truth, it usually misses it, at least according to its own standards. Poststructuralism has taught us how ‘reality’, ‘truth’ and other basic notions on which possible definitions of documentary rest are at best as solid as the fleeting reflections on a troubled surface of water. But before drowning in the uncertainty and ambiguity that these paradigms prescribe, let us perform one very old-fashioned Cartesian move. Because, amidst all this ambivalence, our confusion is the one thing which remains certain and even reliable. And it will invariably, if unconsciously, represent our reaction to documentary materials as such. The perpetual doubt, the nagging insecurity—whether what we see is ‘true’, ‘real’, ‘factual’ and so on—accompanies contemporary documentary reception like a shadow. Let me suggest that this uncertainty is not some shameful lack, which has to be hidden, but instead constitutes the core quality of contemporary documentary modes as such. The questions which they invariably trigger, the disavowed anxieties hidden behind apparent certainties, differ substantially from those associated with fictional modes. The only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our times is that we always already doubt if it is true.

Nothing but the truth

Doubting documentary representation is of course nothing new. It is as old as the documentary form itself. Its truth claims have always been

questioned, deconstructed or called arrogant. The general relationship towards documentary claims has always been one of a disavowed impasse. It oscillates between belief and incredulity, between trust and distrust, hope and disillusionment.

This is also the reason why the documentary form has always presented its audiences with philosophical problems. Whether or how they represent reality has forever been contested. The main argument runs between proponents of realism and constructivists. While the former believe that documentary forms reproduce natural facts, the latter see them as social constructions. Realists think that reality is out there and that a camera can capture its essence. Constructivists stress the function of ideology or understand truth as a function of power. Michel Foucault once coined the expression of a politics of truth.¹ According to constructivists the documentary form does not represent 'reality' but the 'will to power' of its producers.

But both positions are problematic. While realists believe in an objectivity that, more often than not, turns out to be extremely subjective and which has nonchalantly passed off hideous propaganda as truth, constructivists end up not being able to distinguish the difference between facts and blatant misinformation or, to phrase it more directly, between truth and plain lies. While the position of realists could be called naïve, the position of constructivists runs the danger of sliding into opportunistic and cynical relativism.

What do we make of this impasse? The lesson is that we should accept the intensity of the problem of truth, especially in an era in which doubts have become pervasive. The constant doubt about whether what we see is consistent with reality is not a shameful lack, which has to be disavowed, but on the contrary is the decisive quality of contemporary documentary forms. They are characterized by an often subliminal, but still nagging, uncertainty, as well as the question: Is this really true?

This principle of documentary uncertainty is obviously just a provisional definition of modern documentary; it is highly contextualised within

our historical moment. But at no time than in the contemporary context of globalised media circuits has it been more accurate. In this age of widespread anxieties, of precarious living conditions, of general uncertainties and media-provoked hysteria and panic, our belief in the truth claims articulated by anyone, let alone the media and their documentary output, is shaken. But at the same time, more than ever before, our living conditions depend on remote events that we have very little control over. The ubiquitous corporate news coverage which we endure on a daily basis sustains the illusion of control, while simultaneously demonstrating that we are reduced to the role of passive bystanders. While rehearsing attitudes of rational response, they transmit fear on a most basic, affective level. Thus, documentary forms articulate a fundamental dilemma of contemporary risk societies.² Viewers are torn between false certainties and feelings of passivity and exposure, between agitation and boredom, between their role as citizens and their role as consumers.

Documentarism in the field of art

It comes the field of art. In the 1990s, documentary forms became popular again after a twenty year long hiatus induced by Reaganism and the artistic dumbing down which came with it. During this time, the field of art suffered the same onslaught in the public sphere as the field of documentary production. Since the documentary mode was automatically associated with publicness, state funding and the arena of communicative rationality, in many cases, it was advocated by reflex within the field of art. Art also partly tried to assume the role of an alternative media circuit. This aspect has been pointed out by Stefan Jonsson, who argued, that the field of art could become some sort of alternative CNN, which would elucidate the blind spots of corporate journalism and of globalisation in general.³

But there were also other developments within the field of art in the 1990s, which made documentary modes an obvious choice for artists. First, the practice of so-called 'contextual art', in which producers tried to figure out the economic and political conditions of their own activi-

ties. Since documents were usually involved in assessing these parameters, working with or upon them was self-evident. Documents were used, or sometimes simply brandished, in order to evidence archival research, social inquiries or alternative knowledge production. A further affinity was created by the impact of Cultural Studies on the field of art and consequently there emerged a preoccupation with the politics of representation. The awareness of power relations within, not only documentary articulations, but all forms of representation, was heightened and in many cases also transformed by new modes of narration, which reflected their own implication in authority and in the hierarchies of knowledge production with their effects on gender and other social relations.

All of these influences, which are of course interconnected and overlapping, made documentary one of the most important characteristics of the field of art in the 1990s and in the early twenty-first century. But what did these developments mean? Within the wave of excitement associated with the use of social documentarism, important aspects of the character of documents were neglected by many producers. Since documentarism was automatically assumed to be enlightened and critical, many producers paid little attention to the fact that, on the contrary, documents are usually condensations of power. They reek of authority, certification, expertise and concentrate epistemological hierarchies. Dealing with documents is thus a tricky thing; especially if one aims to deconstruct power, one has to keep in mind, that existing documents are—as Walter Benjamin once wrote—mainly made and authorised by victors and rulers.

Thus, an ambiguous situation has been created within the field of art. Superficially, or on the content level, many documentary articulations seemed to erode or even attack unfair power structures. But on the level of form, by relying on authoritative truth procedures, the conventional documentaries have intensified the aura of the court room, the penitentiary or the laboratory within an field of art, which was already quite saturated with these mechanisms. The institution of the so-called White Cube has been criticised for providing a clinical constellation of gazes

with aesthetics and social values, which are actually quite similar to the ones deployed within conventional documentary modes. As is well known, documentary production has taken on forensic duties for a long time, and has functioned in the service of a large-scale epistemological enterprise that is closely linked with the project of Western colonialism. Reporting the so-called truth about remote people and locations has been closely linked to their domination. Not only mainstream documentary truth procedures, but even the features of the photographic technology, based as they are on military technology, testify to this historical link.

Jacques Ranciere has recently described the importance of these structures of seeing and knowing as the 'distribution of the sensible'. According to him, the political component of any aesthetic endeavour is precisely located in the way in which certain aesthetic regimes enable certain visibilities or articulations and disable others. Thus, the political importance of documentary forms does not primarily reside in their subject matter, but in the ways in which they are organised. It resides in the specific distributions of the sensible implemented by documentary articulations. And this applies not only to corporate documentarism, but also to those documentary productions which take up their standards, their truth procedures, their formal vocabulary, and their scientific and objectivist attitude.

Beyond representation

Even the claims of a more radical politics of representation fail to live up to the challenge that contemporary documentary presents. The documentary form as such is now more potent than ever, even though we believe less than ever in documentary truth claims. Documentary reports are able to unleash military interventions, to provoke pogroms, international relief efforts, euphoria as well as mass panic. And this is due to their function within global cultural industries, which commodify information and, more importantly, transform it into powerful and moving affects. We identify with victims, heroes, survivors, lucky winners, and the impact of this identification is heightened by the presumed authenticity of the experiences we believe to be sharing. Pictures that ap-

pear ever more immediate, which offer increasingly less to see, evoke a situation of constant exception, a crisis in permanence, a state of heightened alert and tension. The documentary form thus becomes a major player within contemporary affective economies. It intensifies a general feeling of fear, which characterises the governmental address of our historical moment. As Brian Massumi has demonstrated using the example of the colour-based terror alerts in the United States, power now also addresses us on the level of affect. Plain colors trigger off multiple emotional reactions. Television in the age of terror creates a “networked jumpiness” by modulating the intensity of collective feelings.⁴ Ironically, power takes on the artistic gesture of abstraction. Politics as such are increasingly shifting into the realm of pure perception. They are not only aestheticized. They have become aesthetical as such, as they work (through) the senses. The relationship between politics and art is thus being reconfigured on a level beyond representation.

Contemporary artistic documentarism, with its focus on a politics of representation, has not yet paid sufficient attention to this change; politics as such are moving beyond representation. Very tangible developments make clear that the principle of representative democracy is becoming increasingly problematic. The political representation of the people is undermined in many ways—from the non-representation of migrants to the creation of strange democratic hybrids like the European Union. If people are no longer represented politically, then maybe other forms of symbolic representation are undermined as well. If political representation becomes abstract and blurred, so might documentary representation. Is this also a way to interpret CNN’s abstract documentarism? A documentarism which moves beyond representation?

There is still another aspect of the documentary images by CNN mentioned in the beginning. There could not be any less ‘objective document’ (so to speak) than those pictures, since they are made from the position of so-called embeddedness, which basically renounces most pretensions of objectivity and critical distance. In order to be able to join the troops, journalists had to endure quite dramatic restrictions of the freedom of press. But what if we had to realise that, in this world,

we are all somehow embedded in global capitalism? And that the step back, towards critical distance and objectivity, was, under these circumstances, always already an ideological illusion? In one sense, this is probably true. And paradoxically, one can thus say that there is no more truth and certainly not within documentarism. But let us reverse the perspective: what if the contrary is the case and it precisely those blurred and unfocussed pictures from the cell phone camera that express the truth of the situation much better than any objectivist report could? Because these pictures do not really represent anything. They are just too unfocussed. They are as post-representational as the majority of contemporary politics. But amazingly, we can still speak of truth with regard to them.

Those CNN images still vividly and acutely *express* the uncertainty, which governs not only contemporary documentary image production, but also the contemporary world as such. They are perfectly true documents of that general uncertainty, so to speak. They reflect the precarious nature of contemporary lives as well as the uneasiness of any representation. Finding a critical position with respect to these images implies much more than simply taking this into account or exposing it. It means replacing the set of affects which is connected to this uncertainty—namely stress, exposure, threat and a general sense of loss and confusion—with another one. And in this sense, the only possible critical documentary today is the presentation of an affective and political constellation which does not even exist, and which is yet to come.

Notes:

1. Michel Foucault: Wahrheit und Macht. Interview mit A. Fontana und P. Pasquino. In: Dispositive der Macht. Michel Foucault über Sexualität, Wissen und Wahrheit. Berlin 1978
2. s for example Anthony Giddens (1999) "Risk and Responsibility" Modern Law Review 62(1): 1–10.
; Beck, Ulrich (1992) Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity. New Delhi: Sage.
3. Jonsson, S. 'Facts of Aesthetics and Fictions of Journalism: The Logic of the Media in the Age of Globalisation.' [online]. Available at: www.nordicom.gu.se/common/publ_pdf/157_057-068.pdf
4. Massumi, B. 2006, 'Fear (The spectrum said)', in: Multitudes [online]. Available at: <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Fear-The-spectrum-said.html>