A high hedge cuts diagonally through the photo, extending from the foreground into the background. It blocks the observer’s view of the realm beyond and marks a border. No people are visible, yet the paved road indicates that this setting has not simply been left in its natural state. In terms of the viewing conventions that inform it, the photo at the same time correlates to a political power structure that has become inscribed in the landscape, as David Goldblatt reveals in his commentary on this photo. The hedge was planted in 1660 by Jan van Niebeck to keep the indigenous Khooi out of the Dutch East India Company’s gardens. Parts of the hedge still survive today in the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens in Cape Town.

This photo by Goldblatt, displayed in the exhibition “A Blind Spot” (curated by Catherine David), takes us to the central idea informing the Berlin Documentary Forum: revealing the structures and logics in documentary media.

As recently highlighted by the “Animism” exhibition at HKW, photography and film were developed in the nineteenth century as Western, modernist attempts to draw clear demarcating lines between subjects and objects, culture and nature. These media play an interesting twofold role in this process. On the one hand, photography and film may form part of strategies of objectivization, for example when deployed to document racial or ideological narratives. On the other hand, the very magic driven out of the subject matter through this process of documenting and categorization is displaced into the medium and thus instigate a new reflection on these strategies. Artistic strategies in particular take on the role of disrupting the routines within perceptual regimes that guide modernism for that specific purpose. While documentary forum: revealing the structures and logics in documentary media.

From the outset, photography and film have succeeded in creating connections to things, re-establishing links that modernism tries to sever, inter alia by using these selfsame media. Art is the terrain legitimized by modernism for that specific purpose. Two artistic strategies in particular take on the role of disrupting the routines within perceptual regimes that guide modernism’s practices and thus instigate a new reflection on these strategies. In this sense Goldblatt’s photo is not a simulacrum of a landscape, but instead opens up a space of perception and imagination that places the viewer’s gaze in the Khooi’s perceptual situation. Through this shift, the photograph draws the viewer into the depths of historical strata in South Africa.

Therefore the work of Goldblatt is paradigmatic for revealing complex historical and visual layers of meaning — those layers, which Berlin Documentary Forum 2 decided to deal with this year.

Bernd M. Scherer, Director of Haus der Kulturen der Welt
The Berlin Documentary Forum is a space for the production and presentation of documentary practices marked both by acceptance and intensification of the medium’s inherent tensions and paradoxes. It was founded in 2010 in response to the growing importance of documentary forms in the arts in recent years, and also to fill a gap in the institutional landscape by creating a platform exclusively devoted to critical engagement with “the documentary” as an art form. The contributions to both the first and this, the second edition of the festival are connected not through affinities in subject matter, but by a reflective stance towards their medium; they never “use” the documentary without first drawing attention to the tacit assumptions inherent in the form itself. Above all, the festival was created to provide an outlet for various uses of documentary strategies in and across different disciplines. It is no longer the technologically reproduced image – whether photographic or cinematic, analogue or digital – that forms the exclusive basis of the documentary form. The very definition of a “document”, as becomes increasingly clear, is inherently linked to procedures of contextualization and subject to negotiation. Similarly, documentaries themselves are the result of such negotiation, of acts of framing and place and an author who seeks to represent and shape it, is further compounded by the camera position and angle, speed and panning, characteristic of camera movement in documentary film. Knowing that the camera is not a neutral recording device, they focus on its handling in documentaries from the 1960s to the present day, with special reference to Klaus Wildenhahn’s early works and Miriam Fassbender’s recent work. The camera position and angle, speed and panning, constitute a “controlled” or “contingent” choreography that influences the construction of an image or an event. Printed here are the transcription of a conversation in preparation for the festival events and a text by Wildenhahn, “On Synthetic and Documentary Film” (1975), which outlines the conceptual foundations of Direct Cinema, its methods and forms.

The exhibition “A Blind Spot”, organized by curator Catherine David inquires into the political potential of the fluid relationship between the photographic image and its referent. Photographs, videos, installations and drawings by eleven contemporary international artists are complemented by a program of film screenings from the 1970s and 80s, all regarded as photographic practices, which relate to the “subject” of photography. In his essay “Salutary Estrangement,” the anthropologist Christopher Pinney describes a few of the exhibition’s works, relating them to the discourse on the ethical and political claims of photography. Inquiring into the legitimacy of photography as a mode of diagnosis and a practice of prophecy, he calls attention to the sense of displacement, inherent in the historical tradition of photography. He examines the relationship between the image and what it represents in terms of what Walter Benjamin called “the soulful portrait.”

Sylvère Lotringer’s interpretation of Artaud’s The Theater of Cruelty is extended to address contemporary Western attitude towards death—and life. Looking at particular documentary attempts to frame crime, death and dying, he not only presents rare documents from his own comprehensive archive, but also addresses historical variations in coping with death, from public, collective display to private grief to complete suppression. His essay is complemented by a phone conversation, recorded last winter with Johnny Esposito, police videographer, discussing the ways in which the experience of death and contemporary digital technology impact the American judicial system.

The possibilities of networked production and networked engagement with reality are discussed in a text by filmmaker and writer Florian Schneider. His strategic proposals for the production of “truth,” “continuity” and new cognitive experiences in networked environments (as opposed to traditional methods of film and television) are implemented in a new online platform of the Berlin Documentary Forum. Entitled “Issue zero”, this on-line project is launched in collaboration with filmmaker Eyal Sivan, whose first “networked documentary” analyzes the ideology of montage and linear perception through the prism of Jean Luc Godard’s films, addressing Israel and Palestine.

A conversation with Christine Meisner reveals her thoughts on historical narratives inscribed in the natural landscape of a place and how they resonate in the musical tradition of a people. The artist tells of her experiences traveling through the Mississippi Delta in the Southern United States, studying the legacy of Blues. Her new piece about black agricultural laborers and their regained liberty in a segregated racist society is presented in a screening and live concert.

Traditional Japanese concepts of “place” foreground multiple, simultaneous perspectives of actual experiences and activity within a defined spatial-temporal continuum. The “given” objective aspect, and the “felt” subjective aspect of a place are understood as interrelated and integral. This traditional approach towards the structuring of place, which parallels the structuring of ‘relational’ between material and immaterial bodies and spaces, is demonstrated in experimental Japanese documentary cinema. Film curator Eduardo Thomas addresses these issues in a program of screenings.

Other contributions to the festival, performed on stage, critically reflect on the transformative potential of the documentary. They include new pieces by theater director Rabih Mroué and choreographer Eszter Salamon, lectures by artist Hito Steyerl and cultural theorist Ella Shohat, as well as a screening program devised by artist Ben Russell.

My personal thanks go to the long-term collaborators for their on-going support of the conceptual development of the overall structure and content of the festival since its conception in 2009. I also wish to thank the artists, filmmakers and theorists who have contributed to the exhibition “A Blind Spot”, to the “issue zero” project and to the live events of the four-day festival. I thank the Berlin Documentary Forum 2 team and the team of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. I am grateful to the exhibition architects Kuehn Malvezzi and to the festival architects Kooperativa für Darstellungspraxis, each have planned a unique spatial model that foster special correspondences between the works and ideas on display, the visiting public, and the building of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt.

Hila Peleg, Artistic Director of Berlin Documentary Forum
CONTROL AND CONTINGENCY
EXCERPTS FROM A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ANITJE EHANN, HARUN
FAROCKI AND VOLKER PANTENBURG

Volker Pantenburg: How did you arrive at the notion of the gesture when you refer to documentary gestures?

Antje Ehmann: There have long been efforts to draw distinctions between the documentary and the fictional aspects of film. In the process there has above all been a focus on defining concepts and terms. When considering early film history, it transpires that it makes more sense to avoid the exclusion of certain sub-generes or hybrid forms, such as industrial films, educational films or ethnographic films, which frequently also incorporate fictional, scripted or re-enacted sequences, to refer not to documentary films but to “non-fiction films”. That of course raises questions such as the concept of reality that is taken as a basis. In this discussion theoretical analysis has paid very little attention to the role of the camera, which is generally understood as a neutral recording apparatus. In our project for the second Berlin Documentary Forum we attempt to address the issue from a different angle. We don’t want to take such an essentialist, defining approach, but strive instead to concentrate on the effect that is produced. That is why we talk of the gesture of the documentary approach and the fictional approach.

Harun Farocki: Even if it is perhaps impossible to say what constitutes the documentary or non-documentary approach, there are films that absolutely want to be one or the other. We call that the documentary gesture. On the one hand there are feature films that assert “we are a highly organised construction” and, through a particular way of handling the camera, choreography comes into being as a way of dealing with space, and a quite extraordinary position, which casts the only conceivable gaze upon an event. That slightly boastful stance, this tongue-in-cheek bragging with prior knowledge of what is about to happen, is an old topos in feature films. For example, the slow crane shot along the flag in “Gone with the Wind” (1939), revealing the giant army of war-wounded from the Civil War. The converse example would be a feature film that says “I am rather documentary” and the camera can’t keep pace with events; in other words, the profilmic event is so autonomous that the camera is unable to seize the best image at every moment. A documentary film may equally assert “I’m incredibly genuine, I don’t know anything in advance and so I’m not always quite in focus and the lighting’s a bit clumsy” or, for a moment, it may not have the relevant object in the frame at all. Or, indeed, in the fourth and last case, it may claim “I’m entirely in control of the circumstances and am actually a feature film”. That means that if you’re lucky, for a moment, the audience might take a documentary film for a feature film, or vice-versa.

Ehmann: To put it in a nutshell, you could say that the camera chases after events in documentary films, whereas in feature films it anticipates the events. We find it particularly interesting when these genres or gestures typical of genres imitate each other.

Farocki: The documentary film is actually very often a hybrid form, comprising elements of mise-en-scène, descriptive, atmospheric moments, yet also statements, interviews or commentary sections in which a longish text serves to introduce an image that is allegorised, that becomes a symbol, or is used to draw conclusions. Even the most rapidly produced journalistic reportage format made for the evening news comprises staged sequences, such as a politician making a statement. You see him take a few steps before he steps up to the rostrum to start to speak. This narrative technique regulates the approach adopted in feature films. If a documentary film makes any use of angle/reverse-angle sequences, drawing on this form of dissecting space, it displays a marked resonance to procedures that are classical hallmarks of feature films.

Ehmann: One characteristic of the fictional, the story film, is that the crew shooting the film is familiar with the staged event. The events are stage-managed in order to function in terms of a particular narrative intention. The documentary camera can assume an observational standpoint in respect of profilmic events. If a feature film uses a documentary camera style, it acts as if it is uncontrolled, observing, and works by evoking an analogy between natural ways of looking and filmic ways of looking. Conversely, a documentary film may act as if it were a feature film, avoiding spontaneity and multiple strata of meanings.

Farocki: As theorists have often stated, every film is also a documentary film about its own production or what happens on the set. In other words, it is literally a mise-en-scène that is not entirely controllable and contains elements of surprise.

Ehmann: Or then there’s also something that often crops up in the Dardenne brothers’ films: they show events unfolding as if in real time with the camera calmly observing. For example, in “Le Fils” (“The Son”, 2002) where many of the scenes in the carpentry workshop are shot with great artistry in a single, long take. I would view these methods as being almost those of Direct Cinema, this non-intervention in the profilmic. Observing at length and not introducing edits. There are scenes that last for more than seven minutes without one single cut. Really astonishing!

Farocki: Or think about the scene in “Le Fils” when the boy slips off the ladder during an exercise and is carried on someone’s shoulder. But the man carrying him has back trouble and the burden grows too heavy for him. When you look at this St. Christopher scene, you see that it’s an unedited take, but staged using an incredibly refined mise-en-scène of the sequence; firstly with events unfolding rapidly, and yet, secondly, shot so elliptically that there is nevertheless a really pronounced density to it. But it isn’t the kind of condensed density you usually get with editing, where you see someone start hammering, cut, move in a little closer, cut, some time has elapsed. That is exactly what the film avoids. The film nonetheless succeeds in creating this condensed depiction through this practice of ellipsis. On the one hand you have a feeling that it is incredibly sophisticated, and at the same time a sense that it is completely documentary, and nothing is controlled. Both elements are present in the Dardennes’ work.

Ehmann: Or the way the camera in “Rosetta” (1999) follows the lead character through the underground in real time.

Pantenburg: On the one hand, the issue is clearly that the documentary and the non-documentary gesture are linked to particular narrative practices. I wonder whether the camera is in a sense the instance in terms of which such questions are to a large extent determined.

Ehmann: I think this aspect is very important and has often been overlooked in film theory, precisely because it is linked to a particular technological background. Direct Cinema did not emerge until the 1960s when mobile 16 mm cameras became available, then there was a move to working with sync sound, and film-making became increasingly flexible. A further new phase began when video technology appeared on the scene. I think these aspects are sometimes given short shrift when films are only approached and analysed semiotically. I reckon that an insistence on paying attention to the camera might serve as a slight corrective to that.

Farocki: Of course there are also other strategies; the documentary camera is only one of many. In this event we will first of all seek to concentrate on the camera. To put it in very simple terms: is the camera shaky when it is looking for something or does it always glide elegantly into the most ideal position? We plan first of all to enumerate and comment on these various stances, these gestures.

Pantenburg: A festival like the Berlin Documentary Forum needs a strong concept of the documentary, of what constitutes documentary practice. Against that backdrop I find it interesting that you call into question the notion that this refers to a category defining a fixed corpus of works, and yet, at the same time, you wish to adhere to the concept by asserting that there are documentary gestures, which may appear in feature films, in documentary films and also in television reportage. The point being that the crucial issue is always the particular blend of documentary and other gestures.

Ehmann: To put it in a nutshell, you might say we are asserting that the documentary dimension is so strong that it even infects feature films.

Farocki: Yes, in terms of what one could dub “style”, the camera as a stylistic element. In my
an angle, as if it couldn’t see straight. That’s a problem from a more precise historical perspective? Has someone paid rates this element.

tion values that nonetheless explicitly incorporated something similar in the great serial “Breaking Bad.”

Farocki: It is probably like cinematic depictions of dreams. In the past, it would be possible to have someone lying down and closing their eyes, then the image would blur via a dissolve-trick, like an expanse of water, and you’d understand that it was a dream. In contrast, in a film such as “Don’t Look Now” (1973), you never know which temporal plane you are on, whether it’s a flash-forward or a flashback; if something is imagined or not. At some point this form became a narrative standard. Nowadays a documentary can also take the liberty of jumping backwards and forwards in its chronology without having to add some form of intertitles. In 1992 I heard a lecture by Thomas Elsaesser that I liked a great deal. His argument was that mainstream film in the past had to seem to take everything it was narrating really seriously. As a result, in the early Bond films there were perhaps episodes that could be described as humorous; Lotte Lenya for example in her factory of terror or things like that. However, in later recordings of documentaries parodies became parodies of themselves. I think that over time the role of the camera and the narrator has also been transformed. You have to be much cooler about doing that now. It’s no problem to show a series of poorly filmed images one after another but you nonetheless have to demonstrate your competence.

Ehmann: That’s very interesting with reference to control and contingency. The contingency in Direct Cinema or in the documentary world is in a sense relinquished, yet is controlled by selected protagonists who tell a conflict-ridden story of their own accord. I think it’s funny that this is always criticized for being an uncritical practice when, actually, it is rather one of the laws of the documentary that you develop an eye for the subject matter.

Pantenburg: At the festival you’ll be showing Wildenhahn’s “Der Reifenschneider und seine Frau” (1968/69). What does Wildenhahn represent? Are you interested particularly in this film, or in methods and forms from the 1960s and how these took shape, with this film as an example?

Ehmann: Wildenhahn has a very good grasp of his craft but accepts that some aspects are not under his control. As we said earlier with reference to “Heiligabend auf St. Pauli,” he doesn’t mind if someone walks right through the frame or if the sound goes slap-bang in the middle of his shot …

Farocki: Or that the most important figure is unfortunately not visible because they’ve moved so far away …

Pantenburg: Or if he walks into the frame himself.

(Everyone laughs)

Ehmann: Another of our examples is the Romanian film “Moartea domnului Lazarescu” (“The Death of Mr Lazarescu,” 2005) by Cristi Puiu. It has fantastic flawed panning shots, as if the camera couldn’t work out where the protagonist was, and then corrected its position. I think this is highly artificial — what I’m interested in is that tension between the people who walk in front of Wildenhahn’s camera and this artificial approach.

Pantenburg: In terms of the phenomenon, at first it’s not possible to distinguish one from the other. In both cases there’s a line that peters out into nothing.
Farocki: That really is a highly peculiar quotation from the documentary realm. Cristi Puiu does the same in “Aurora” (2010), although that film has a less documentary look than “The Death of Mr Lazarescu”. There again you find these contrived ersatz panning shots, this pseudo-panning.

Pantenburg: Those hybrid forms … That reminds me of a text by Jean-Louis Comolli from 1969 on Direct Cinema. He gives a series of examples, including Jean Eustache or Jacques Rivette, directors who had great confidence in the contingency. Comolli talks about “accumulation as a practice”. You shoot a lot of footage and trust that a narrative will emerge from the material. It is a kind of deferred exercise of control, which in the first instance accords a great deal of space to contingency. The films are what would generally be dubbed “feature films”, works of fiction, even if their narratives are imbued on many levels with entirely aleatory elements. He makes this very clear via the notion of direct cinema how contingent. Comolli emphasises that this direct approach is actually generated. Does it arise through particularly panning shots or is it a phenomenon that comes from montage? Or is it produced solely as a consequence of the fact that in the profilmic there is in a sense no narrative; is it perhaps about the absence of narrative? To put it in slightly different terms: is the documentary angle or the fictional angle inscribed in simple techniques like autonomous panning shots?

Farocki: A panning shot that is motivated is clearly a cinematographic technique: you follow a protagonist because you do not wish to break off the narrative strand around that figure. An autonomous panning shot can also be a cinematographic technique: for example if the camera pans to show that someone is standing in a particular spot, such as a policeman observing the scene. In most cases, however, an autonomous panning shot expresses a switch from a narrative to a descriptive mode: we turn our cameras – or our gaze at the world around him. I believe there is a gestural component in every panning shot. It is not just a particular technique but also symbolises an author’s attitude.

Pantenburg: At first I concentrated on autonomous pans, by which I mean pans that are not rooted in a narrative intention and do not follow planned events in the images. That’s because this seems to be the modus in which panning shots reveal the most about their nature, because they are most self-aware in this form. This holds true for experimental films, documentaries or feature films: the possibility of drawing a distinction between the documentary approach and the fictional approach seems to me to be in the first instance partly suspended when it comes to individual camera movements. The issue is rather how the documentary approach is actually generated. Does it arise through particularly panning shots or is it a phenomenon that comes from montage? Or is it produced solely as a consequence of the fact that in the profilmic there is in a sense no narrative; is it perhaps about the absence of narrative? To put it in slightly different terms: is the documentary angle or the fictional angle inscribed in simple techniques like autonomous panning shots?

Farocki: That’s right. But here we could also talk about your examination of the pan as a formal strategy and a method.

Pantenburg: The impulse to reflect on what camera pans actually are came to me through Gerhard Friedl, because he says that pans are a strikingly prominent element. You’d have to describe those films – “Kittelfeld – Stadt ohne Geschichte” (“Kittelfeld – A Town without History”, 1997) and “Hat Wolff von Amerongen Konkursdelikte begangen?” (“Did Wolff von Amerongen Commit Bankruptcy Crimes?”, 2004) as documentaries – but the pans deployed there are very much slanted towards the control end of the spectrum and are thought out carefully. You can see that Friedl and his cinematographer have given a great deal of thought to where the camera is placed, whether it will pan from here to there by 180 degrees or 90 degrees. Yet nevertheless what actually happens within this clearly defined spatial and temporal framework is left to chance. The off-screen voice commenting adds another entirely different element, a peculiar narrative stance vis-à-vis the material. That was the point of departure for thinking about panning shots …

Harun Farocki: Do you mean autonomous pans or pans in general?

Ehmann: Exactly. And that makes you think that this actually stems from a background in video. But Grandrieux shot “Sombre” on film. There are camera strategies or practices that could already have been deployed in the 60s, but then in turn there are practices that film has learnt from video and then re-appropriated for the realm of film.

Pantenburg: There are similarly confusing elements in Claire Denis’s films, for example, when someone walks into their own point-of-view shot. There is a strange shift in agency here: a sudden change from a highly reduced narrative stance, an I-perspective, into the external role of an objective narrator. This kind of amalgam, in which minimal shifts between various narrative options become visible, would be interesting for your project too.

Farocki: That’s right. But here we could also talk about your examination of the pan as a formal strategy and a method.

Ehmann: I can’t answer that question in general terms right now. One interesting point does occur to me though. The way that “Sombre” (1998) by Philippe Grandrieux is shot you might actually think that it would only be possible with video, because it’s too risky. His working method involves not telling the camera operator what it’s all about. The camera man shoots a scene that is arranged but doesn’t know what is happening, and that is done over and over again …

Farocki: And he never repeats the scene the same way, but keeps on developing it, and has to reconstruct the sequence later from these fragments.

Ehmann: Pantenburg: At first I concentrated on autonomous pans, by which I mean pans that are not rooted in a narrative intention and do not follow planned events in the images. That’s because this seems to be the modus in which panning shots reveal the most about their nature, because they are most self-aware in this form. This holds true for experimental films, documentaries or feature films: the possibility of drawing a distinction between the documentary approach and the fictional approach seems to me to be in the first instance partly suspended when it comes to individual camera movements. The issue is rather how the documentary approach is actually generated. Does it arise through particularly panning shots or is it a phenomenon that comes from montage? Or is it produced solely as a consequence of the fact that in the profilmic there is in a sense no narrative; is it perhaps about the absence of narrative? To put it in slightly different terms: is the documentary angle or the fictional angle inscribed in simple techniques like autonomous panning shots?

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SALUTARY Estrangement
Notes on the Exhibition "A Blind Spot"
Christopher Pinney

Isn’t it the task of the photographer – descendant of the augurs and haruspices – to reveal guilt and point out the guilty in his pictures?

Walter Benjamin

We can easily imagine Benjamin’s suggestion – made in the midst of a discussion of Eugène Atget – conscripted as the motto of a certain form of engaged photojournalism intent on pointing out the guilty. But his proposal that photographers might be thought of as the descendants of the augurs and haruspices points us to a very different manner of grasping the relation between the image and what it represents.

Augury, a Greek science entailing the close study of bird habits, was perfected by the Romans who elected a college of augurs “who alone were authorized to ‘take the auspices’, that is, read the signs.” Auspices were taken before any important public or military event, and might involve the observation of sacred chickens taken by armies into war, or the augur’s demarcation with a wand of the templum, the area of the sky in which wild birds were to be observed. Haruspices, Etruscan diviners, who came to rival the augurs, also sought to discover the will of the Gods but through the study of entrails (exta) or, sometimes, lightning whose frequency and directionality was pregnant with meaning.

Atget, in Benjamin’s reading, was a forerunner of surrealism, “the first to disinfect the stifling atmosphere generated by conventional portrait photography in the age of decline.” His images of a mysteriously empty Paris evacuated the photograph of the face, its standard default signifier, in favor of a different physiognomy. Looking for what is “unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift” Atget’s city is “cleared out” and offers a “salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings.”

His deserted cobbled streets, silent courtyards and frozen shop-fronts worked against the “exotic, romantically sonorous names of … cities” as Benjamin memorably put it and engineered a transition from a conventional facial physiognomy to a public physiognomy. Whereas conventional portraiture took the human face as its fons et origo of expressive signification, Atget pioneered a different mode of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari described as “facialization.” In Deleuze’s account, in “Cinema 1: The Movement-Image”, facialization – a form of landscape physiognomy – is approached through filmic close-ups which present the face as if it were a landscape from which “the viewer seeks to fathom meaning from its darker or hidden regions.”

Atget facialized Paris and in the process moved photography away from the human face as the ground zero of intention, meaning and clarity towards a different and more opaque topography.

Early photography, if we are to believe Benjamin, likewise deposited aura in its “ultimate point of retreatment” – the face. The technology for the production of these faces created a new time-space: “The procedure itself caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it; during the considerable period of the exposure, the subject … grew in to the picture, in the sharpest contrast with appearances in a snapshot.” In consequence, daguerreotypes transcribed peculiarly powerful individualized physiognomies. Benjamin cites the photographer Karl Dauthendey’s anxiety about the facial presence in these early images: “We were abashed by the distinctness of these human images, and believed that the tiny little faces in the picture could see us.”

But for Benjamin the concern with what he calls “the soulful portrait” is a derailment of what is “more native to the camera”. The face was a deviation, a detour, from photography’s necessary work. Just as psychoanalysis permits us access to the instinctual unconscious, so photography – when it follows what is truly “native” to it, allows us to discover the optical unconscious around which swirl practices of prophecy and divination. Benjamin describes Karl Blossfeldt’s close-up plant photography in which are revealed “the forms of ancient columns in horse willow, a bishop’s crosier in the ostrich fern, totem poles in tenfold enlargements of chestnut and maple shoots, and gothic tracery in the fuller’s thistle.”

Here technology reveals itself as a magical process, a mode of diagnosis. Photography, as Benjamin continues in a crucial and justly oft-cited phrase “reveals in this material physiognomic
in the Greek incarnation) but not a human one (it appears to be female as and of desire is then confronted by the camera the landscape. This symbol of arcane knowledge commences with a tracking shot along a hedge and architecture as the elements of their non-facial Knauff and Goldblatt also take landscape and prefigures practitioners as diverse as Walker ev- er of photographic modernism, and who oneer of photographic modernism, and who knauff and goldblatt also take landscape and architecture as the elements of their non-facial physiognomy. “With Atget,” Benjamin wrote in the “Work of Art” essay, “photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance.” Knauff’s film animates an Atgalian sensibility, much as Michael Haneke’s “White Ribbon” (“Das weiße Band. Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte”), 2009) gives cinematic form to August Sander’s photographic aesthetic. “Le Sphinx” commences with a tracking shot along a hedge that prefaces an Atget-like vista before stopping at the outward-facing sphinx which punctuates the landscape. This symbol of arcane knowledge and of desire is then confronted by the camera “full-face”, presenting the viewer with a “face”, but not a human one (it appears to be female as in the Greek incarnation) grated to an animal body. It is famously blank, a transitional zone between “archetypes” and “the motor of the “four-eyed machine” ges- tering to a dispersed space of other physiogno- mic forms pregnant with political significance. The voice-over layers increasingly static images in which seemingly random political forms ally themselves with this problematic face with frag- ments from Jean Genet’s 1983 text “Quatre heures à Chatila” (“Four hours in Chatila”). Knauff’s open-ended genet’s text also opens up the question of what the photograph can and cannot reveal. The photograph, like a television screen has only two dimensions and cannot be walked through. For Genet, walking through Chatila and Sabra “resembled a game of hopscotch”, a three-dimensional kinesthetic as he threads his way through and across corpses “bent or arched, with their feet pushing against one wall and their heads pressing against the other.” Photography refutes this, refuses to show how “you must jump over bodies as you walk along”. Centered on the archetype of an indistinguishable physiognomy “Le Sphinx” establishes an experimental space for a differ- ent deterritorialized faciality providing, without doubt, evidence of “historical occurrences” with “hidden political significance.”

A similar fascination with the transitional and translational space between faces and bodies and bodies and spaces, informs Jeff Wall’s des- olate “Cold storage” (2007). An empty space yawns in front of the viewer embodying, at first sight, everything that the embodied spectator is not: concrete, decay, the chill of death. But it is an image that slowly reveals itself as the alter ego, or inverse mirror, of the viewer, a space created for the preservation of flesh. Emptied, hollowed out, its oblivion declares an absence, an absence which is its raison d’être, what was once breathing, warm, flesh.

In Goldblatt’s magisterial work the political sig- nificance is rarely hidden, but the project ex- plores a historical occurrence of colonization and spatial separation, which resonates with the one which informs “Le Sphinx”. A foundational history still, literally, sprouts in the remnants of Jan van Riebeeck’s hedge of wild almond, the subject of one of Goldblatt’s images. Planted in 1660 to exclude indigenous Khoikhoi from the Dutch East India Company’s gardens, a portion of the hedge still thrives in Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens in Cape Town. In another of Goldblatt’s documentaries Table Mountain appears mysterious and foreboding when glimpsed from the beaches, lawns and bird-baths of the “White Group Area”, Bloubergstrand, as though a quite distinct contin- ent elsewhere a black domestic worker has placed her bed on tins filled with sand so that a husband or lover could be hidden during police raids enforcing pass laws. The Group Areas Act of 1950 enforced the provision of separate ac- commodation for black and colored workers in housing, the paraphernalia of state history) al- ways the image as constructed through a transla- tion to experience and to the image, and more precisely the image as constructed through a pathway of movement is engaged by Melik Ohanian’s “DAYS: I See What I Saw and What I Will See”, which enacts something akin to an Anabasis for the railway age. Film and railroads have run on “parallel tracks” since the Lumière Brothers’ Cité Radieuse. Cinema’s commitment to the railway age of miniaturized dolly track was conventionally used to invisibilize the process of producing the smooth tracking shot. The infrastructure of track guaranteed the absence of those erratic signs that might inadvertently betray the fact that we were looking through a moving camera. Foregrounding what he terms a “labor camp” in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, it is natural that Ohanian should make the curious powerful compaction of distances and sense of the political grotesque that Gold- blatt captures is narrated more expansively in Eric Baudelaire’s “Lanabase de May et Fusako Shigenobu, Massao Adachi et 27 années sans images” (“The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Massao Adachi, and 27 Years Without Images”, 2011). The Japanese Red Army’s 27 years in Beirut collaborating with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (of which the depressing low-point was the Lod Airport mas- sacre) is mediated by Xenophon’s account of the army of ten thousand Greek mercenaries hired by Cyrus the Younger to remove his broth- er Artaxerxes II from the throne of Persia and who then wandered lost – estranged – in the mid- dle of an unknown country (the “Anabasis”, known more commonly in English translation as the “Persian Expedition”). Baudelaire’s embar- kation to the interior and return to the shore, de- tails Fusako’s continuing incarceration and Adachi’s travel embargo. Adachi, a major avant- garde filmmaker helps Baudelaire in Japan in return for film footage from Beirut, his beloved city of conflict and defeat, hoping for heroic narrative. Baudelaire can only offer images of Beirut’s Ferrari dealership and waves crashing over the harbor seawall. Xenophon took the augur’s advice when setting out from Ephesus to join Cyrus. An eagle had screamed at his right, but this was an ambivalent sign, interpreted as a sign of the great rather than ordinary man by a soothsayer but also sig- nifying the necessity of hard work and the pos- sibility of failure. Baudelaire’s “Anabasis” is satu- rated with similar signs and a corresponding set of doubts.

Recall Genet as he is voiced in “Le Sphinx” marking the difference between photography’s flatness and his experience walking in Chatila and Sabra as akin to a “game of hopscotch”. “I stepped over bodies as one crosses chasms” he wrote. This vertiginous subject matter, a rec- cognition of doubt, evidence of “historical occurrences” with the curiously powerful compaction of distances and sense of the political grotesque that Gold- blatt captures is narrated more expansively in Eric Baudelaire’s “Lanabase de May et Fusako Shigenobu, Massao Adachi et 27 années sans images” (“The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Massao Adachi, and 27 Years Without Images”, 2011). The Japanese Red Army’s
hyper-visible the – “labored” – material conditions of the moving image – 100 meters of track which the camera smoothly negotiates in four minutes each day. These tracks were then dismantled and reinstalled to permit the onward progression of the camera, past aggregate yards, factories, and workers’ temporary housing. Filmed over 11 days and nights the end product was 1,100 meters of movement unfurled over 42 minutes of time.

The coming and going, and the sense of circularity to which anabasis gestures, hangs suspension. Vincent Meessen’s remarkable “Vita Nova” (2009) which also takes us back with an absolute directness and explicitness to the face and its effects. The face in question is in the first instance the celebrated young black imperial loyalist who appeared on the cover of the copy of Paris Match that Roland Barthes was handed at the barber’s. In “Mythologies”, in the second section on “Myth Today” this is presented with memorable casualness: “I am at the barber’s, and copy of Paris Match is offered to me.” And on the cover that famous image of “a young Negro in a French uniform ... saluting... his eyes uplifted” and signifying – so Barthes concludes – “that France is a great Empire through its “purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militarily”. In the image of Christop, a young face that has the power to signify in “Vita Nova” appears in profile on the edge of an image of the funeral of Louis-Gustave Binger the colonizer of Côte d’Ivoire, founding member of the Academy of Colonial Sciences and founder of the Colonial Party. The profile – unmistakably that of Barthes himself – belongs to Binger’s grandson who will later publish photographs of his grandfather un-named. But Binger’s name endures in the surreal semi-abandoned structures of Bingerville which survives as a photograph in architecture of the parallelism between photography’s double temporality and opium and hashish seem able to mobilize photography’s temporal unconscious as the alibi for analytic narratives of great grace and insight. In his beautiful text, “Nanking Restaurant” (2006), Koester documents the East African coca משתים בנורגגיים in China and the effacement of this narcopolitics both in conventional historiography and the remaining structures of Calcutta – the command centre for this destructive trade – to probe beneath the surface of a contemporary amnesia, just like the “marvelous power” of opium itself (as De Quincey had suggested in “Confessions of an English Opium Eater”, 1845). Koester notes that for De Quincey opium was a “portal” permitting access into the “secret inscriptions of the mind” and he describes his own photo-narcography as an intervention which permits the “bottom layer” to “be excavated by applying the right ‘chemical’ to retrieve seemingly lost incidents”. Koester’s tactic is applied in this exhibition to Calcutta as the imploded residue of the global traffic in opium, to Alamut Castle in Iran the ground zero of the “Hashishin” legend. All these become locations for the camera, deployed like a surgeon’s hand to pierce the sedimentation of epochs. Just as De Quincey insisted that it was magical opium (and its “marvelous agency”), and not the opium-eater, who was the hero of his tale, so Koester develops a profound investigation of the magical agency of photography and its narcochemical ability to recover a past lost to ordinary human vision.

Ineffable alignments and re-alignments run through Hassan Khan’s remarkable work. Pulse lights mutate into piscatorial augurs which in turn mutate into a Kaaba disco projector around which participants in a fleetingly-seen street-dispute enact some arcane choreography in the weirdly entertaining “Jewel” (2010). This is the realm of augurs and haruspices: random signs denied any decoding. Estrangement, finally, is also a power of nostalgia, which permits the recovery of displacement from the conventional physiognomy of pity. “Angola to Vietnam” (1989) consists of 27 photographs of Leopold Blaschka’s glass models of botanical specimens from the Harvard Botanical Museum’s Ware Collection. Ethiopia is represented, for instance, by the familiar Arabica, the. Photographically the series of 27 photographs of Leopold Blaschka’s glass models of botanical specimens from the Harvard Botanical Museum’s Ware Collection. Ethiopia is represented, for instance, by the familiar Arabica, the "astonishing plant photographs" models of botanical specimens from the Harvard Botanical Museum’s Ware Collection. Ethiopia is represented, for instance, by the familiar Arabica, the "astonishing plant photographs". Photographically the series of 27 photographs of Leopold Blaschka’s glass models of botanical specimens from the Harvard Botanical Museum’s Ware Collection. Ethiopia is represented, for instance, by the familiar Arabica, the "astonishing plant photographs".
makes manifest what Benjamin termed photography’s “tiny spark of contingency”.

Both women are seated, their clothing pulled imperceptibly to the right, gaze directed straight ahead – almost certainly towards the site from which they received instructions in the course of the photography session. Azoulay finds herself making manifest what Benjamin termed photography’s “tiny spark of contingency”.

Part of the solution relates to the fact that the photograph is the trace of an actual physical occurrence that involved the participation, and agency, in some sense, of the women themselves. But more important is a mode of ethical address which emanates from these sitters’ eyes and which can be reciprocated by a future beholder. In the time of the event itself the reciprocity of the gaze is declined and frustrated, “the situation in which they are gazed at is one that departs from the direct meeting of gazes between those present opposite each other”. Enslaver and enslaved look past each other, deferring the ethical revelation of the face. That revelation awaits a subsequent fulfillment, “the situation in which they are gazed at makes manifest what Benjamin termed photography’s “tiny spark of contingency”.

Azoulay’s narration is heroic and the temptation to be persuaded by this is immense. But the work collected in this exhibition serves to underline the ways in which it marks a retreat to an archaic physiognomy, an abandonment of the radicality of the new faciality which the works presented here start to explore. Azoulay’s redemptive narrative echoes many aspects of Darwin’s conclusions. In that work Darwin wrote of how: “The movements of expression in the face and body, whatever their origin may have been, are in themselves of much importance for our welfare. They serve as the first means of communication between the mother and her infant; she smiles approval, and thus encourages her child on the right path, or frowns disapproval. We readily perceive sympathy in others by their expression …”. The historical lineament which over two centuries links Johann Kaspar Lavater’s physiognomy, via Darwin, to the “face” of Azoulay’s universal addressee serves to demonstrate the tenacity of the “soulful portrait”. The salutary estrangement and the hidden political significance that Atget perfected, and whose legacy is grasped by the practitioners represented here, remain pitched in a battle against the desire for understandable faces and bodies; a desire for human agency that wears the patina of recognition, a desire for – in other words – familiar expressions.
FRAMING DEATH
SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER

Since what early age have I wanted to die? Perhaps not die, but experience death? To experience death without dying seemed like a natural goal for me.

Nick Ray's Diary

There’s no “Great Family of Man”, and there’s no universality of death. Yes, people are born and people die, but birth and death, like everything else, keep changing in unpredictable ways and only the bad habit of attributing ancient origins to recent collective customs lead us to believe that they have existed in this form at all times. Actually, if we were to project on a screen in rapid succession all the figures that death has adopted over the last thousand years, it would be difficult not to laugh at the dizzying, and apparently senseless, permutations of so many attributes that we believed to be fixed fixtures of the medieval knight would faint on his horse, but not always what one would expect. At the news of someone’s death, the grieving family remained in seclusion, the mourning community would visit the grieving family. The interruption was necessary for society to absorb gradually the sudden disappearance. It gave people time to reflect on their own lives and after their behavior accordingly.

All these ways of registering someone’s death publicly ceased abruptly in the early 20th century. Death no longer introduced a hiatus in everyday life; it stopped being shared collectively. This massive change in Western culture wasn’t perceptible at first. How could one notice what wasn’t there anymore? Do we remember how it was to be born and to die, how it was before the conceptualization of death? It was around that time that theorists of the “masses”, like Gustave Le Bon or William McDougall, even Sigmund Freud himself (“Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego”, 1922) set out to identify the danger presented by unruly crowds and the need for charismatic leaders capable of channeling their regressive energy toward worthy ideological causes. Fascism was the first to appeal to them. It was not just a dictatorial regime, it was a scene of ritual gatherings on a grand scale of collective mourning. The discovery of speed and its powerful effect on every aspect of life deeply altered the time-space coordinates. The widespread dislocation of traditional ways of life was accompanied by a significant religious decline. Individuality asserted itself at the expense of the community. Torn between outward mobility and growing interior weariness, modern societies were struggling to contain the flows of unregulated capitalism. The 1929 crisis was the last blow. It tore apart the social fabric and created mayhem worldwide. In 1933, returning from Vienna where he first learned of Freud’s “death instinct”, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, in a famous speech, warned that the “massive onrushes of entire populations are a new kind of epidemic”. Death and rebirth existed. in “art and death”, 1927, though, he asserted that “within magical limits, death is knowable and approachable with a certain sensibility” and he took his readers step by step through the horrific experience of dying: “Who in the depths of certain kinds of anguish, at the bottom of certain dreams, has not known death as a shattering and marvelous sensation unlike anything else in the realm of the mind?”

Philippe Ariés, Michel Foucault’s mentor, reminded us of all these unpredictable shifts of behaviors toward death in his masterful essay, “The Hour of Our Death”, 1977. What remained constant throughout the centuries was the idea that death wasn’t an individual event, but something that affected the entire environment. The reasons for reclusion were many, no one questioned the necessity for an interruption in everyday life. Death has always been a public and social fact. It was the whole group that was stricken by the loss and it affected relatives and friends in widening circles. It was manifested in countless ways. The door of the deceased’s building was draped in black, passers-by salted the slow funeral procession on its way to the graveyard, the burial was attended by the whole community and friends would visit the grieving family. The interruption was necessary for society to absorb gradually the sudden disappearance. It gave people time to reflect on their own lives and after their behavior accordingly.

Major “high modernist” writers of the 1930s and 40s, like André Breton, Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, or Simone Weil, on the contrary, mobilized their sacred practices capable of eliciting a cathartic terror in society. Death was their only ally, and a volatile weapon at that. Everywhere democratic structures and institutions were crumbling down. Only a concentrated form of death – a symbolic “sacrifice” – could still hold society together. The sacrificial bond would spread by contagion, like the plague, and redeem society from its increasing aimlessness. “The only question at this point,” Artaud wrote in 1933, “is whether, in this world which is slipping away and committing suicide unknowingly, a core of men would prove capable of imposing a superior notion of the theater that would bring us back the natural and moral order and the ancient counterculture” (“The Theater and the Plague”, 1933).

Death having disappeared, the first step was to make it visible again. In a Surrealist inquiry, André Breton asked: “Is suicide a solution?” Artaud replied that he first wanted to be sure that death existed. In “Art and Death”, 1937, though, he asserted that “within magical limits, death is knowable and approachable with a certain sensibility” and he took his readers step by step through the horrific experience of dying: “Who in the depths of certain kinds of anguish, at the bottom of certain dreams, has not known death as a shattering and marvelous sensation unlike anything else in the realm of the mind?”

In this harrowing journey, nothing was left to improvisation, everything was calculated with clinical precision – with the “cruelty” of a surgeon – until the nervous sensibility, like an infant hulled through the womb by frantic contractions, reaches the much dreaded and desired moment of delivery. For Artaud, death and rebirth always went together. He wanted his audience to experience death in all its terrifying, thrusting energy to eradicate certain childhood panics “in which death appeared clearly in the form of an uninterrupted confusion”. His “Theater of Cruelty” wasn’t based on shedding blood, “at least not exclusively”, it involved at once a contagion of affects (the disorder of the plague) and the codified element of the ritual (the Balinese dance). Artaud was the last in a long cohort of preachers who invoked death throes in order to convert the unbeliever.
But death itself had replaced any other belief. Asked to lecture about the theater and the plague at the Sorbonne in 1933, Artaud scared his public away by embodying the disease. He crawled between the seats — exhibiting his boils — and then, when everyone had left, he turned toward Anais Nin and said: “Let’s have a drink.” And then he added somberly, “They don’t realize that they are already dead.”

Early in the 20th century, the dead were not entirely divorced from the living. There still was a sense of intimacy with death, for instance, in James Van Der Zee’s early family photographs in Harlem where parents tenderly hold a dead baby. Often times the photographer wasn’t able to tell later on who was alive and who was dead. He had no compunction either about using double exposures and superimposing images of angels or pious inscriptions around a woman’s dead man’s hand — wasn’t considered sacrilegious either. Van Der Zee’s photographs were not experimental in the modernistic sense, but they had an aesthetic of their own. They also had a specific function. They sent a message to families living far away in the south or in the north that the deceased was being treated in the proper way.

Other photographers rediscovered death some half a century later and it was as if a lost continent had suddenly re-emerged. Something was starting to change. Diane Arbus had shown the old painter caper from “The American Friend.” Nick rarely used screenplays, he was an actors’ director. Obviously, he wanted his last film to be a real film. At first the two co-directors had conferences in a corner of the loft to discuss the story, but the fiction was thin, and it wasn’t difficult to recognize Nick in the dying artist. Wim resisted the idea. Besides, a fiction film was extravagant considering their small budget. He wanted to bring the action back to Nick, but not in a documentary way either. Nick would play his own character in the film, the way Fritz Lang played the character of Fritz Lang in Godard’s “Contempt” (1963). But as soon as the shooting began, reality started intruding, narrowing their choices. After a week Nick became too weak to co-direct the film. The screenplay started unraveling and was soon forgotten. Why not make it a story of Nick himself? Wim asks. “It’s you, Nick. Why take the step away?” Wim didn’t realize that he was opening the door wide for death to step in.

“It has to be about you, too,” Nick replied, challenging Wim in turn. Nick’s action in the film was clear: regaining his self-esteem before he died. But Wim had no action of his own that he could think of. “My own action is going to be defined by your facing death,” he said cautiously. Wim was reluctant to commit himself, he still hadn’t defined by your facing death,” he said cautiously. Wim was reluctant to commit himself, he still hadn’t reached the dead father. “Let’s have a drink.” Every time Wim turned to Van Der Zee’s photographs, his public away by embodying the disease. He crawled between the seats — exhibiting his boils — and then, when everyone had left, he turned toward Anais Nin and said: “Let’s have a drink.” And then he added somberly, “They don’t realize that they are already dead.”

In “Lightning over Water” (it was first known as “Nick’s Movie”) Wim Wenders admitted to having fallen into the same trap. In 1979, he offered to co-direct a film with Nicholas Ray, the legendary director of “Rebel Without a Cause” (1955), whose glamorously disheveled family photographs in Hollywood had been cut short by booze and drugs. Nick Ray was at the end of his rope. He was broke; he hadn’t made a film in ten years. He had terminal cancer and was living on his bed in his Soho loft, coughing out his lungs. For a number of years, Nick had drummed up for support. Wim was the first serious candidate to answer his call and give him a last chance to direct. When the two filmmakers, young and old, looked at their first rushes, Wim sheepishly, but luminously, admitted to Nick: “The film, whatever we did, looks very clean, pretty — like licked off. And I think that is a pure result of fear.”

It was the start of a filmic adventure that neither of them had really foreseen, let alone wished to happen. They were not the only ones to be rattled by the dread of death. It didn’t take long for the small international crew hastily assembled around Wim and Nick to realize that Nick wasn’t just sick, but dying. “As soon as you saw Nick,” Stefan Czapsky, the gaffer, said, “you knew he was dead. You could see it in his eyes. He was the perfect con-game. Susan Ray, Nick’s common-law wife — she was forty years younger — had no illusions about it and confronted Wim’s fantasies about him. ‘You’re just a dead man.’ Everyone had a lot of respect for Nick as a filmmaker, but it wasn’t the filmmaker who was dying, it was the man. The man was certainly formidable, but he wasn’t especially likable. He could be mean and arrogant. He had been a hustler all his life. Wim wanted to pay homage to the filmmaker, not to the dying man.

The crew was torn as well between their adoration for Nick and their own fear of death. They got even more confused when Nick pressed Wim to acknowledge that they were not just making a fiction film, but a film about Nick’s death. This switch didn’t happen right away. It wasn’t death that Nick had in mind when he developed a thirty-page screenplay based on the old painter caper from “The American

self-exiled in Europe for a number of years and increasingly dependent on his young entourage for survival, Nick had become a cult figure for Cahiers du Cinéma authors. Once Godard famously said: “Nick is the only one who is really an actor in cinema.” But he wasn’t quite ready for the death of Nick Ray. Was Nick himself ready for it? Nick wanted to be involved with film one more time before he died. He wanted to experience the kind of power that comes with being a director. He had a taste of it during the
first week of shooting when he subreptitiously took some cocaine to give him enough energy. But Wim had been right to take over from Nick. Nick was in no condition to take care of the mechanics of the filming schedule and the list of shots. Actually, whether or not Nick really wanted to make a last film before he died remained an open question. He probably didn’t know himself. But he certainly welcomed the idea of dying making a film.

During the last period of his life, Nick had been notoriously reluctant to finish a film. “We Can’t Go Home Again” his masterpiece of a work which exploded the screen in a myriad of fragments – was still in progress. And maybe it was meant to remain that way. His friends and family in Hollywood reacted to “Lightning over Water” with a healthy skepticism. All Nick wanted, Betty Ray, his third wife, estimated, was a diversion from himself. “Nick was on stage. And, the fucker, he was having the time of his life.” And yet, she recognized that Nick had always been bigger than life. It was a great piece of honesty that “a person who is going through the death process was willing to talk to the mirror. Nick was clear in that way. He never was a person to hide who he was. And in terms of what they set up to do,” she added, “nothing’s been done like that to my knowledge.”

Wim was fascinated by the American way of life, but also repulsed by it. He hadn’t been exposed to the American way of death yet. At the time, Wim was on his way to a brilliant career. Two years before, he finished a major film, “The Gospel According to Muybridge.” Nick had created Zeotrope, his own cinematic work and offered to back-up one of Wim’s projects. Coppola had created Zeotrope, his own com-}

tents themselves, but from the medical personnel left without specific guidelines. Other codifications were being introduced in various places, waiting to be picked up and given more visibility. Bud- dhism and Eastern philosophies, for instance, were finding their way into Western societies ready to fill the vacuum. In “Imagined Communi- ties” (1983), a ground-breaking essay on the invention of nationalism, Benedict Anderson re- minded us that “all profound changes in consciousness, by their nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivion, in specific historical circumstances, spring narra- tives.”

Anderson’s “amnesia of death” was already slowly being lifted and a new narrative – a new mythology for the living – was springing forth from the very place where dying patients had been exited. State-of-the-art technologies alone had not prepared the medical personnel to answer the insistent questions that “end-of-life” patients increasingly raised. It took Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss-born psychiatrist working with “near-death” patients to address these in “On Death and Dying”, first published in 1969. The book – euphemistically renamed “The Five Stages of Grief Model” – was enthusiastically embraced worldwide and became the new Bible of Death. It identified five stages that terminal patients are wont to experience when confront- ed with the prospect of their own demise: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and accep- tance. These stations of dying were obviously patterned on Freud’s four stages of infantile sexuality leading to “genital normality”. They neared on the issue of sexuality as the final reintegration of mature adults to the state of inert matter.

Kübler-Ross was more open-ended with her own sequence of stages than Freud had been as long as terminal patients, dismissing their “irrational anger”, humbly reached “total accep- tance”.

This total acceptance gave the hospital personel a chance to share with the dying “a mutually gratifying experience”. The gratification, of course, was only one-sided as it demanded from the patient a gradual detachment from the world leading to a state “almost void of feelings”. Obviously this is, as Kübler-Ross asserted, “gratifying to the visitor because it doesn’t pres- ent dying as a frightening experience”. The staging of dying at the hospital was meant to

Kübler-Ross went even further. In reality, accep- tance, she admitted, wasn’t a stage, but “a natural process, a process indeed, a sign perhaps that a dying person has found his peace and is preparing himself to face it alone”. Facing death alone: we certainly have come a long way from the time when death was experienced collectively, as she herself witnessed with her own family in Switzerland. The new narrative of death belongs to a very different culture – a culture that imposes on people to live and die alone.

... We learned from “primitive” societies that there isn’t such a thing as a “natural death”. Whenever death occurred, it was considered to be an acci- dent or a crime. Among the Sara populations in Chad studied by Robert Jaulin in “La Mort Sara” (“The Sara Death”, 1967), for instance, the sorcerers were always the first culprits. They were well versed in sympathetic magic and ex- perts in a variety of poisons – and would kill anyone just to try them. They were the wretched ones, the anti-social ferment, threatening the tight-knit tribe from within. Their function was to introduce confusion in the group’s order and they were feared and hated for it. But anything else would have been too mundane, too simple. Death could be pegged on something – anything really: a minor quarrel, a spouse’s revolt, a jealous reaction. When someone died, everyone rushed to deny that they had anything to do with it. But it was enough to accuse someone of the crime for that individual to become the criminal. It may be difficult for us to accept this idea in the West since we go to great lengths before proving someone guilty under the law. The Sara had little...
regard for an individual’s rights and death for them was never considered a personal affair. As long as someone was responsible for the death they would remain immortal as a tribe. Death didn’t come with old age – they didn’t live long enough to experience decay – it always came from the outside and pounded on the living. Whether guilty or not, the family of the “criminal” had to pay an indemnity for the death. “Each dead is a capital” they would say, and it had to be matched by a counter-gift. By the same token the alleged crime would become a “total social fact” mobilizing at once violence, panic effects, economic and legal elements. Each death was a way to involve the entire society. “Primitive” no one ever died alone.

The hospital wasn’t the only place where attempts were being made to identify and register publicly the transformation toward death. The modern judicial system as well was revealing of the way death is experienced in Western society. Although the technology used to identify criminals replaces sorcerers’ poisons and séances of possession, old rituals are still re-staged via documentation. For the police, death is always a crime and it needs to be documented in a very special way. In Western society, paradoxically, crime is the only alternative to an anonymous death. The police have taken over the task of acknowledging someone’s death collectively. They are, it seems, the only people capable of paying full attention to a death; the only ones for whom the details of an individual’s life are actually relevant for the investigation: it may be the street outside the motel, the bloodied shower room in the basement, the white circles painted around the absent bodies in the rooftop parking lot. The challenge was to document the crime scene in an objective way. Police photographers take neutral photographs of a crime, making sure that the light is evenly distributed. Videos of a crime scene also make this kind of claim. They aim at pure objectivity, isn’t their purpose to help establish the truth in the judicial context? Pure objectivity, of course, is unattainable. But is it even something to be wished for?

The jury has no special preparation. It is no more used to seeing real crime scenes than anyone else in the country. But jurors certainly watch the news every day on their TV screens. Videos of crime have to compete with the spectacular images circulated in the media. They have to convince the jury that the crimes they are watching in the courtroom are unlike the faked ones dripping with ketchup. These are real crimes. But then they may be overwhelmed by the reality of a crime presented in all its violent form. A constant threat is to be horrified by what they see, how can they be expected to deliver a proper verdict, thoroughly informed and rational? Any overreaction on their part would certainly upset their judgment and endanger the search for the truth. The jury, therefore, has to be protected against itself and their anxiety as-supposed to the absence of certain techniques. Otherwise the videographer could be publicly accused of manipulating them emotionally. The camera used isn’t just meant to document a crime, but to register like a seismograph current attitudes toward death. Far more so than abstract sociological analysis filming a crime scene reveals, as Artaud said, that “within some limits, death is knowable and approachable with a certain sensibility.”

This is where Johnny Esposito comes in. Johnny studied a variety of disciplines, especially psychology and communication, besides filming skills and techniques. Confronted with the vexing problem of truth and degrees of tolerance, he had the idea of introducing into the legal context a technique meant to account visually for crime scenes. His main concern, though, wasn’t technical, but psychological. He had to find a way of presenting the crime documentation to the jurors and making it not only tolerable or acceptable, but also desirable. In order to do this, Johnny turned to “film noir”, adapting its ominous atmosphere and sense of foreboding. His own strategy was to delay viewing the crime and to “keep the eye moving”. His camera would peek from a distance at some cues: an arm hanging limply from a bed, drops of blood on the floor; little stabs of cruelty meant to partially “desensitize” the viewers, or better still, to “whet their appetite” in such a way that they couldn’t help to see the maimed body. In a strange roundabout way, the jury’s judgment had to be protected from the truth by a calculated fiction. What was taken for truth in the criminal justice system in fact resulted from an ingenious artifice, a fiction that could pass the test of reality.
deteriorating. Would he be strong enough to shoot again? Nick wasn’t someone to be discounted easily; he certainly remained a wild card. The crew left with the same question: should they go on filming the dying of Nick? Was he really willing to expose himself that far? The prospect was terrifying.

On 28 April, Wim flew in from Los Angeles. Everyone realized the purpose of this trip was to finish off the film. They didn’t have enough material. Chris Sievernich, the producer, recognized reluctantly that “it had to be done”. But it could certainly have been done differently. Wim was returning to New York with Ronee, his fiancée. She was an outsider. She hadn’t been involved with the first shootings, and she hardly knew Nick. On the other hand, she shared none of the insiders’ hang-ups. She wasn’t taken in by Nick’s father image or by the drama of his career. Wim had asked her to come on board for his film about dying, starring Nick. “They are burying flowers.”

“Lilies of the Valley...” Nick asked anxiously. “What kinds of flowers?”

“Don’t cut!” Ronee said firmly. The camera stopped. It was Nick’s last shot. Wim’s part of the dialogue was added later on, but without Nick. It was a skilful montage. There was no resolution or revelation, no lightening over water.

**EPilogue**

Nick died on 16 June, but not in the film. Wim and Ronee were in California in the high desert and only got the news two days later. The film had been more of a challenge for Wim than for Nick, who only died. Wim had fulfilled his part of the contract and delivered “Lightning over Water”. The film remained incomplete, and every effort to finish it failed. Even the inclusion of Tom’s video footage to the 35 mm stylishly shot by Ed didn’t prevent it from remaining fragmented and inconclusive.

Nick dreamt of taking a “slow-boat” to China in order to find the magical Ginseng that would cure his cancer. After his death, his corpse was hastily arranged on a Chinese junk sailing across New York Bay, with the crew and Wim on board getting drunk on sake and making final pronouncements about Nick’s death. Nick’s ashes were on the deck in a Chinese urn, along with rolls of films flying in the wind and Susan looking away. The wake was used prominently for the first version of the film. The shortened version is screened-out for the competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 1980 and isn’t well received.

In 1981 Wim spends three months alone recutting his own version (90 minutes) of “Lightning over Water” and adds his voice-over to the film. All the copies of Peter Przygodda’s first version are destroyed and the only existing copy entrusted to the Munich Film Museum for the exclusive purpose of scholarly research. It will remain in reclusion until the period of mourning is over.

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Crime is everywhere

Excerpts from a phone conversation between Sylvère Lotringer and Johnny Esposito
Held on 31 October 2011

Johnny Esposito: Sylvère, I’m trying to remember the last time we saw each other. When was that?

Sylvère Lotringer: Mid-80s; late 80s. So you’re still working for the DA [District Attorney], for the Brooklyn DA? Amazing.

Yes. I still do the same work I do, though the work has evolved a lot. And this might not have the same shock value as dead bodies, but we live in a Big Brother society, where everybody’s movements are recorded.

Right.

Everywhere you go. In every city that you’re in and every store and every elevator and every ATM and every supermarket, everywhere that you go, your image is being recorded. So when crimes are committed, we’re able to recover that footage and use it to convict the people. So, very often on recovered surveillance video are crimes as heinous as murder. For instance, one time I saw some footage of a bus stop, and it was around midnight in Brooklyn, and a gang of, like, four people, four kids attacked some man at a bus stop, an outside shelter, and killed him. They stabbed him, and they beat him up, and you see everything clearly on the surveillance video. So, then that video is actually used as the evidence to convict them. It’s like the technology has advanced so much in the last 30 years that they’re just able to recover [the footage]; actually there’s a relatively new term for it because of the popularity of the TV shows, and that’s “forensic video”. And basically any kind of video that is used as evidence is considered forensic material.

Wow. So basically what you mean is that the crime scene is everywhere now.

Everything is being recorded all the time, and when a crime occurs, you just go, you canvas the neighborhood and you find all the camera
angles of all the film and you review all the video until you actually find what you’re looking for. So you could have, like, 24 hours of surveillance, or you could have two weeks’ worth of surveillance. It’s not one point of view. If you go into a bodega [spanish wine bar], there’s a camera outside the bodega. And sometimes from the camera in the bodega you see crimes right on the corner of the street. And the technology has made it almost foolproof in court.

(...)

But what happens when the crime happens indoors, is there still the crime scene to document?

Oh, there’s so much in-door recording it’s unbelievable. There’s so much.

You mean private people?

Private people; yes everybody. It’s unbelievable. Private people, for instance, they have what are called “nanny cams”. Affluent people, and not even affluent people, just middle-class people set up cameras in their home to record their babysitters and what they do throughout the day with their children.

That footage alone has produced all kinds of stuff. Then there’re people that are sexual deviants, and they record themselves left and right. And while that’s a perfectly fine liberty, when you record abusing a child, or abusing a woman, or abusing anybody – and you record it on film, it’s all there to sort of—we actually recover stuff from Facebook …

That’s why I don’t want to have it! (Laughs) … and use it against people. Seriously, that’s how much the technology has advanced in the last 20 years. Remember I told you that I used to send my people out all the time as a phone crew? That’s down, like about – believe it or not – 90 per cent. Because everything is about recovering all this surveillance material, going through it, finding what you need to find, enhancing it either with sound or enhancing it with captions. And of course, blocking the faces of the people who are innocent and just showing the faces of people that you’re processing the crime from. It’s, like, very detailed work with editing software and it’s all kind of computer software now. I had one case that had something like 600 hours of recording and 29 defendants. And all 29 are being tried separately. So it’s like 29 cases, but for each case you have to produce the 600 hours of material.

Of collected material, collected everywhere, already existing?

Yeah. Everywhere: you could either see it as an aid of some kind, you know to help keep society safe, or you could see it as the ultimate intrusion of the civil liberties because it’s everywhere and it’s being done without your permission.

What does it mean in terms of the strategy that you use to adapt— I mean, do you still have to present things in such a way?

Absolutely. That particular formula has not changed. The only thing that changed is that back in the [early] days we used to use an analogue clock visually. Now we use a time-based date and a digital format at the bottom of the film. So you see a digital display of the clock. You remember the purpose of the clock?

No.

To show that it was unedited. Because you would see the arms on the clock jump. You had to have a visual reference point.

Oh, I see, yes. Unedited was an important thing. The only way that you could demonstrate that it wasn’t edited was by having a clock that had sweeping hands. An old-fashioned face clock that had sweeping arms. And if you tried to edit it, you would actually see the arms, the sweeping arms on the clock, jump. If you cut out, like, five seconds, you would have seen the second hand jump. Very quick. Now the software that is available is so sophisticated that you could fake the clock. What you cannot fake is a digital display at the bottom of the frame that is running continuously. And tenths of seconds are passing by.

But then you must have some very heterogeneous material. It must be different cuts that are put together for the jury, right?

No, I mean, while that is quite possible, that’s pretty complicated, because all those cuts have to be agreed by all the parties, both the defense and the prosecutor. And that’s kind of a virtual impossibility. The compromise that you get is just blocking innocent faces and enhancing sound, doing captions. And beyond that – editing it the way you would edit a commercial, for instance, to sell something – you’re still not allowed to do anything like that.

But if you don’t film it yourself, you can’t really control the events the way you would [like to] to present the material to the jury, only through editing then.

The material that is gathered these days, as I mentioned to you earlier, is all recorded video through all kind of situations. And the amount of material that comes in is enormous. And you’re constantly editing it, just to get to the portion that is relevant to the case. If there’re 24 hours of surveillance, you’re not going to show 24 hours. You’re going to show ten minutes of it. But finding those ten minutes of it and slowing it down to a pace [so] that you can follow it (because surveillance is recorded in time-lapse), that’s basically the work these days. You know, get a video from an ATM machine and you just make a digital copy of it and put it in the trial, and the person is sent to jail, for like, forever for bank robbery. And they don’t even have to make a confession. Before, we had to rely on the person actually making a confession. These days, there’s so much video-surveillance information around that you don’t need anybody to say anything. You just recover the video, and that’s all you need.

But then, there’re very few crime scenes that are shot at all, only in exceptional cases, right?

I don’t need to send somebody to film a dead body, I just ask the police department to give me a copy of their video. And then with the copy of their video, we do whatever we’re going to do and present that in court, as evidence. You see what I’m saying? But, we still do a lot of children, and that’s a very complicated thing. I have a room set up with a two-way mirror, and we shoot through the two-way mirror. And the room, it’s decorated in a way that is child-friendly. And then the child is interviewed with anatomically correct dolls. And through the careful illustration with anatomically correct dolls, very young children are able to describe sexual abuse that they went through. And that recording, without any editing at all, is such a powerful image that when it’s presented to the Grand Jury they indict the person. And the same thing is true when I send people out to a hospital to take a statement from a victim. It could be an elderly abuse, a child abuse, a domestic violence. And then, for instance, I’ll give you an example. I set up an automatic place for recording only domestic violence [statements]. In a set, the person comes in, sits down, makes their statement, and continues on through the booking process. And then that video is presented against them in court. And basically, they’re sitting there giving very comfortable and casual details about the violence that they were just arrested for. It’s done totally automatically. It’s done with, like, a webcam.

You devised a certain strategy that dealt with respecting the possible effect and emotion that could be created on a jury so that they would be incapacitated to provide kind of a rational verdict. This involved on your part a whole itinerary, and a camera, and a strategy – and not showing it directly.

Well, it’s taking film knowledge. In other words, a film, even a documentary film has a point of view and takes you somewhere. Right?

Yeah.

Remember the purpose of a close-up scene, in film, to create tension on the part of the viewer. The way that you create this tension is that the image is trying to squeeze out of the frame that’s in front of you. So when you watch the close-up, it’s associated with a feeling of tension. It’s a direct cause and effect. Okay? So, if you don’t want to manipulate a scene to produce that effect, you have to do the exact opposite. The exact opposite is having a neutral frame, and whatever occurs within the frame is the reality of what’s happening. And most of the time, that’s more than enough. But people are not used to it, because everybody that watches media in general is watching a point of view. And it’s the point of view either of the filmmaker, the producer, the channel, the network. Somebody’s got a point of view, and they’re putting it through, and they’re controlling your feelings,
and they’re controlling your reactions. Well, in this kind of setting, it’s the exact absence of all of that. And so you have to be cognizant of all the elements that are going on at any given time. And basically, you’re capturing a moment. If you remain open to the moment, if you allow yourself to be very fluid in how you react to it, you should be able to capture some subjective reality. You should be able to. If you don’t, if you allow yourself either to get angry, upset, or assuming your ego somehow, what you will produce, or what you will record, will reflect that bias. And once you introduce bias into a piece of evidence, it is subject to suppression. And a lawyer, especially a skilled lawyer who knows some of this language and knows some of this imagery, can go to a suppression hearing and they can suggest that the material is prejudiced, that it’s biased, and the entire evidence will be suppressed, nobody will be able to look at it.

The idea of these evenings in Berlin is to say that there’s still something left of documentary that you could rely on, as opposed to the possibility of manipulating everything. Right?

Right. I have people that—you ever go on YouTube?

Sometimes, yes, of course.

On YouTube, they have these unbelievable videos that are done by helmet cameras. And there are unbelievable videos that are done by cameras that they put on balloons. And a lot of these videos are posted on YouTube. They’re amazing; dirt-bike riders biking down the side of a mountain; people doing snowboarding; people doing hiking up the side of mountains; mountain-climbing. And they’re recording all this stuff with, like, little cameras on their helmet, or little cameras on their [back] pack, and the videos, they’re unbelievable. It’s amazing. Really powerful.

This I know directly, because one of my old friends is a filmmaker in Hollywood and he has all these technical—he made one or two films on surfing, with cameras on the surfboard. That’s pretty amazing, yeah.

And, now they have this footage for, like, people who do bungee jumping and people that do all kinds of, like, what they call extreme sports. And they have all this footage, and what I find the common denominator for all this material, is that the image is virtually un-manipulated. Unedited. And the subjective reality of it is so overwhelming that it pulls you in. It draws you right into it. It could actually make you feel, like, as if you’re riding down the side of a mountain on a dirt-bike. And you’re actually there. And some of these young filmmakers that are making these videos and posting them on YouTube are incredibly talented. I mean, seriously. And so much is available now, that the technology just never stopped. But let me stop talking here, maybe.
REALITY MUST BE DEFENDED

FLORIAN SCHNEIDER

Cinema addressed the unconscious, television modulated distance. Nowadays it is not just about working on the net but above all on working within and across networks. But how is it possible, especially in a medium that claims to document anything or everything, to rediscover or even reinvent documentary?

“We must engage with this society in the prevalent medium”: this slogan conveyed filmmaker Michael Mrakitsch’s decision, shared by many other filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s, to work against television on television rather than trying to make a living in some niche of the cineastic realm.

If we agree with Mrakitsch, it’s time to apply this principle. Political and aesthetic strategies shouldn’t just duplicate or illustrate what is given; instead, they must seek to confront new configurations of power and powerlessness that proliferate across networked environments. It might sound strange to drop the illusions of artistic freedom. This may seem disconcerting from a contemporary perspective, since documentary has migrated almost entirely out of television and back into even older media — the museum, theater, or more recently cinema. This is not a result of political or aesthetic considerations but, instead, one of the few survival strategies still available.

To rely on claims about the pervasiveness of the internet in almost every sphere of life has become hopelessly banal. However, it’s much more promising to suggest using this medium as the terrain for debating questions about how social fictions are made — and, instead, sets out to defend the real. Far beyond questions of taste, gossip, and the notorious difficulty of addressing what unfolds on the net, there are many reasons why it is difficult to view the net as an appealing environment for critical debate, particularly in the era of so-called “social networking.”

For instance, networked reality is still perceived as “virtual” (with an unpleasant aftertaste of being somehow “unreal”), which is still seen as a threat to authenticity and originality. At the same time, networked services have enabled additional apparatuses that document, store, monitor, and record every possible movement. In this light — omnipresent documentation, on the one hand, and the deceptive appearance of second-order reality, on the other — documentary is fighting a losing battle on two fronts. The rise of particular network services reduces myriad ways of looking at things to short-term, unambiguous necessities (“Like!”). With this, other ways to inhabit the net, or even to use it against the grain, are dissipating. The net increasingly becomes a sort of convenient transportation hub or a technology that is more or less “neutral.” Even in this latter view, at its very best, it is supposed to accept the given at face value, in the literal sense of the Latin word data, meaning that which is given.

It seems as if the room to play with the potentials of a new medium — freed from outdated conventions of seeing and unburdened by the imperative to realize value — has vanished beyond our conceptual horizons. Walter Benjamin said of analog photography, “The illiterate of the future will not be the man who cannot read the alphabet, but the one who cannot take a photograph.” In this sense, our challenge now is to learn once again how to see — both with new devices and despite them.

To make something visible one must leave something out. Visual production is always a more or less conscious process of reduction, which is never merely or strictly technical. Devices have nothing to do with it. Editing images, reducing quantity and complexity to given data for straightforward consumption, filtering out disturbing elements and suppressing ambiguities: these illusions are fabricated, as if reality could be consumed.

As long as these processes were standardized and were generally accepted, we could participate in the great debates: Are we really seeing the same thing? Who benefits from what is shown to us? Doubt was the driving force of the analog — or so it would seem in retrospect.

But, paradoxically, standardization of image production was the necessary precondition for perception to become “individualized”, and for the “subjective” to give rise to subjectivity with all of its supposed shortcomings and flaws.
To discuss what was seen and its effects made sense only as long as unified standards applied — for recording and transmitting images, for resolution and aspect ratios, and above all for framing.

Contrary to many claims made about the supposed power of images, their actual impact was never as potent as the standardized realities of factory society. Instead, it was the systematic over-estimation of that power that was most effective. Yet through this ambiguity of standardization, on the one hand, and individualization, on the other, perception could seem autonomous enough to produce (or at least enjoy) a certain degree of authenticity in what was seen.

In clear contrast to the age of television, the conditions under which images are now produced are constantly renegotiated on an ad hoc basis. Encoding, decoding, compression, and distribution of data — let alone its reception and processing — are all done more or less in compliance with proliferating, overlapping, and conflicting technical standards. There is no clear ground for calling these disparate "technical" processes into question. The outcomes of these endless renegotiations cannot be predicted; as a result, they cannot be generalized, let alone refuted.

Authenticity no longer stems from a more or less autonomous rejection of the standardized, mainstream image. Instead, it is largely the accidental result of disparate factors — limited bandwidth, technical improvisation, and/or the time pressures dictated by the demand for "content". It is no longer produced by an audience that can only listen and watch yet is entitled to criticize — and does so precisely to compensate for its own powerlessness. Instead, authenticity resides in the "honesty" of more or less raw images which at their best can awaken sympathy or malice.

Of course, television wasn’t replaced by some digital cottage industry; instead, its scale has been supplanted and expanded upon dramatically and is sometimes called the "creative industries". This deregulated image production, a sort of postmodern affect industry, and its cyberspace counterpart are no longer concerned with truth. What is at stake is the question of power: what does it mean to own an image?

Who has the power and the means to exercise ownership?

Moreover — and unlike the production of images in the fictional realm — documentary has always had to raise the question of ownership. Who does seeing belong to? And how does the image transform — even just quantitatively — the reality latent in a period time?

This is the significant distinction that marks documentary now. When realities are produced in networked environments, we must engage with them in a network mode. Only if we claim control of the contemporary means of production — the means to produce reality, in a sense — can we begin to make an image that need not apologize and is not compromised by its made nature, which does not inform on but, rather, forms reality.

Conventional understandings of documentary would have it capture and "fix" reality in order to replay it later on. A particular moment or site is isolated, stored, and reconstructed as an event in ways that produce plausible forms of truth — all with a degree of permanence beyond the contingencies of time and space.

However, conventional approaches are doomed to failure in networked environments. When uncertainty is the precondition of any assertion and instability is the rule, we must rely on an alternative strategy to produce, invent, and develop truth.

We must do more than merely emphasize that everything is "interwoven" somehow or other, with events following one from another with a certain degree of probability in some hazy automatic way.

It isn’t enough to simply demand the triumph of "transparency" and "openness" without also asserting how realities need to be re-created again and gain in new contexts. And it is scary to imagine ceding the empire of optical experience — and hence the anti-optical as well — to the imperatives of a handful of corporations and their proprietary code.

A crucial characteristic of networked environments is that image production no longer takes place in our heads, as sometimes claimed. Instead, a great deal of visual production is outsourced — in many ways, and at every level — to apparatuses that pre-empt even the most basic decisions involved in perception, cognition, and imagination.

Documentary must find new standpoints, both literally and figuratively. It must take a stand vis-à-vis a postindustrial production of fictions that increasingly possess, even own reality. Practices such as computer vision, automated image analysis, and pattern recognition permeate crucial areas of everyday life in the control society and subjecting them to sophisticated algorithms. Empirical perception, less and less the domain of our senses; instead, is taken over by cybernetic devices, which operate on the basis of their own assumptions and in the end produce tautologies.

Against this, reality must be defended. But merely capturing it isn’t enough; instead, it must be broken free and become fugitive. But what could this mean? Where could documentary flee to? Ultimately, this cannot be a polite question about the "appropriate use" of technology but, rather, the opposite: How can we use technologies for things very different than their intended purposes?

The machinic legibility of images makes it possible to treat them like text, and to input and output them correspondingly. It becomes possible to interrogate images in new ways, not just according to the immanent relations of what they depict but formally — categorize, index, and tag their "processing" in search and to find. In this way, networked environments give rise to an almost irresistible temptation to reduce the image to what is or can be made legible. Anything that might remain unreadable in any way is directly threatened with extinction — dismissed as incomprehensible and useless, ignored and discarded.

That however can scarcely be said to tell us anything about reality. Quite the contrary: after all, this is a really redundant undertaking. Visualizing data as a means of rendering the given visible and verifying what is anyway obvious leaves no scope for an exploration of reality that could call into question the rules by which this reality is produced, let alone assert a right to take production into one’s own hands. However, an exploration of this kind is exactly what would constitute the importance of documentary: generating realities that free themselves from obsessions and possessions; that resist the ways in which all forms of living are captured by technical devices.

Today this kind of proposition is lurking below the noise threshold. Not the image’s ground but its underground is no longer to be found between images, or in front of or behind images, but rather in their midst: within or beyond the visible, in the static buzz of useless information. Just as the beauty of the documentary film once lay in its graininess, today this beauty is sunk on what is supposed to be the least significant bit.

But when images become illegible and the actual, existing information can’t be compressed, truth is no longer the sum of probabilities. This non-compliant remainder with its generative multiplicity of meanings is the basis for a networked documentary that sets out to escape from an algorithmic, menu-driven "reality". Documentary that aims to produce surplus of reality confronts a paradoxical realization nowadays: communication "over the net" tends to consume reality’s store rather than expanding it in the ways imagined (and partly practiced) in the techno-utopias of the 1990s.

Social exchange, in terms of individual creativity and shared affect, is subordinated to specific economic "laws" regardless of their ability to generate profits (or, indeed, epic loss). As a consequence, images of reality are diminished quantitatively — literally compressed — and their "processing" is reduced to the endless algorithmic exploitation of metadata in order to profile, monitor, and foreclose user generation.

The art of documentary is resistance to communication. It means rejecting the imperative that everything must be communicated and, instead, to work with breaks, ruptures, and incomprehensible elements. It means leaving behind the semantically homogenized space of the "net" and delving into the underground beneath the threshold of what is visible only because it is legible.

In the networked image of reality, change encompasses more than just perceptions of space understood, in general terms, as the shift from
False time and the noncompliant, illegible remainder aren’t new approaches that became available only with the advent of digital information and communication technologies. On the contrary, one could easily demonstrate that documentary, in contrast to documentation, is marked by two key refusals: on the one hand, to be reduced to the legible, and, on the other, to conform to a flat notion of timeliness.

However, now, in defending the real, this remainder and false time play a pivotal role. These two features of documentary can disrupt the contemporary production of continuity. It provides the status quo with the legitimacy it so desperately needs in the age of networking: to justify its claim to the exclusive rights to reality.

Traditionally, continuity results from the fabrication of linear time and a consistent space. Ambiguities were eliminated, contradictions were reconciled, and the immediate was standardized in order to reduce what couldn’t be understood to a comfortable selection of endlessly repeated facts. Cutting off all uncalculated or unpredictable outside influences was a necessary condition for a cinematic self — one that, by losing itself in such a protected environment, was constantly assured of its continued and contained existence. Continuity served as a kind of ideological workout in the fitness studio of the soul.

But what importance does continuity have now, in a seemingly ahistorical, networked, and converging media environment? Continuity is produced here in ways that are diametrically opposed to the methods of film and television. In networked environments, the perception of time and space is inverted.

Classical “continuity” established synthetic time and a consistent sense of space, so that the viewer considered them to be both plausible and seductive — and thereby made two worlds one. However, contemporary continuity is no longer a matter of mechanics and geometry. It doesn’t present events in a logical sequence from an anthropomorphic perspective. Instead, the aim is to produce both the event and its representation simultaneously.

Networked continuity is based on immediate availability and exchangeability. It demands unified semantic spaces and an insistent real time with neither past nor future. However, a critical understanding of continuity must sidestep these homogenizations. In their place, we can envision a very different kind of continuity — one that consists of something more than incessant self-reassurance, one that struggles against the onslaught of repetition of the same. It would demand an engagement with history that is more than mere entertainment: one that proceeds through breaks and ruptures, standstills and sudden movement. The result: a past that resists any form of “coming to terms” with it, and a present seen as the beginning of the past rather than the end of the past.

Networked reality can only be recorded as asynchronous, heterogeneous data flows. There is no longer any synchronous time in the industrial sense, whose interdependencies demanded a “pulse” to implement and coordinate the assembly line, the mass media, and indeed the nation state. Motorized simultaneity drove material production and media. It was within this scheme that the camera served as a “clock for seeing”, as Roland Barthes noted.

In contrast, networked global economies exploit asynchronicity. Rather than a binding, quartz-based time, there are only time-slices: the principle — for example — of the transient, discrete moments when actions are allowed on a constantly renegotiated, ad hoc basis. This constant re-prioritization is called multitasking. We cannot understand its effects; we can only accept them. Criticizing a milliseconds-long “phenomenon” on historical or ideological grounds is almost beyond comprehension.

The effects, which would otherwise run rampant, can only be mediated by realizing real time. However, in the too-early or too-late of false time, reality cannot be satisfied with the time-slice allocated to it. It will necessarily occupy a longer or shorter interval — and give rise to all sorts of endless discontinuities.

Ultimately, documentary need not fear the paradoxical illegibility and polyvalence of the real. Instead, documentary must revalue the heterogeneity of data flows — not only as an overwhelming chaos but also as a plenitude of almost mythical extent. This superabundance of political, social, and cultural scenes must be investigated and recreated.

None of this is new.

Each time the documentary has undergone a renewal, its reinvocation has gone hand-in-hand with a radical change of milieu: from early landscape photography to portrait ateliers, from “living portraits” of traveling and fairground cinema to silent-film studios, then subsequently returning into the factory, heading off to war, and back into the natural world.

In the 1960s documentary, as camera and sound-recording equipment became portable and broke free from the studio, filmmakers and video artists seized that opportunity. By moving into settings where they had little or no control over the noise threshold in any sense, they engaged with a lively, animate world, became aware of life in the public sphere, and reclaimed realities that had once existed independently of mediated images.

Now, we could lament how surveillance cameras monitor our streets, and how our public spaces are becoming “mere” collections of semipublic images on the net. But it also means that, for documentary, today’s street is this networked environment. Not just the “net”, but a much deeper investigation of what that milieu might mean.

It is just as risky and dangerous here, and the contrast to conventional modes of filmmaking could not be greater. We have no choice but to find new ways to see it.

Florian Schneider is a filmmaker and author based in Berlin. The author would like to thank Ted Byfield for editing the English version of this text.
FOURTH READING: KINO-EYE. FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES

KLAUS WILDENHAN

Every synthetic film — and again, I would like to clarify the term: I do not use the term “synthetic” in a derogatory fashion: synthesis = joining individual, independent parts to form a whole; a film (feature-length film) made up of different elements = synthetic film — every synthetic film lags a step behind the development of the society it is intended for.

“The October” by Sergei Eisenstein and “The End of St. Petersburg” by Vsevolod Pudovkin were created to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. The synthetic film is situated in a rear defensive position with regard to contemporary politics. Political developments provide movie directors with the necessary material; they rework it for the medium and play the revised version back to society. The artistic, synthetic piece has the task of linking a historical situation to the current one; it must call to mind, it must interpret, construe, crystalize-out role models, communicate a self-image, encourage and thus give clues for further action. The artistic, synthetic work is the stuff legends are made of — and it should by all means be realistic and positive.

The shorter the distance between society’s actions and the replaying of the artistic, critical treatment of them, for instance in film, the better the discussion, i.e. the political debate within society, functions. Should there be a deadlock, our liberal entrepreneurial society will tend to avoid the issue by switching to the theater of illusion. A reminder:

(Wilfried Berghahn, 1961) “If Ruth Leuwerik managed to top the popularity charts for female movie stars for three years after the “Trapp Family”, continuing to only play roles that confirmed her audience’s hopes that there are no problems in this world that can’t be solved, because we all basically have our hearts in the right place (they’re ‘pure’, they’re ‘clean’!), that says more about the mentality of the German burgher during Konrad Adenauer’s third term in office than the so-called socially critical films produced in those years.”

The fundamental political issues and conflicts are kept quiet. The separation of the classes is much more noticeable than in reality. The ruling class not only dominates the economy and the distribution of society’s wealth, but also determines the degree of enlightenment that society is to receive about itself. For the most part, it controls the creation of legends, developing them into the entertainment industry’s diversionary tactic. The middle-class producer of art is left with nothing but to exploit his increasing state of isolation in a sensitive manner. Perhaps he’ll be awarded an art prize for his efforts.

At this point, filmmakers must take a step back, before the advent of the synthetic work, before the beginning of the motion picture. Every society has a basic cultivation of information that comes before the legend: the creation of a chronic. Within the film industry, newsreels and lengthy documentaries, often supplied by the newsreel producers, play that role. We know full well that they contribute and have contributed to as much misinformation as has the motion picture genre that Berghahn described in 1961.

All the same, newsreels are theoretically marked by a less artificial and more direct basic approach vis-à-vis the viewer. Newsreels play back first-hand material. It is journalistic work: more modest, less expensive, right on the ball.

(A digression about the scope of information in our system — We don’t mean to claim here that in a system of free-market entrepreneurship the journalistic accumulation of information can act independently and radically, detached from this system. Its scope is by all means limited by what the system’s liberal or reformist ideology of information allows. But this room for maneuver must be filled out and taken advantage of, if only to never lose sight of the boundaries that have been set. It is significant that it was in 1961 when Berghahn wrote his work about the guiding principles of synthetic film in the Federal Republic of Germany that the ARD television station’s very first news magazine shows, chiefly “Panorama”, came into their own in terms of style and political significance. TV news magazines are nothing but newsreels. They contributed to the rise of political discussion within our society. Certainly there were limits, and when these boundaries were crossed, senior editors were replaced. Again, as far as I’m concerned, that’s also useful information. It serves as an example of how one more degree of enlightenment was provided with regard to the dogma of the freedom of the press and freedom of opinion. I don’t want to idealize or overrate the role of journalists, authors and directors. But it would amount to a reverse renunciation not to continuously expand to the maximum the positions once conceded in a liberal educational space. That is nothing but solid craftsmanship.

At some point, we must certainly ask how much informative material no longer gets shown in the official and tolerated “leftist” newsreels and magazines. That brings us to the problem of the counter-newsreel. Where and how can counter-newsreels be produced and distributed? The situation doesn’t look promising in the Federal Republic of Germany. There have been minute beginnings and failed attempts. For the time being, one would have to admit that the need for a functioning source of counter-information — information that is not just offered now and then, esoterically, in student cinemas — is not yet recognized. At least not to the degree that such a need would be reflected materially in any way. Attempts that were made failed due to a lack of financing or functioning commitment. They failed because there was no actual site to replay them and no perception that “counter-newsreels” can even contribute to enlightenment.

Back to my thoughts on the advent of newsreels and the “kino-eye”:

At the beginning of a new social order, newsreels are the very first information platforms. Soviet newsreels accompanied the civil war in that country, not motion pictures. Newsreel cameramen, editors and directors laid the foundation for the future works of the famous directors of Soviet synthetic film. I believe I can derive this much for our current situation: whenever the theater of illusion staged by the powers that be gets out of hand, we should heed the call by a “documentarist”, a “cinematic eye” — a call that usually demands in a solemn lecture the return to reality. This is an expression of healthy confidence that the propaganda-effect of social raw material is sufficient to trigger in humans — the recipients — the awareness of “truth”.

“We declare the old films, the romantic, the theatricalized etc., to be leprous. — Don’t come near!”
Vertov demonstrated the most important leap that every young filmmaker must make when he turns back to the beginnings of film in his society, every young filmmaker who no longer wants to work with synthetic film because, among other reasons, it exposes him to too many possibilities of being corrupted. Dedicated journalistic work is a beginning.

Here, the filmmaker takes the leap from newsreel work to kino-eye work. First, he needs to find current, socially relevant material (newsreel). Then, it’s about defining not only current, but also neglected and neglected topics must be treated in detail, must be treated as documentary material rather than being dealt with only briefly in a newscast, in a report.

This switch from newsreel work to kino-eye work is important and should be kept track of. Both are driven by the same journalistic urge – and we do assume it’s progressive, dedicated journalism – but they’re defined by different features with regard to topicality, thematic intensity and emotional engagement.

The pressure of events forces the journalist to bundle and summarize when working on newsreels; it is he, a single voice, who reports.

In documentary work, the protagonists have the floor. It is no longer the voice of the filmmaker that dominates. Of course he chooses the pictures and he is responsible for the final montage. But the story is told by the protagonists on film – the heroes of our everyday lives – caught up in conflicts and events. Their collective voices report. The story might consist of statements they make or the observation of an unfolding activity.

It is the documentarist’s job to capture this in as concrete a manner as possible. He doesn’t tell the story in his running commentary but through the montages that have been shot. This difference between journalistic reporting and a film documentary, between newsreel and kino-eye, is fundamental and a first step in the type of film production we are defining. Kino-eye work calls for long-term dedication on site. The breathless overview is anathema to it.

An ideological aspect of kino-eye work: it aims to encompass social life in its entirety, meaning that as many people as possible should be involved in the work of documentation. According to Vertov’s plan, for instance, this means all the amateur film-groups in a country. This might be a naive plan, since documentary work, like all types of production, requires a great degree of adept professionalism if it is to be effective. But a tendency to spontaneity participation is inherent in making documentaries; they trigger a move toward lively discussion in large groups.

From this basis, the next leap is to the type of production chosen, the leap to making a synthetic film. This might be the motion picture we’re familiar with (or it can also be the so-called poetic film, but more about that later).

In the Soviet Union, Vertov’s colleagues moved on to dramatized synthetic film; beginning in 1925, they founded the great tradition of the Soviet motion picture, with for instance “Battleship Potemkin”, “Mother”, “October” and “Arsenal”. Without the early newsreels and the continuing documentary work of kino-eye, these motion pictures would never have been possible. Vertov described and boosted the documentary method primarily in his writings. I can only refer here to his essays on the principle of kino-eye (“Kinoglaz”), e.g. “On the Film Known as Kinoglaz”, “Artistic Drama and Kino-Eye”, “Three Songs about Lenin” and “Kino-Eye: On Love for the Living Human Being”. (They are all to be found in German translation in the edition of Dziga Vertov’s works mentioned at the end of this essay, published by the East German Institute for Film Research.)

It is easy to see a vital documentary inquisitiveness in Vertov’s films, how his theory of “life taken by surprise” becomes concrete, how he observes everything he can get his hands on: work, birth, accident and death, switching on electricity, baking bread, the Soviet Union’s streets and the countryside.

In 1930, Vertov made a discovery without which the documentary film as we know it would be unthinkable: synchronous audio/video recordings of interviews with everyday workers. A female concrete worker, a collective farmer and a woman farmer in “Three Songs about Lenin” (1934) and a female parachutist in “Lullaby” (1937) are the first everyday heroes in the history of documentary film to speak spontaneously. From his silent-movie observations to these scenes of synchronously recorded speech, Vertov consistently pressed ahead in his productions toward experimental documentary work.

We enjoy invoking him. But these documentary sequences are not the decisive element in his filmmaking.

For the most part, Vertov created synthetic films. In his products – in contrast to his theories – he moved away from a documentary approach, creating “film poems”. One must allow of course for the production of the films in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 30s. (Vertov’s diaries, published by the Austrian Film Museum – also listed at the end – provide important information on this topic.)

Let’s continue. In 1927, Vertov had mapped out a good part of his theories, and he and his colleagues shot four major movies (“Kinoglaz”, “Forward, Soviet!”, “The Sixth Part of the World”, “Man with a Movie Camera”).

In 1927 in Rotterdam, the first significant Western European documentarist began his work: Dutch cameraman and filmmaker Joris Ivens. With Ivens, we move closer to our own social beginnings and to the experiences a young filmmaker has during his training. These are experiences that almost instinctively lead him to make documentaries and then take him further down the path of becoming one of our major progressive filmmakers. One who can teach us many useful things; who is still prepared to learn new things, too.

Ivens shot his first documentary, “The Bridge”, in 1927, and he did so deliberately to try out his technical prowess and to hone his observation skills. It was serious professional work for Ivens, the one difference being that the end product was not meant for sale.

“The Bridge” may now look like no more than a study in movement but I got a great deal more out of it than that. I learned many secrets about these movements in relation to the camera. For example, I learned that when you film repetitive movements such as the actions of a counter-weight on the bridge, you have to observe this for a longer time and with greater attention than you would think. You will always discover some-
thing new, the countermovement of a gliding shadow, a significant trembling as the cables come to a halt, or a more telling reflection at a more subjective angle.

From the little glass house below on the bridge, the operator watched everything I did. When I came down the long iron ladder after filming the huge cable wheel at the top of the bridge he just had to tell me what was on his mind:

“You don’t have to eat the bridge. You look like some sort of tiger sneaking and creeping around that wheel. I had to laugh when you suddenly stood up straight against the sky with your camera. Did you get what you wanted?”

I did get what I wanted. What he had seen from below was the long careful observation of all the elements, the turning wheel, the gliding, sticky oily cable and the busy traffic down on the dock. When I stood up I had finally found the right moment for the shooting. That is, the ‘here and now,’ the acid-test of your sensitivity. With your handheld camera you freeze at that critical moment – the moment you find the right spot for your shot. Not two inches more to the right or to the left or a little higher or a little lower, or closer or further away, not a split second later or earlier – but here and now.

Of course you learn to give yourself leeway: you can begin your camera motor shortly before that decisive moment and stop shortly after that moment has been completed; but you have to be sure that it has been caught within your total footage.

I learned from ‘The Bridge’ that prolonged and decisive observation is the only way to be sure that it has been caught within your total footage. Anyone who has worked with film knows how easy it is to create fast shots and sequences, to find smooth transitions and re-jig the drama in the artificial world of the cutting room. In the cutting room you believe you have the actual power to include a message. Of course, the maker has power. Here, in the cutting room, is where his authorship begins. The filmmaker bears his soul in montage. And that’s when the lonely author most easily falls into the traps of pre-cut middle-class art patterns. The temptation is great to delicately sprinkle in some sarcasm, knowledge acquired by reading, a sentential touch, or the mentality of a German language lesson. A formally self-contained argument can be quickly achieved in this way that has nothing whatsoever to do with reality.

Any excessive formal effort at smoothness or typecasting should fall away in documentary film. Each and every artificial attempt to round out the story must be avoided. You show a collection of slivers that have been trapped. If you were persistent and lucky (one requires the other), you’ll succeed in drawing the audience, the recipient, into the arc of suspense created by this open game. That’s what it’s all about: including the recipient. In that respect, the roughness of documentary film offers the audience the opportunity to experience the drama of documentary filmmaking. In respect of selection of slivers that have been trapped, in that respect, a documentary film represents a beginning and synthetic film a continuation; in that respect, documentary film is an open game and synthetic film a closed game. In synthetic film, the viewer can accept examples but he cannot join the beginning of the conversation by no means offered by the synthetic product. He has to submit to it. In the case of a documentary film, the audience can soon say yes or no to the product.

If the documentarist has fulfilled his task, the product opens up a field of discussion between him – the creator – the people depicted and the audience. The creator by no means vanishes in the conversation. This relationship is best demonstrated in an actual discussion at the end of a screening.

Back to Joris Ivens. In 1929, the Association of Soviet Film Directors invited him to show his films in the Soviet Union. In the meantime, he had shot several additional short films, but he was still at the beginning of his career, which would eventually lead him to become a dedicated socialist filmmaker. One of his short films was “Zuiderzee,” a documentary about Dutch land reclamation from the sea. The Russian audience appreciated this film most of all. One presentation in particular was to attain a certain amount of significance for Ivens and would influence his future work – it proved educational for him. The film was shown in a Moscow auditorium, to 800 construction workers contracted to build the Moscow subway. Although Ivens had shown the film easily 200 times before, he stayed in the auditorium because he understood that his absence would have caused the audience. After the film was over, the discussion began:

“After these answers my questioner arose again. ‘I think,’ he said, ‘that Citizen Ivens is either a fake or a liar.’

When this was translated for me I was puzzled. The audience was now as excited as I was. I told the translator to ask him for an explanation. He repeated: ‘A fake or a liar.’

‘Could you put that a little more concretely?’ I asked.

‘You say you’re from the middle class, yet the film we have seen was surely made with the eyes of a worker. I know, because it is exactly my misfire. I’m an engineer. So, either you are a liar and bought the film in Holland from somebody or else you are a worker who’s pretending to be from the middle class – and that is certainly not necessary here in a workers’ and peasant state,’ he added smiling.

I couldn’t have asked for a higher compliment: ‘The film is exactly the way I see the work. I had no documents with me and I made no attempt to prove that I was really a member of the middle class. Somewhat desperate, I tried to pin the questioner down on his sharp observation. I asked him, ‘Where, in my film do you see the work shown exactly the way you see it?’ ‘Several places,’ he said, ‘especially in that heavy basalt stone work on the dike. I have done that kind of work.’

‘I see what you mean. I can explain how I filmed that sequence. I could not find the right angle of my camera on this stone work. So I started watching the work to see how it begins, how it ends, what its rhythm is; but still I could not find my camera angle. Then I tried to move the heavy basalt stone myself because I thought it would be valuable to get the actual feel of the
work before filming it. I soon became exhausted because I wasn’t used to the work, but I found out what I wanted to know. You have to feel first where to get a grip on the stone — not in the middle, but at certain corners. I found out there is a trick of balancing with the stone — how to use your own weight to get the stone from one place to another. I found that the greatest strain in the work was on the shoulder muscles and on the chin. Therefore, those were the things to emphasize when photographing this action because they belong organically to the work. From then on the camera — its angle and its composition — were all dictated by that muscle and the chin. Those became the two focal points for the action. Reality dictated the photography, not my aesthetic effort to achieve a nice balance of lines and lighting. But this realistic angle also happened to be the most beautiful angle. I could not satisfactorily and truly photograph the stone laborer until I found out the physical strain of his work.”

My question was satisfied. ‘That is good, very good,’ he said. (...) This was one of the most significant evenings in my young film career. That man had discovered something about. It took the common sense of a Russian worker to do this.”

The question a Russian worker put to Joris Ivens is right on the mark with regard to the beginning of it all: where does the documentarist even come from?

Answer: making documentary films is the effort on the part of the middle-class art producer to steer attention in his society back to the actual production conditions and work procedures. It’s his attempt to develop an aesthetic point of view out of the action he plans to illustrate and not to foist his own formal ideas onto the action. It’s his endeavor to bring material from the people, working-class material, back into the center of attention.

This represents an impulse to enlighten at a juncture where enlightenment was long denied. It is carried out by members of a social stratum who are able to acquire the requisite training and means of production thanks to their class-status and who are then able to get assignments (usually from non-commercial institutions) to finance this basic documentary provision of information. And who then often end up experiencing serious “commercial” difficulties. (This statement refers to the German social system and also to the beginning of a socialist society like the Soviet Union, which initially, in the 1920s, relied for art production on the progressive educated middle-class.)

A few examples of where socialist and bourgeois documentarists came from in the early days of the documentary film movements:

Dziga Vertov’s father was a librarian. Vertov writes that after finishing elementary school he attended music school and two institutions of higher learning. He wanted to be a writer.

Joris Ivens’s father owned a chain of photography shops. Ivens was supposed to join the family business. His father could afford the best education for his son, who studied economics in Rotterdam and photochemistry in Berlin, and did internships at a camera factory in Dresden and at Zeiss in Jena.

John Grierson, founder of the English documentary film school, studied philosophy and social sciences. His father was a teacher at a Scottish village school.

Robert Flaherty (“Nanook”, “Moana”, “Tabu”, “Industrial Britain”, “Man of Aran”, “Elephant Boy”, “The Land”, “Louisiana Story”), whom Grierson once called the “father of documentary film”, was an iron ore prospector, his father a mining engineer.

Richard Leacock, American documentarist and student of Flaherty, himself marks the advent of a renewal of international documentary film. His films and those of his co-workers, which they dubbed “cinema direct” or “living camera”, exerted an influence on socialist documentary film. Leacock was also a technical inventor who studied physics at Harvard.

This list has the sole purpose of demonstrating that enlightened men passed on their knowledge in other ways than originally intended; that they at some point in their filmmaking career were interested more in the “raw material” of their society, in documentary material, than in the formal translation of their observations into the accepted (and easily marketable) synthetic artistic products.

This was the start of an effort to return social attention back to the broader strata of society. That doesn’t mean that the material in the documentaries immediately met with widespread acceptance, especially not when audiences were plied on all corners with the “sweet embraces of the romance” (Vertov). But it is nonetheless a sign of resistance and the will to recover the health of the social body when interest in enlightenment is awakened: when people begin to ask about how things really are. This start was made by documentary film. It demonstrates an art that comes before the art of play-acting.

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Dziga Vertov, “The difficult years of Dziga Vertov: Excerpts from his diaries”, Quarterly Review of Film Studies, 7/1, Vienna 1982, p. 17.

I traveled to the Delta during the transition from winter to spring because I wanted to find nature in a cold, “graphic” state in which the twigs, earth, and fields were visible, the landscape quasi-exposed. To this extent, I already had a clear idea of the video’s aesthetics; also that it should be black-and-white.

I foresaw a chronological order for the work’s structure; from the end of slavery to the present day; the period of the blues’ origins and activity. Whereby, right from the start, I wanted to build in digressions that sketch out the colonization process, the quasi-origins of this musical fusion. But the beginning of the video was not planned. Big Jack Johnson’s death came unexpectedly. It happened when I was there in Clarksdale. I wanted to talk with him; the local blues-icon. He died on the day that we had planned to meet.

That music should play a major role was the basic idea. I did not want to create a work about the blues, but instead, work with the blues at all levels. Exactly how first became clear during the journey when I found a CD by John Lee Hooker, which I had been looking for, for a long time, and thereby discovered his brilliant song “Country Boy”. This song was like an awakening. All of a sudden I could see the entire video in my mind, the atmosphere about the role that music would have in it. Listening to this song while riding through the fields and the woodland of the Delta opened my eyes.

In the second part of the video there is the story of a strange encounter: suddenly, a man dressed in black and white, clad in a hat and silver walking-stick appears. He is called the “God of the Crossroads”. What is the significance of this character?

I actually did meet this character, exactly as described in the song, on the day that Big Jack Johnson died, at a crossing on the road in Clarksdale. The encounter was not accidental because it resembled a common motif in several blues songs that tell of the musician meeting a mysterious man at the crossroads who “tunes” their guitars, after which they are able to play like virtuosos. Blues legend Robert Johnson, for example, embodies this myth—it is said that he sold his soul there in the Delta at a crossroads for his own unique way of playing the guitar. In my research I searched for the origins of this myth and came across a fusion of various African and European motifs. I was particularly interested in the character of Eshu, also Exu and Elégbá, an Orisha from Yoruba culture, which I had already encountered during a previous project in Brazil. Eshu is a messenger between the here and now and the hereafter and can be found at the crossroads, the symbol of the encounter of journeys through life. There, he also fulfills wishes at the price of a sacrifice. In the Afro-American Voodoo religion, Candómbélé or the Santería plays a more important role than in Africa because his mission, among others, is also one of reshaping the connection to the ancestors in Africa: A connection that was broken by slavery. The character of Eshu came to New Orleans through slaves from Haiti and Cuba, and found its way northward on the Mississippi into the Delta.

In the context of the blues, Eshu becomes a trickster, who is often described in the same way as the person that I ran into.

Eshu disappears just as suddenly as he appears. Afterwards, the song says: “Beyond the city limits the light turns over making things lucid.” From this moment on, the time-levels mix between now and back then; between what can really be seen and the knowledge about what has happened. In that, the drawings in the video play a very important role. They open up an entirely different view of reality than the documentary image. They show a land from a surreal perspective, all-embracing in terms of time: one sees the markings of a terrain that has been thoroughly let dry and flooded. In the context of the urban parcels of the land-lease system, border lines and the courses of rivers. But also traces that have long passed, of white settlers, or the original inhabitants, appear, which you have put together from various maps and researched. Your works generally take a starting point in a concrete historical and social context and yet you are not concerned with depicting this, as such. For you, what is the role of the documentary element? How do you see the relationship between the found and the fictional in your work?

I have never viewed my work as documentary, and I never asked myself this question. But there is this dilemma with the truth, with the "authentic": I was busy with it for a long time, but never came to an artistic conclusion — Foucault was useful to some extent. I think that the category of truth does not exist in art and have decided not to consider it and to see what makes sense within my work and what is believable within the framework that I have set. It is actually so that I first want to experience something — I want to understand why something has become the way it is. Put simply: why certain things in human history have happened. What I then pass on in my work has gone through a long filtering process. Ultimately, nothing in “Disquieting Nature” is invented or contrived. Almost everything took place as is. Every depiction of a past event is always a construction. With regard to Roland Barthes’s concept of writing history as narrative, Michel de Certeau once emphasized a small but important difference — he described historiography as narrative, a telling of something that truly took place, and yet the result and further development of it. Precisely this is the distinction from fiction, and that is what interests me — “the discourse with the dead” as de Certeau calls it. For that I needed a mediator to open the doors. That is also the reason for the scene with the character like Eshu at the beginning of my video, before the history is called on.”

This transcendent perspective is also mirrored in the way that the river is sung about in the lyrics. The Mississippi River becomes a protagonist of a worrying, deceptive nature that makes the stories, the bodies, disappear and simultaneously makes them reappear. In your videos you show flooded landscapes and the movements of the water’s current repeat: “Fluid stories seeping into the land”. Things have played out on the river’s shores and the riverbed that should actually be forgotten. “The river carries them off, and they wash downstream”. And at the end: “the river is flowing away, it didn’t have a thing to do with anything at all”. The lyrics emphasize the river’s ambivalent testimony — it is both a place of refuge for the victims and an accomplice of the propagators. How did you arrive at this personified portrayal?

This awareness of a river as a stream of history is a motif that has long accompanied my work... In the “Wade in the Water” drawings (2009–10), an
thematized and drew the ambivalent role of the river (in this case it was the Ohio River) as the route for shipping slaves inland and also as a vanishing point for people who wanted to escape from slavery. Right from the start I was interested in the river’s importance in the American landscape as a sign of progress, as a border to be crossed, as a marker of penetration and an aid in escape. In this way, in my drawings, the river became a protagonist in the process of colonization.

“Disquieting Nature” zooms in on the sites of individual crimes. The river is their witness, it absorbs them; they drift with it through the landscape. The river is, of course, also a metaphor for time in that it plays absolutely no role for me exactly when something happens. The “river” will bring it forth again sooner or later. The events come on land only in the present; one can view them only in the here and now.

You often speak about “nature’s memory” in relation to the work. What exactly is to be understood by that? At a different level you focus on music as a time-based, cultural recording medium that preserves the stories of individuals and allows them to become part of a collective memory.

In my confrontation with the relationship of music and nature, I consider the human-made landscape as a memory storehouse in the same way that music is also a type of archive. Music is fluid; there is never the one moment in which a thing is created. Sounds are carried through history, everyone adds something. Particularly important for me were two references that influenced the narrative-base of the blues: European minnesingers who traveled from town to town and passed on stories, and the tradition of the Griot, West African storytellers who have a similar function of carrying stories within them, and while spreading these stories, constantly further developing them. The events have written themselves into the landscape in a similar way. And I am not talking about excavation sites here, but rather, how in the case of the Mississippi Delta, in its very nature became a landscape of colonization and thereby a memory of it: The way that the entire landscape was restructured to install large-scale agricultural systems and how the attempt was then made to reconstruct its “original” nature again. In the video I looked for sites that stored the violence that went along with this process. The acts of violence themselves are no longer visible, but nonetheless registered in a disquiet nature. My work sings of this.

“Disquieting Nature” has an open narrative structure in which various stories and storylines surface and submerge. Whereas the images show landscapes and places where people are only indirectly present, the lyrics are about racist attacks, murders, and the appropriation of space. The impression of crime scenes appears only in the connection between music and text while, however, their evidential nature has been lost.

In the work I was concerned with depicting human interventions, even when people cannot be seen in the images. Sites where something has happened; which is, however, not shown. I am interested in the depiction of violence that is the basic motif of all of my works. I consider violence to be an unresolved dimension of our existence. It cannot be stopped. As the lawyer Jacques Vergès once said, “Violence is the mark of our freedom”. In my works I attempt to understand violence, or at least get behind the motivation, the reason, for certain acts, to illustrate the dimensions of these basic human acts, and the way that their conceptualization and social acceptance change over the course of history.

Christine Meisner is an artist based in Berlin. Cordula Daus is a cultural scholar and author based in Berlin.
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Filmmakers, Thomas will address this specifically Japanese concept, which challenges such binary distinctions as space/time, inside/outside, emptiness/collusion, and foregrounds the spaces between elements. The three filmmakers have employed strategies like unusual montage techniques, off-centre framing and abstract electronic music to examine traditional subjects in distinctly non-traditional ways.

Matsumoto Toshio: “Giroen”, Japan 1955, 35 mm, 16 min | “The Song of Stone”, Japan 1973, 35 mm, 75 min | “Atman”, Japan 1975, 16 mm, 12 min | “Sway, Yuragi”, Japan 1985, 16 mm, 8 min | “Engram”, Japan 1987, 16 mm, 12 min

Ito Takashi: “Spacy”, Japan 1981, 16 mm, 10 min | “Ghost”, Japan 1984, 16 mm, 6 min | “Venus”, Japan 1990, 16 mm, 5 min | “The Moon”, Japan 1994, 16 mm, 7 min | “Unbalance”, Japan 2006, video, 5 min

Kawase Naomi: “Tsukoku no danshu”, Japan 2002, Beta Sp, 65 min

4.30 pm – 6 pm

Objectification

Lecture – Hito Steyerl

Filmmaker and theorist Hito Steyerl’s presentation examines the relation of objects to objectivity and objectification. How do 3D technologies affect our notion of space and material reality? What are the affinities between these new tools and early photography, with its ability to freeze life? And what are 3D’s blind spots and white shadows? Case studies will include 3D-mapping based on videos and other live-gathered data. Once a scan is produced — for instance, of a battlefield — the event can be revisited and observed from an infinite number of angles. However, the data does not simply provide evidence but also introduces ambiguities, interpretations, confusion. “If you want to establish the truth,” Steyerl says, “then you establish at the same time the contradiction.”

6.30 – 8 pm

A Blind Spot

Screening presented by Catherine David

OC, English subtitles

Les mains négatives

Marguerite Duras, France 1978, 35 mm, 18 min

Taking as her motif mysterious prehistoric hand-prints discovered in southern European caves, Duras juxtaposes against this narrative a series of blue-and-black filmed images of Paris boulevards at dawn. “The word is not yet invented”.

Le Sphinx

Thierry Knauff, Belgium / France 1986, 35 mm, 12 min

Using its soundtrack fragments from a Jean Genet text about massacres committed during the Lebanese civil war in the Palestinian refugee camp Shatila, “Le Sphinx” dwells visually on the figure of the stone sphinx.

Toute révolution est un coup de dés

Daniele Hulett, Jean-Marie Straub, France 1977, 16 mm, 10 min

In the rigid, objective poses of Brechtian epic theater a series of actors recite, under a plaque commemorating the “raving dead” of the 1871 Commune, Mallarmé’s poem “A Throw of the Dice Will Never Allow Chance”. For Straub, the challenge of this film was, he said, to “combat opacity.” Dedicated to the dead of the Paris Commune, the film and its voices turn into a rhythmic equivalent of the poem’s experimental typography.

Les Photos d’Alix

Jean Eustache, France 1980, 16 mm, 18 min

Alix Cléo Roubaud, a photographer, talks to Jean Eustache’s teenage son Boris about her photographic manipulations and the reasoning behind them, confessing cheerfully to many instances of “trucage”, although always in the name of some kind of truth. The film’s themes of mismatching, manipulation and masking are underlined when it emerges that the photographs described are not the ones seen on screen.

8.30 – 10 pm

Opium, Indigo, Photography

Lecture – Christopher Pinney

In this lecture Christopher Pinney, an anthropologist specialized in the visual culture of South Asia, looks at Joachim Koester’s work “Calculata Served as a Basis for British Expansion in the East” (2005–07). Koester flags up topics occluded from official photographic histories of the city of Calculata: its role in the illicit opium trade with China and its trade in indigo dye. Both were controlled by the East India Company, an early Anglo-Saxon multinational corporation exercising military and administrative as well as trading power in India. Pinney’s political analysis of photography’s “optical unconscious” is complemented by the more delirious, subjective approach of Thomas de Quincey, for whom opium was a “marvellous agent” able to reveal “secret inscriptions”.

10.30 – 12 midnight

Melodrama Performance – Eszter Salamon

“Melodrama” is a solo “documentary performance” in which Eszter Salamon re-enacts interviews she made in 2006 and 2012 with a woman living in a small village in Southern Hungary who happens to share her name. Reading her homonym like a choreographic script, Salamon performs the 62-year-old woman’s gestures and intonations, reproducing them on stage to the music of Terre Thaumatin. The result is a meditation not just on the possibility of getting inside another person’s skin, but the extent to which personal hopes are a blind spot for whom opium was a “marvellous agent” able to reveal “secret inscriptions”.

For the ones who opium was a “marvellous agent” able to reveal “secret inscriptions”.

11.30 – 12 midnight

Framing Death – the Unmaking of Huntington over Water

Presentation – Sylvère Lotringer

The last of Sylvère Lotringer’s three presentations focuses on the making of “Lightning over Water”, Nicholas Ray and Wim Wenders’ film (USA/GDR 1980) about Ray’s final days of life. The director of “Rebel Without A Cause”, Ray had been diagnosed in 1979 with terminal cancer, and Wenders offered to help him direct his last film. But the attempt to turn the film into a fiction failed, raising ethical questions about the entire project. Featuring “Lightning over Water”, rare videos of the film and re-enactments of key scenes as well as audio interviews with all the participants in the production, this session will explore a film seen by Paul Virilio as a latter-day Greek tragedy, with the technical crew in the role of chorus.

9 – 11 pm

Montage Interdit

Eyal Sivan in conversation with Ella Shohat

“issue zero” — an online project designed to examine documentary practices in networked environments — is launched in pilot form during the festival. The first commissioned work is by filmmaker Eyal Sivan. “Montage Interdit” explores the language and possibilities of montage in documentary work through the prism of Jean-Luc Godard’s films. The piece consists of film materials accompanied by interpretative commentaries from various thinkers. One of the commentaries will, however, take the form of a live on-stage event: Eyal Sivan in conversation with the theoretician Ella Shohat, whose book “Israel Cinema” discusses Sivan’s work examining historically revisionist documentaries about Palestine.
A Blind Spot
Exhibition
31 May – 1 July 2012

The blind spot of a photograph refers to something not visible or shown but nonetheless latent in the image. Dismissing the dominant pictorial regime, the images in “A Blind Spot” preserve an openness and indeterminacy that precludes reducing them to a description or illustration of a fixed reality. This is the point of departure for questioning the documentary aspect in contemporary artistic and photographic practices.

The exhibition, curated by Catherine David, includes works by Eric Baudelaire, Elisabetta Benassi, David Goldblatt, Hassan Khan, Joachim Koester, Vincent Meessen, Olaf Nicolai, Melik Ohanian, Efрат Shvily, Jeff Wall and Christopher Williams.

Thu 31 May – Sun 3 June
10.30 pm and 12 midnight (West Garden)
DAYS, I see what I Saw and what I will See
Video installation – Melik Ohanian

Projected on either side of a screen, “DAYS, I See what I Saw and what I will See” is a two-channel video installation of a labor camp in the United Arab Emirates. Over the course of eleven days in 2011, Melik Ohanian laid camera tracks through the camp, shooting 100 meters during the day and at night to make a sequence which, once edited, became a continuous track showing the whole camp in 42 minutes. One side of the specially constructed screen shows night, the other day.

PICKER
Peripheral Vision

Projected on either side of a screen, “Peripheral Vision” is a two-channel video installation of a labor camp in the United Arab Emirates. Over the course of eleven days in 2011, Melik Ohanian laid camera tracks through the camp, shooting 100 meters during the day and at night to make a sequence which, once edited, became a continuous track showing the whole camp in 42 minutes. One side of the specially constructed screen shows night, the other day.

picture credits

p. 1 Joachim Koester
“The Barker Ranch” (Detail), 2008
From a series of four gelatin silver prints
Courtesy Jan Mot, Brussels

pp. 6-11 Joachim Koester
“The Barker Ranch”, 2008
From a series of four gelatin silver prints
Courtesy Jan Mot, Brussels

p. 18 Joachim Koester
“Time of the Hashshashin (Alamut Castle – Interior)” (Detail), 2011
From a series of six gelatin silver prints
Courtesy Jan Mot, Brussels

pp. 26-27 Joachim Koester
“Time of the Hashshashin (Alamut Castle – Looking South West)” (Detail), 2011
From a series of six gelatin silver prints
Courtesy Jan Mot, Brussels

From of a series of six diptychs
Gelatin silver print
Courtesy Jan Mot, Brussels

From of a series of six diptychs
Gelatin silver print
Courtesy Jan Mot, Brussels

From of a series of six diptychs
Gelatin silver print
Courtesy Jan Mot, Brussels

p. 65 Efрат Shvily, “100 Years” (Detail), 2012
Archival pigment print on baryt paper
Courtesy of the Artist and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv

pp. 66–67 Efрат Shvily, “100 Years”, 2012
Archival pigment print on baryt paper
Courtesy of the Artist and Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv

Video Still - Day Version
HD video with sound. Double projection on the two side of a same screen. Duration: 2 x 42 min.
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris
Co-produced by Sharjah Art Foundation.
Photo: © Melik Ohanian
The Thessaloniki Documentary Festival is a leading European Documentary Festival, carried out every March in Thessaloniki since its inception in 1999. Through its tributes and retrospectives, the TDF focuses on filmmakers with unique cinematic voices, internationally renowned for their contribution to the documentary genre. Its main thematic sections are: Recordings of Memory, Portraits-Human Journeys, Stories to Tell, Habitat, Music, Views of the World, Greek Panorama. The TDF has been attended by major documentary personalities of the world, including Monika Treut, Joris Ivens, Johan van der Keuken, Albert Maysles, Pirjo Honkasalo, Stefan Jarl, Kim Longinotto, Barbara Kopple, Julia Reichert & Steven Bognar, Jennifer Fox, Jon Alpert, Arto Halonen, Joe Berlinger & Bruce Sinofsky, Sergei Loznitsa, Eyal Sivan, and many others. The Festival’s side events host exhibitions, masterclasses, round table discussions, publications, concerts and parties.
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Truth is concrete #5 by Dan Perjovschi, illustrator and art director of "Revista 22", the first political magazine launched in Romania after the fall of communism. //revista22.ro
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