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Documentary Practice in the 'Post-Truth' Era

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Contents

1. Introduction

2. Narrowing of terms

2.1 What is truth?

2.2 What is 'post-truth'?

2.3 What is documentary practice?

3. Layer one: Representation of politics

3.1 Disinformation as a political tool

3.2 The seductive power of constructed narratives

4. Layer two: Politics of representation

4.1 A historical case study: Gordon Parks – The Making of an Argument

4.2 Self-claims: The promise of the documentary

4.3 Representational critique: What pictures try to tell us, what pictures try to sell us

4.4 Artistic reverberations: Fiction is given a status upgrade in the documentary field

4.5 Case study: Max Pinckers and his concept of Speculative Documentary

4.6 Deconstructing the deconstruction: Rediscovering the real

5. Self-positioning: Reflections on the practice component of this research project

6. Conclusion: Promoting the idea of visual literacy

Bibliography

Appendix / Plates

1. Introduction

‘Our conscious motivations, ideas, and beliefs are a blend of false information, biases, irrational passions, rationalizations, prejudices, in which morsels of truth swim around and give the reassurance, albeit false, that the whole mixture is real and true.’¹

I remember that in my late adolescence I had this quote by the German social psychologist Erich Fromm pasted on the wall of my bedroom at my parents’ house. Even though Fromm’s diagnosis, in the context of the respective chapter of his manifesto *To Have or To Be*, refers to a juxtaposition of specific levels of consciousness that he programmatically seeks to overcome,² the quotation nevertheless unfolds some of the fundamental concepts and questions that will be investigated in this research paper.

In order to approach a useful analysis of the topic, I will first try to frame the terms to be examined and then explore questions around the phenomenon of truth in the context of both *political communication* and *documentary practice*. Methodologically, observations, case studies and discourse analysis from and referring to *both spheres* will be used to unfold and discuss different positions. In a subsequent section, results are interwoven with the reflection of the author's own artistic strategies as expressed in the practice component of this research project.

A conclusion will balance the findings, critically evaluate their artistic and social implications and finally suggest a perspective for practical and educational activism.

2. Narrowing of terms

The expressions used in the subtitle of this study commonly describe a broad spectrum of ideas and notions. As a starting point, some origins and meanings relevant to this investigation’s perspective will therefore be defined and specified.

¹ Fromm, Erich (1976). *To Have or to Be?*. Reprint, New York: Continuum, 2008, p.80.

² In the context of the chapter *‘Being as Reality’*, Fromm sees this level of consciousness in contrast to an unconscious knowledge of reality, the knowledge of what is true, that is, as he argues, repressed and determined by society, which provides its members with various kinds of fiction and thus forces the truth to become the prisoner of the alleged rationality.

2.1 What is truth?

The concept of truth is used in various contexts and understood in different ways. Generally, the conformity of statements or judgements with a state of affairs, a fact or reality in the sense of a correct representation is referred to as truth. Of course, the respect for a certain intellectual humility requires me to not even approximately attempt any final clarification of such a fundamental question of philosophy and of life itself at this point. Nevertheless, I think it is important to pose this question at the beginning. One of the potential – and maybe fundamental – answers comes from Aristotle:

‘It is not because we are right in thinking that you are white that you are white; it is because you are white that we are right in saying so.’³

With this definition, Aristotle established a notion of truth that was taken up and further developed as ‘correspondence theory of truth’ by representatives of realism. Realism supports the thesis that there is a reality that is independent of thinking. In contrast to this are the ‘coherence theories of truth’, which see the coherence of a statement with other statements as the decisive criterion or an indication for the truth of a statement.

2.2 What is post-truth?

Subsequent to some initial sporadic appearances of the term ‘post-truth’, *Oxford Dictionaries* had seen in 2016 a spike in frequency in the context of the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential election in the United States, becoming associated overwhelmingly with a particular noun, in the phrase ‘post-truth politics’. Their committee then announced ‘post-truth’ as its international Word of the Year. According to Oxford, the compound word ‘post-truth’ can be defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.’⁴

³ Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, Book 9, section 1051b. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989

⁴ *Oxford Languages*, Oxford University Press: <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>

2.3 What is documentary practice?

In this research paper, the term ‘documentary practice’ refers to a wider scope of conceptual/ artistic and journalistic storytelling approaches and methodologies in visual media, including both photography and film. The ‘documentary’ mode as such will be referred to as a field of interest in the ‘real’ world, the world as it is – even though consciously reflecting on and questioning what our concept of reality is based on and which parameters might shape our perception.

3. Layer one: Representation of politics

This section briefly examines the use of post-truth narratives in the context of Donald Trump's election victory in 2016, the course of his term in office, and in particular his campaign strategies for the subsequent – and lost – presidential election in 2020. The underlying structures of a dichotomy of political identities within American society and the interest-driven and targeted fabricating of a strong polarisation by the Trump administration are the subject and content of the photographic and cinematic realisation within the practice component of this research project.

3.1 Disinformation as a political tool

Numerous substantial investigations by journalists and scientific research have proven that the 2016 US presidential election (as well as the UK's Brexit referendum in the same year⁵) were massively influenced by an unprecedented use of data analysis methods and large-scale individually tailored messages in social networks (micro-targeting).⁶ Elections and referendums as fundamental pillars of democratic constitutionality have been hijacked and undermined by

⁵ cf. notably British investigative journalist Carole Cadwalladr's TED-talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/carole_cadwalladr_facebook_s_role_in_brexit_and_the_threat_to_democracy (accessed 24 May 2021)

⁶ Cadwalladr, Carole. *The Cambridge Analytica Files* – ‘I made Steve Bannon's psychological warfare tool’: meet the data war whistleblower. In: [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/data-war-whistleblower-christopher-wylie-faceook-nix-bannon-trump), 18 March 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/data-war-whistleblower-christopher-wylie-faceook-nix-bannon-trump> (accessed 24 May 2021)

systematic misinformation, ‘alternative facts’⁷ or ‘manufactured consent’⁸. In addition to a biased voting result, another effect of misinformation is to elicit fear and suspicion among a population, or as Hannah Arendt puts it:

‘If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer. This is because lies, by their very nature, have to be changed, and a lying government has constantly to rewrite its own history. On the receiving end you get not only one lie—a lie which you could go on for the rest of your days—but you get a great number of lies, depending on how the political wind blows. And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please.’⁹

Correspondingly, the sphere of political communication and thus the process of democratic decision-making is being increasingly damaged by the undermining of the concept of truth. Truth becomes the bargaining chip of a public relations machine and the sovereignty over its interpretation becomes an instrument of power politics. The resulting uncertainty and destabilisation of large groups in society leads – as we have seen – to populism, social division and administrative malfunction.

3.2 The seductive power of constructed narratives

Comparable to 18th century snake oil salesmen, Donald Trump was (and still is) very good at selling false cures for the people’s hardship, plight and fears. By persistently and continuously adopting and reinforcing an ‘us-versus-them’ scheme, he continues to blame ‘the others’ for everything bad. With simplistic phrases, he unabashedly but successfully makes his supporters believe that it was the others’ fault, without having any appropriate solutions for the actual and urgent challenges.¹⁰

⁷ A phrase first used by US Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway during a Meet the Press interview on January 22, 2017, in which she defended White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's false statement about the attendance numbers of Donald Trump's inauguration as President of the United States.

⁸ The term originally derives from: Chomsky, Noam. et al., *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1988

⁹ Hannah Arendt made these comments in 1974 during an interview with the French writer Roger Errera. Cited from: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1978/10/26/hannah-arendt-from-an-interview/> (accessed 24 May 2021)

¹⁰ Among them: health care, affordable housing crisis and student debt on a domestic level, climate change and other multilateral issues on the international stage.

Through the hypocritical narrative of assigning his political opponents and their supporters either to the ‘elitist establishment’ or to ‘the radical left’, he formed a socio-political template that led to an extreme alienation of the electorate. The equally dramatic and bizarre riot on Capitol Hill (6 January 2021) was only one of the more visible indications of the disastrous consequences of a programmatic dissolution of any distinction between fact and fabrication. The myth of the ‘stolen election’, perpetuated even after the electoral defeat – the latter objectively confirmed by all relevant official institutions – is another symptom of an ominous and alarming idea of ‘alternative facts’.

4. Layer two: Politics of representation

The analytical examination of the politics of representation in the field of visual media, as originally conceived by pioneers such as the American artist and theorist Allan Sekula¹¹ or the British-Jamaican sociologist Stuart Hall¹², among others, is a perspective from which I would like to present some case studies and unfold further considerations in this section.

For Hall, representation is the way in which meaning is given to the things depicted:

‘At the heart of the meaning process in culture, then, are two related ‘systems of representation’. The first enables us to give meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between things – people, objects, events, abstract ideas, etc. – and our system of concepts, our conceptual maps. The second depends on constructing a set of correspondences between our conceptual map and a set of signs, arranged or organized into various languages which stand for or represent those concepts. The relation between ‘things’, concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call “representation”.’¹³

And as Hall explains further, a ‘gap of representation’ occurs when a ‘true meaning’ is different from its media representation.

¹¹ cf. Sekula, Allan. ‘*Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)*’, in: *The Massachusetts Review* XIX, 4 (1978), p. 859-883

¹² cf. Hall, Stuart (Ed.). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 19

4.1 A Historical case study: Gordon Parks – The making of an Argument

In 2013, the Gordon Parks Foundation collaborated with the New Orleans Museum of Art in an exhibition that explored the 1948 *Life* magazine photo-essay *Harlem Gang Leader* of the African-American photographer Gordon Parks. More precisely, in the exhibition-project that was also published as a book, curator Russel Lord traces the editorial process and parses out the various voices and motives behind the production of the picture essay. Featuring contact sheets, proof prints and the published *Life* article, it becomes clear that at earlier stages of the selection processes, Parks chose shots quite different from the ones that eventually made it into the layout. *Life* re-selected from his selection and the intended narrative was led by another curatorial voice.¹⁴ As Russel Lord states in his essay featured in the book,

‘Parks carried that approach into his work for *Life*, carefully crafting an in-depth and complete portrait of Red Jackson [the gang leader, author's note] that reflects a broad range of his emotions, anxieties, and experiences, a portrait that was truncated, reshaped, and distorted within the pages of *Life*. [...] In the same fashion, the pictures in ‘Harlem Gang Leader’ focus on the violent behavior of [the protagonist] and fellow gang members, without drawing attention to the systemic reasons behind the violence.’¹⁵

The case study can be considered an early and therefore clearer example of typical methods and practices, no different from those of many other photojournalistic or popular entertainment magazines. Each had and, assumedly, still has its own curatorial process in gathering, selecting, manipulating and recontextualising the visual information that photographers provide. However, it would certainly be too brief to locate the problem of the construction of meaning only at the level of the distribution channels of a media landscape designed for value creation.

¹⁴ cf. Fig.1 in the appendix of this document

¹⁵ Lord, Russel et al., *Gordon Parks – The making of an Argument*, Göttingen: Steidl, 2013, p.36 et seq.

4.2 Self-claims: The promise of the documentary

In many areas of the production and dissemination of photographic and filmic images, no one makes a secret of the fact that the consciously shaped image serves the targeted visual communication of particular messages. These messages can be of a mercantile nature, but also of a political, ideological or even propagandistic kind. Already during the actual artistic-technical production process, i.e. at the very moment when a photographer or cameraman makes the image, production methods and means of creation are consciously chosen in order to achieve the intended communication effect. But how does this operate – in contrast – in a more specific area, which we have described above as ‘documentary’?

The term ‘document’ itself, etymologically derives from the Latin verb *docere* (to prove, to demonstrate), and is associated as a noun in general usage with meanings such as ‘testimony’ or ‘evidence’. Accordingly, if documentary practice is to distinguish itself from other contexts of image production and reception, then it would have to show a certain testimonial or evidentiary character, i.e. there would have to be as close a connection as possible between the image and the depicted (‘the referent’). In this respect, it corresponds to the idea of ‘a witness [who] has first-hand knowledge about an event [...] and can certify in some capacity what may or may not have occurred’¹⁶ – a notion that strongly contrasts with what Stewart Hall calls a ‘gap of representation’ mentioned above (cf. sec. 4). And this is precisely where the critique of representation comes in.

4.3 Representational critique: What pictures try to tell us, what pictures try to sell us

In the context of visual cultural studies, ‘representing’ is understood as a practice in which aspects of fabricating, imagining, performing or displaying come together and which is closely entangled in relations of power and domination: ‘representing’ does not mean passively, neutrally and directly reproducing or depicting something that already exists outside of its process of representation. Rather, it is a complex of construction of meaning and reality – a formative and powerful practice conditioned by ‘framing’. Representational critique understands representations as practices of domination and addresses the misappropriated or one-sided representation of social groups or issues (e.g. race, gender or class).

¹⁶ Good, Jennifer and Lowe, Paul. *Understanding Photojournalism*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 115

Accordingly, stereotyping and obscuring are two modes of representation through which power relations can be established and consolidated. Thus, it is not only the question of what and who is represented that is important, but above all in what way, under what conditions and for what interest this happens. Representational critique emphasises the production of meaning and is directed against an unquestioned idea of images as mere depictions.¹⁷

In this way, as Kerstin Hamilton, researcher and curator of the 2021 exhibition *Dear Truth* (Hasselblad Foundation, Gothenburg), summarises aspects of preceding postmodernist critique,

‘[t]he idea of universal truth was rigorously questioned and, within photography, the documentary genre was particularly criticized. The reasons for this criticism were many, but one of particular interest [...] relates to documentary’s connections with truth and objectivity. This bond simultaneously carries the promise and the perils of documentary photography, touching upon fundamental questions concerning the photograph’s relation with reality.’¹⁸

Indeed, many previously held basic assumptions, especially in photojournalism – as a sub-genre of documentary practice – have been legitimately questioned through important findings in cultural studies research, and the conditions of ‘consumption’ of images and news ‘stories’ in a commercialised media landscape have been brought more into focus.

In her comprehensive ethnography of the labor behind international news images¹⁹, cultural anthropologist Zeynep Devrim Gürsel ruptures the self-evidence of the journalistic photograph by revealing the many factors determining how news audiences are shown people, events, and the world. News images, she argues, function as formative fictions – fictional insofar as these images are constructed and culturally mediated, and formative because their public presence and circulation have real consequences in the world. Professional image making thus becomes central to processes of *worldmaking*, a term she borrows from philosopher Nelson Goodman²⁰ who emphasises that representations contribute to the *understanding* but also the *building* of the realities in which we live.

¹⁷ cf. Hall, Stuart (Ed.). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997

¹⁸ Hamilton, Kerstin (Ed.). *Dear Truth – Documentary Strategies in Contemporary Photography*. Gothenburg: Hasselblad Foundation, 2021

¹⁹ Gürsel, Zeynep Devrim. *Image Brokers: Visualizing World News in the Age of Digital Circulation*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016

²⁰ Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Harvester Studies in Philosophy. Hassocks, UK: Harvester Press, 1978

4.4 Artistic reverberations: Fiction is given a status upgrade in the documentary field

The critical diagnoses that were formulated with regard to the potential truth value of visual representation within the discourses of cultural studies were increasingly echoed within the artistic strategies of all kinds of lens-based documentary practice. Promoted by the ‘uncertainties’ that existed as to how the relationship between fact and fiction – or authenticity and falsehood – could be adequately described, new forms of expression emerged in the most diverse areas of the production of visual narratives. In addition to the hybrid TV formats that had existed for decades, such as ‘infotainment’ or ‘soft-news’, newer genres were emerging, such as ‘docu-fiction’ or ‘faction’, which continue to develop in a broad spectrum of media contexts – from the entertainment industry to the visual arts.

Collecting contributions from and about artists who explore the boundaries between fact and fiction, Dutch art historian Nele Wynants writes in the introduction of her anthology²¹:

‘Fiction is honest in that it doesn’t claim to be telling the truth. But even if fiction belongs to the imaginative realm, that doesn’t mean that stories are inherently untrue. Perhaps stories reveal a deeper truth about the world in which we live than statistics or measurable facts. [...] [F]iction pulls us into the world of the possible, the thinkable, the speculative, which—not coincidentally—also help some sciences in formulating hypotheses and assumptions, thinking out of the box and exploring new territories.’²²

An example of such documentary practice will be examined in the next section.

4.5 Case study: Max Pinckers and his concept of Speculative Documentary

In his project *Margins of Excess*, self-published as a photo book in 2018, the Belgian photographer Max Pinckers tells the stories of six protagonists who had attracted the attention of the media and American public through hoaxes, deceptions or false reports. The book weaves together their stories through personal interviews, press articles, archival footage and staged photographs²³, with Pinckers deliberately intertwining reality and fiction in the making. As he

²¹ Wynants, Nele (ed.). *When Fact Is Fiction: Documentary Art in the Post-Truth Era* (Antennae Series, Arts in Society), Amsterdam: Valiz, 2020

²² Ibid. p. 10

²³ cf. Fig.2 in the appendix of this document

states himself,

(n)ot to fool us, but to reveal a more intricate view of our world, which takes into account the subjective and fictitious nature of the categories we use to perceive and define it.²⁴

In view of the discourses shown and described so far in this essay, this strategy appears to be a very coherent and contemporary artistic implementation in the field of documentary practice. Particularly because the cases themselves on which the work is based already carry precisely and inherently the theme, which is consistently further negotiated in the artistic conception, the epistemological reflection, and finally also in the formal realisation. Interestingly – and refreshingly – Max Pinckers manages in this, as in other of his works, to develop an impressive mastery not only in the discursive framework but also on the pictorial level of the photographs he has taken himself – which may distinguish him in this point from other protagonists in the field of current conceptual documentary photography.

For what he does, and also advocates in his work as an educator, Max Pinckers has formed and established the term ‘speculative documentary’, also to distinguish it from other terms such as ‘post-documentary’, and describes his approach as follows:

‘I think the documentary attitude, critical method, or gesture, is a way of coming to terms with reality – a way of doing, engaging and creating that embraces the multiple and mutable realities of our world. I’ve always experienced the documentary space as a hybrid one, [...] a space in which images are conscious of their own deceptive nature and have the ability to critically question themselves. The documentary should openly embrace its limitations and continuously challenge them, doubting and speculating over our mediated relationship to reality when attempting to (somewhat clumsily) represent it through images and narrative.’²⁵

Having explored the social constructivist position with interest and appreciation, I will discuss it critically in the next section.

²⁴ Max Pinckers. Photographer’s website. <http://www.maxpinckers.be/projects/margins-of-excess/> (accessed 24 May 2021)

²⁵ <https://americansuburbx.com/2018/07/max-pinckers-interview-speculative-documentary.html> (accessed 24 May 2021)

4.6 Deconstructing the deconstruction: Rediscovering the real

Looking at the discourse on questions of factuality and objectivity in the context of documentary practice, two major camps can be identified in it: the proponents of realism and those of constructivism. While the former believes that documentary forms depict natural facts, the latter understands them as social constructions. Adherents of realism believe that the documentary form truthfully reproduces what we can see with our own eyes – that is, the appearance of a reality that is as evident as it is objective. Constructivists, on the other hand, take the position, as shown above, that documentary evidence arises within a highly complex system of attributions of meaning.

German filmmaker, artist and researcher Hito Steyerl does not see this dualism, and the doubts associated with it, as a fundamental shortcoming of contemporary documentary images that must be coyly concealed, but rather as their decisive characteristic. On the way to this diagnosis, however, she first provides a very clever, useful and essential differentiation and assessment in one of her fundamental research contributions on our topic²⁶:

Both positions are problematic. While realists believe in an objectivity that, more often than not, turns out to be extremely subjective and which has nonchalantly passed off hideous propaganda as truth, constructivists end up not being able to distinguish the difference between facts and blatant misinformation or, to phrase it more directly, between truth and plain lies. While the position of realists could be called naïve, the position of constructivists runs the danger of sliding into opportunistic and cynical relativism.²⁷

To deny that images can depict reality also means to open the door to all kinds of revisionists, falsifiers of history, fact-twisters and political propagandists, in a torturous space of relativism where facts don't have any other value than outright falsehoods. And as I outlined in section 3 of this study, these are not purely theoretical considerations, but tendencies that in their effects have already led to enormous distortions on the global political stage.

As just one example, let us recall the (aerial) image of Donald Trump's inauguration on 20 January 2017, to which Trump had his spokesman Sean Spicer counterfactually claim: 'This was

²⁶ Steyerl, Hito. *Die Farbe der Wahrheit. Dokumentarismen im Kunstfeld*. (Reihe: republicart, Bd. 8). Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2008

²⁷ Quoted from: Steyerl, Hito. 'Documentary Uncertainty', in: A Prior Magazine Issue #15. Frankfurt/Main: Revolver, 2007 [English-language version authored by Steyerl herself, largely congruent with the first chapter of her German-language publication *Die Farbe der Wahrheit* from the subsequent year]

the largest audience ever to attend an inauguration’ – as evidence showed, it was not!²⁸ And it was again a photograph (of his predecessor's inauguration) that provided this evidence very graphically.²⁹

Without necessarily propagating a – sticking to Steyerl's diction – ‘naïve’ and unquestioned realism, I would yet want to ascribe a certain quality of indexical truth to the photographic image, at least and in particular, on the production level – for a reason that is as simple as it is powerful: a photograph, quite independently of any selective interpretation by the author of the image, also depicts that which actually wasn't intended to be depicted; e.g. a detail in the background that eludes conscious and immediate perception, something that thus cannot be claimed to be ‘constructed’, something whose significance may only be revealed at a later point in time than the moment of the shutter release. There are many such occurrences and possibilities in the field of observational documentary photography.³⁰

And this potential of classical non-fictional photographic practice is given surprisingly little consideration by many of its critics, who see themselves informed by constructivism.

5. Self-positioning: Reflections on the practice component of this research project

As a practice component of this study, relating to questions on both, representation of politics and politics of representation, and building on a previous conceptualisation of my project in a photography-based multimedia version, I decided to re-conceptualise and re-arrange the video-footage and photographs in a single-timeline-based documentary film narrative.

The film in a way combines what is referred to in this essay as ‘layer one’ (sec. 3) and ‘layer two’ (sec. 4). In terms of content, the film speaks about the dichotomy of political identities and the construction of a social division in the United States. Formally, on the other hand, it

²⁸ cf. Fig.3 in the appendix of this document

²⁹ The Guardian, 22 Jan 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/22/trump-inauguration-crowd-sean-spicers-claims-versus-the-evidence> (accessed 24 May 2021)

³⁰ Much could be said about what exactly these possibilities and potentials are, but this would go beyond the scope of this study, which for the sake of a concise argumentation would like to concentrate on its main topic. However, to point to an area that such a reflection could explore, reference is made to aspects of the magic of images, the magic of human encounters too, a magic of the moment inherent to the medium.

negotiates the possibilities of photographic/filmic narration and in doing so turns its external subject matter into an internal, self-referential topic: *the construction of narratives*. Thus it seeks to intertwine the political and the photographic/cinematic layer with regard to the respective modes of representation. It is an attempt to interweave and merge the ‘what’ and the ‘how’. Beyond that, it is also an exploration of photographic and cinematic means, a weighing and probing.

According to international categorisations, it is a feature-length documentary film³¹; under film theory genre terms, it is an interview film with elements of an essay film³². Within the conceptual scheme of ‘documentary modes’ as developed by American documentary theorist Bill Nichols³³, the film could be assigned to what he calls the ‘expository mode’, because a structural principle is applied that uses the *argument* as the main motive force of the plot. However, the film does not use any ‘Voice of God’ commentary to ‘explain’ something to the viewer and all spoken information is told in ‘external monologues’ of speakers whom we see in the picture or hear on the radio.

Overall, the film follows similar strategies to those I have been pursuing in my photographic work for a long time. Drawing on a deep curiosity in exploring anthropological and sociological questions, I am interested in using the means of documentary practice to develop narratives that allow for complexity rather than reduce it, and that offer the audience an opportunity to delve into a subject for themselves rather than providing them with easy answers. These means include: comprehensiveness, interweaving of narrative strands, thoughtful montage and sequencing, carefully considering formal questions of rhythm and juxtaposition, and cautiously exploring the space *between* the images; this applies to both: documentary photography *and* film. And on a more ontological level, these means for me *also* include: authenticity, honesty and an

³¹ Feature length is defined as over 40 minutes according to U.S. *Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences*. Academy Awards. Rule two (Eligibility) 2a and Rule eleven [Special rules for documentary awards] II (Categories) A; Approved by the Academy’s Board of Governors on Tuesday, 12 January 2021. c.f. https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/93aa_rules.pdf (accessed 24 May 2021). The same regulations apply for the *British Film Institute*. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/bfi-national-archive/research-bfi-archive/bfi-filmography/bfi-filmography-faq> (accessed 24 May 2021)

³² Laura Rascaroli sees the essay film as ‘a contrarian, political cinema whose argumentation engages with us in a space beyond the verbal’. cf. Rascaroli, Laura. *How the Essay Film Thinks*. Oxford University Press, 2017

³³ cf. Nichols, Bill. *Representing Reality*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991

informed and wise relationship to conceptions such as reality and truth!³⁴

The filming, editing and montage of a documentary, by their very nature, always involve a degree of construction, as with anything that is consciously conceived and the result of subjective and interpretive authorship. We know that a plot or ‘story’ arranges the facts into a narrative. And there is a fine line between such arrangement and pure invention. Nevertheless, there are two directions one can go from this line. On the one side is the realm of the documentary, on the other that of the fictional.

As this investigation has shown, there can hardly be any fixed rules for the latter, but from my personal point of view there are clear ethical, professional and artistic points of reference. In the end, within my own documentary practice all depends on well-considered and mature individual decisions and a sense of what is still ‘authentic’ in a documentary representation and what is no longer, i.e. to what extent I seek to approximately ‘depict’ reality, or interpret it, or even shape it moderately. However, to re-create it completely as fiction would personally not occur to me. From my perspective, the sphere we call reality is too multifaceted and exciting for that – and actually already holds all the great themes of humanity.

³⁴ Interestingly, there seems to be far more specific and elaborate research on this in the field of documentary film studies than is the case in the neighbouring field of documentary photography – at least as far as the critical analysis of fundamental decision-making processes at the *production level* of documentary lens-based work is concerned. The corresponding discourses on questions of subjective interpretation of ‘reality’ seem to have been conducted here historically much earlier and more sustained. The Swiss media theorist Christian Iseli has written a very interesting essay on this (German language only). cf. Iseli, Christian. ‘Strategien der filmischen Umsetzung’. In: Institute for the Performing Arts and Film (Ed.). *Wirklich? – Strategien der Authentizität im aktuellen Dokumentarfilm*. Zürich: Zürcher Hochschule der Künste [hdk], 2009

6. Conclusion: Promoting the idea of visual literacy

In the course of this investigation, we have been able to see why in the sphere of political communication – especially in times disturbingly described with the term ‘Post-Truth Era’ – it is not a good idea to deny concepts of facticity and truth altogether.

And we have also been able to see that, similarly, in the field of documentary practice there are good reasons not to dissolve completely the concept of reality in favour of a constructivist dogma.

In all this entanglement of postmodern ideologies with the ‘older’ ideologies of maintenance of power, utility maximisation and oppression, it may not be entirely wrong to proclaim what the *New York Times* has taken to heart as the slogan of its current brand campaign: ‘*Truth is more important now than ever*’³⁵. Of course, the solution in politics cannot be to put into power some kind of gatekeepers of truth, but must be to increase the reputational consequences and change the incentives for making false statements.

In reference to artistic endeavours that do not want to be restricted by what are perceived as too narrow boundaries of the documentary, I find it useful to recall the following: it does exist, the form and genre of *fiction*³⁶ that is freed from all perceived constraints of reality. And anyone can enter it, give free rein to their fantasies, and give the imagination its best possible expression – but perhaps not without labelling it accordingly and thereby addressing the audience with honesty and respect.³⁷

Looking ahead, I would again like to address the social implications of our topic and open up a perspective of activism.

In all the areas that operate with images – political communication, media reporting, entertainment, TV, cinema, art, etc. – and on all the channels through which such processes of information exchange take place, there are *senders* (sources) and *receivers*. And there are *signs* by means of which this information is transmitted. In the case of images, these signs are usually of a more complex nature, often suggestive and always ambiguous. Thus, the ability to ‘write’

³⁵ Originally launched in 2017 as: ‘The Truth is hard’

³⁶ In literature, in cinema, and in the future perhaps increasingly as an emerging genre in the field of photographic storytelling (beyond fashion and advertising, which have been using this genre since the early days of photography);

³⁷ The case of documentary filmmaker Elke Lehrenkrauss was the subject of much controversy in Germany in the spring of 2021 because she passed off her film ‘Lovemobil’ about prostitutes on the German-Czech border as a documentary work, received public funding and numerous prizes at festivals for it, but in fact - as it turned out - had staged a large part of the film with actors.

and read these signs and codes becomes, on the one hand, a tool of manipulation, but on the other hand, also a central competence of individual autonomy and collective freedom in an enlightened society and – if things go well – of a democratically constituted polity. I would like to call this ability *visual literacy*.

In addition to the classic instances of visual communication processes (publishing houses, newspapers, picture agencies, film distributors, art galleries, etc.), in almost all parts of the world today it is above all the social networks that provide, shape and to a large extent also control these channels. Basically, however, in such networks (in contrast to the ‘classic instances’ mentioned above) every participant can become a sender or a receiver. In this context, the German media scientist Bernhard Pörksen³⁸ therefore speaks of an ‘editorial society’ [‘redaktionelle Gesellschaft’]³⁹.

Visual literacy is thus not only an aesthetic virtue, but an essential cultural technique, in a positive sense also an elementary means of emancipatory self-assertion. The power of images, especially in a world of algorithmically controlled machine intelligence and visual overload, is a paradigm of our time – a time we inattentively and conformistically call ‘post-truth’ era.

Visual storytelling – as a conditioning counterpart of visual literacy – is a method that, apart from its use in the advertising industry and in cinema, has its widest sphere of operation and its most important manifestation precisely and especially in the field of documentary practice.

In my view, it is important and highly relevant for society as a whole to promote and further develop the concept of visual literacy. In order to counteract an erosion and undermining of factuality and truth and to make misinformation and manipulation conscious, we can make our contribution in the field of documentary practice – in one way or another – to hold necessary discourses, to epitomise them in our own work and, moreover, to communicate them actively.

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³⁸ Prof. Dr. Bernhard Pörksen is full professor for Media Science at Universität Tübingen, Germany

³⁹ cf. Pörksen, Bernhard. *Die große Gereiztheit. Wege aus der kollektiven Erregung*. München: Hanser-Verlag, 2018

In this book, Pörksen analyses the agitation patterns of the digital age and the business of disinformation and shows how the interplay of old and new media changes the character of debates, our idea of truth and authority.

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Appendix / Plates



Fig.1 Gordon Parks, 'Untitled, Harlem, New York' 1948.

Gelatin silver print. Courtesy The Gordon Parks Foundation.

The markings on the photo show how it was to be cropped for publication.



Fig.2 Max Pinckers, Representation of Jay J. Armes
From 'Margins of Excess', 2018



Fig.3 Inaugurations on the National Mall in Washington: Donald Trump on 20 January 2017 (l.), Barack Obama (r.) on 20 January 2009; Source: Der Spiegel / Reuters

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