



Cahier #2

A Magical Imitation of Reality

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H S Hito Steyerl
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H S Harun, you once stated that “the only way to distinguish a documentary film director from any other kind of director—of feature films, for instance—is that the feature film director can buy a private swimming pool, and the documentary maker cannot.”

H F Though Michael Moore has most likely got one, if not several.
In Turkey recently, a woman told me she sat on a board for the regulation of commercial broadcasters. They show too many commercials or frequently violate the code by showing women with plunging necklines or couples kissing. Instead of imposing the usual fines, it was mooted that they might be forced to screen documentary films. Documentaries as a punishment! I immediately wanted to offer mine as the highest penalty available. Commercial channels don’t like anything with the label “documentary film.” But the documentary style is by no means alien to them. All those typical TV formats—game, chat, and reality TV shows—are cheaper to produce than the cheapest feature film. And there must be something that appeals to the viewers in all of this—a taste for reality.

H S Yes, I got the idea that reality TV shows are very documentary as a format, not in terms of what they

show, in that they don't show life as it really is, but in terms of giving a true impression of the circumstances in which they are produced and the reality of a competitive society, which is all about elimination and survival of the fittest and so on... These reality TV shows are full of great documentary images—not because they have something to do with actual reality, but because they offer allegories of a kind of neoliberal natural state of being. The author Mark Fisher recently summarized this perfectly when he called reality TV the flagship product of “capitalist realism.” Capitalist realism expresses the impossibility of imagining a system different to what we have now; it describes a condition in which capitalism seems to be the only plausible system and therefore inevitable. What is more, capitalist realism is an echo of socialist realism with its bland, naturalist, reduced version of reality. Where once we had an overdone genre which involved brawny farmers and workers marching into a bright future, today an equally artificial, kitsch representation of the working classes is used to demonstrate the inevitability of a harsh culture of competition where everyone fights everyone else... It's really not to be confused with reality! But what you have just touched on is a much bigger subject, namely the transformation the whole documentary industry has been undergoing over the last twenty or thirty years. I think you are someone who experienced these changes first hand; by the time I arrived on the scene, it had all already happened. Perhaps

you could say a bit more about this development.

H F

Helmut Färber once made a very accurate observation: good texts are only published because the system is too sloppy to ban them. Publicly-owned television was particularly obliging in terms of its negligence. There was a vast regulatory apparatus: before you could shoot a take, you had to fill out an entire file full of forms. But the system was never quite able to find out what kind of film would be produced from the shots. In the early 1970s, some like-minded friends and I used to fantasize about shooting an entire film under a false production number that no one had authorized.

In the early 1970s I was lucky to get commissions in a department whose boss was so wrapped up in his own career machinations that he had to let his assistant step in, and she was busy with building up with a political project outside TV—so I got some agency. Werner Dütsch, who worked in the cinema department at WDR (West German Television), was subversive. He managed to get a two-hour program slot. In the first ninety minutes, he showed a Western by John Ford and in the final thirty minutes, he ran something either by or about Straub/Huillet. At meetings for the station, he presented the high viewing figures from the Ford film, but made it look as though these included the figures for the Straub/Huillet.

It was also possible for a man like Klaus Wildenhahn to have a permanent position with NDR

(North German Television), where he made *cinéma vérité* films for decades. A kind of institutionalized subversion.

In Baden-Baden at South-West Television, Ebbo Demant achieved something unique: he assembled a group of around fifty filmmakers—some were young and had come straight out of film school—and took me on as part of this circle in the late 1980s. We all met every two years to view and discuss our work. Not everything appealed to me. There was a certain tone I particularly disliked—the idolization of anything thought to be unusual or sophisticated.

In the 1990s, I got commissions from some four or five producers and turned out one or two productions a year.

There's a game that gets played at children's birthday parties, where you dip into a jar and pull out five words and have to make a sentence out of them. That's roughly how it works with television. When making films, you have to be ready to create something meaningful from a random sequence of images. You arrive on a Monday morning at, say, a dentist's office or a nuclear power station, and what you manage to shoot has to be worked into a film. Even when nothing you hoped or expected might happen actually does. That's just the way television works: you have to compensate whenever there's a lack of material and iron out any flaws. A man like Chris Marker can furthermore manage to turn what is a random selection of material into the virtuosic performance that is his film *Sans Soleil*.

The 1990s were a good time for documentary film. Money was tight and lots of producers realized that a documentary cost a tenth the amount of a feature film to produce. And the channel “Arte” had also been launched. At the time, it seemed that there were more opportunities for making films than there were people with the know-how to make them. To put it simply: there was more money than talent. In my own work, I have often not really registered important developments—the great de-industrialization, for instance. And it also passed me by just how quickly publicly-owned television was changing around the turn of the millennium. In 1997, I was working on a documentary about privately-owned television companies (*Worte und Spiele* [*Words and Games*], 1998); I had a bigger budget than ever before. The first broadcasting was scheduled for half-past midnight on NDR III. That was already enough to tell me what the channel’s management thought of my work. A couple of years later, I wanted to make something about a venture capital firm. In the program synopsis, I promised to show real business transactions. A broadcasting house I had already worked for for fifteen years, the one in Baden-Baden, didn’t question the feasibility of my claim: it was simply dismissed as uninteresting. Business transactions have been far less commonly filmed than birth, sex, or death scenes. So I called them and asked: if you don’t find that interesting, then what should I be suggesting? What sorts of films do you consider viable? They gave

me an example: parents who adopt. You should film the moment when parents make contact with the child for the first time, they suggested. So love between a parent and child is interesting and lust for money is not? (I went on to establish that this wasn't the real issue, however. It had more to do with the fact that my last film on Channel One had only achieved a 5% viewing rate.)

Nowadays, there is only one broadcaster who will let me do work for her. The television climate has changed. Television was once made by people comparable to those who are behind the newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* or the magazine *Der Spiegel*. Today's TV producers and directors are like those working for the tabloid-style *Focus* and *Bild*.

H S This all alludes to a cultural shift. I wonder if you could comment on this from another angle. I think what is happening in television is exactly what everyone always thought would happen to the state under communism...

H F —it withers away.

H S Yes, exactly. Television will simply wither away. I was really surprised when my students told me they just don't watch TV anymore. They're not interested. It's turned into a populist medium, probably still watched by a certain percentage of the population but losing out overall.

- H F Television has lost out to modernization.
- H S Yes, it has lost out in the modernization process—which is partly due to the fact that it underestimated its audience. People are not as stupid as television thinks, and they are simply abandoning ship. Television has behaved in exactly the same way as the cynical socialist bureaucrat described by Slavoj Žižek. Though the bureaucrat himself may no longer believe in socialism, the masses should kindly go on believing. The same goes for 1990s television broadcasters. They no longer believe in the rubbish they're producing, but continue to think they can prescribe it to the masses. But the masses are not so daft. They are turning to YouTube and Vimeo to watch everything that television no longer offers. And they are becoming producers and broadcasters in their own right. That is why I'm thoroughly convinced we should simply let television wither away. There is no point continuing to get involved; it is better simply to leave it to its inevitable fate.
- H F Indeed, though as Mao says, "About everything reactionary, it must be said that if you don't hit it, it won't fall."
- H S I've just made a new film in which I smash a TV set. That's one way to begin. For a start, you can just lash out.

H F Television has never been much loved. It was needed—many people couldn't live without it—a bit like a husband who still needs his wife even if he doesn't love her. In any case, it's not a romantic relationship. You can imagine someone being romantically, even passionately in love with cinema, but not with television. But then all of a sudden, close to its end, television managed to produce certain cult series like *The Sopranos* or *The Wire*. I don't know the figures, but I do know people who buy these series on DVD rather than watching them on TV.

I suppose I feel sorry for television. It won't be long before we're all making calls for free over the Internet and then the phone companies will go bust. I'm not so bothered about them, but somehow I am about television.

H S I don't feel sorry about TV. I think it's just as wrong to suggest that television expresses the fantasies of the proletariat as to think that the proletariat is by definition populist and racist. Rancière pointed this out recently in a great article ("Racism: A Passion from Above"). It is always maintained that the "populace" is inherently against immigration and that we should respect its quasi-natural fantasies as something entirely inevitable. That is the argument used by populist governments across Europe, and they pursue their politics accordingly. Rancière is quite right in noting that these "fantasies" are in fact the fabrication of populist politics. It's the

same with television. The public isn't stupid—it's just made out to be so. Program-makers invariably don't belong to the section of the population their programs are targeting. They are cynical Miles-and-More-style bureaucrats. That's why people are leaving television and moving over to cheaper forms of distribution like the Internet. There is what you might call a *Lumpenproletariat* of the visual media. Such a thing does exist. Actually, I think it's far better to think in terms of a *Lumpenproletariat* of distribution.

H F YouTube doesn't just appeal to the masses, though—it's also chic, in the camp sense of the word. Smart people like it because it's a bit silly.

H S These days, film history happens on YouTube, not on television and not—more dramatically still—in the cinema. Cinemas are screening 3-D children's blockbusters or product-placement flics for sky-diver wristwatches. Film history has all but disappeared from cinema. It has migrated to the realm of Internet downloads.

H F I find the picture quality on YouTube pretty bad. Another generation and it might be good enough.

H S Don't worry; that will happen. We'll have to pay for it, though. But there's a massive difference between YouTube quality and nothing at all. What's more, I think we're now savvy enough to see beyond the

problem of bad resolution. Of course, we don't know what the film would look like in 35 millimeter, but we get a reasonable idea. Enough to analyze its composition and structure. It may be rubbish as far as visual quality goes, but at least it's educational rubbish. A jpeg doesn't cater to excessive special effects. As such, it already looks something like structural film. In the nineteenth century, people had to accept that there was now photography as a medium of artistic expression and not just oil painting. That you didn't need to spend ten years slaving away as an apprentice mixing paints for some master in order to be able capture something—there was another way. That's what it's like now with mobile phone images online. New technologies are emerging. I love it.

H F I can get excited about it, too, when I think that DVDs, and VHS videos before them, have made great films more widely available—films from all eras and far-flung countries. Even if you went to the best cinemas every day, you wouldn't get to see all this.

H S And you can even download them. All that data is probably only three mouse-clicks away.

H F Klaus Theweleit wrote about how all of a sudden, in 1968, there were great films being played on television—specifically, on the film archive program, which ran on Channel Three of the publicly-owned television in the FRG. He thought the films

were being shown to get students off the streets. At times like those, television served as a kind of community college for further education.

H S If only that were the case, but television isn't an FE college any more. It's just an instrument for market research. Advert breaks punctuated with propaganda. The most you can hope to learn about on TV is a bit of biology. (Laughs)

H F You're quite right. (Both laugh...)

H S An FE college for biology and zoology.

H F Yes, zoology... And cookery...

H S ...Cookery, exactly. Basically, TV covers anything biological, especially propagation and genetics. But apart from that, television can't really be compared to a college anymore.

H F Indeed! And now one might ask why so much of documentary filmmaking, which has been driven from television, has migrated to the world of art. It was, after all, an art magazine which approached us and asked us to hold this discussion. Why is documentary been taken up by the art world? Both of us make our films with funding for art, with money from film festivals or themed exhibitions. Most likely, it's that documentary films give art licence to claim real-world relevance.

- H S You mean something along the lines of mimesis? Like a real urinal in the White Cube.
- H F Yes, of course, the documentary film is a magical imitation of reality. And what's more, it's something that has been found, not made. As with an *objet trouvé*: there are millions of pebbles lying on a beach and one of them looks like it has a face. Pippi Longstocking always claimed to be a professional finder of things. "Don't search, find!" says Godard. The renunciation of authorship masks a hidden cult of the author: he who finds knows how to judge and is therefore the true author. There is a long tradition of this in modernism. The role of the curator or DJ or film programmer has been much celebrated in recent times.
- H S Do you not also get the feeling that there is something else going on here? In contrast to the conditions of production you have been describing, which have a lot to do with national media policies, the link of documentary modes to art is essentially an international phenomenon and within this context, documentary has often mistakenly assumed the identity of a universal language.
- H F Let's just say that if a film had been made a hundred years ago in Ghana, it would probably have looked quite different than one made in Paris. Nowadays, it's impossible to imagine a different kind of cinematography. Different kinds of films, yes—a film from

Conakry will be unlike all the others, and films can show very different ways of life, sure—but not a different kind of cinematography.

H S Yes, that's exactly what I wanted to go on to say: the language of film is inherently more universal than the language of other art forms. If you look at contemporary art from the 1990s, even from China—and this is actually relatively easy to understand since China's art industry at that time was in part or wholly aimed at the Western market—there is still the sense that something has been lost in translation. This doesn't appear to apply in the case of the various languages of film.

H F But people still want to have a sense of the foreign element—to see that the art is meant to be Chinese.

H S Of course. What I'm saying is meant to identify film's specificity in relation to other traditional media, which work from the basis of specific histories of art with historical references to national traditions. The history of film is relatively young, and characterized from the outset by a process of transfer. I was reminded yesterday how Sergio Leone stole elements from Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*. Kurosawa had himself borrowed from Dashiell Hammet, who in turn had borrowed from Charlie Chaplin. Even Ozu—who is widely considered to be the most Japanese of film directors—took his models straight from Hollywood. In reality, he is McDon-

alds through and through. The West loves him because he has created a spruced-up, slo-mo, artisan version of the patriarchy. So in this respect, there has always been an element of transfer in the history of film, which perhaps hasn't been the case for art forms with thousand-year histories.

H F But what about the twentieth century? Pop art from America can be traced back to Duchamp. If you go to art school in Braunschweig today, is it significant that Germany did not have a Renaissance? That Riemenschneider wasn't in Italy?

I am inclined to think that documentaries and the moving image in general feel at home in the world of art because they get judged differently there. And visual artists themselves are often more than keen to get behind a camera, since this is a way for them to escape a thousand years of tradition, as you put it.

If an artist paints a picture, all you will hear is that something similar has already been done by such and such a painter or school. Make a film, however, and it's very rare to hear someone say: that's already been done by Pennebaker or in the 27th John Ford movie—at least not from someone within the art world. I must laugh sometimes at the fact that you can make it in art with a film that would just crack people up in the movie business. Many films in this context actually look more like television!

H S Yes, that's often true. And in this sense, the cul-

tural shift is regrettable. On the other hand, it does away with excessive fetishization—something that is completely redundant, in the field of documentary filmmaking, too. Hallowed traditions concerning whether there should be commentary or not, whether the camera should be allowed to move or not, whether one should use fixed calibration and shoot everything in 35 mm, even though virtually no one was able to afford the film stock... What a load of elitist nonsense!

H F The stationary camera... Where was that a dogma?

H S In ethnographic documentaries. And it had to be positioned no more than 7 meters away and used exclusively with this particular lens—otherwise it was not considered authentic enough and the “culture” couldn’t be correctly represented.

H F Right, yes, I had completely forgotten the whole debate about tracking shots! I can elaborate. There are a large number of texts warning of the dangers of *cinéma vérité*. That something isn’t true just because it has no commentary. That every cut is already a construction. Far more texts about *direct cinema* than *direct cinema* films.
Back to Ozu: Perhaps we can say that if we as filmmakers do not debate whether or not Ozu is an artisan patriarch—and I don’t think he is—then this debate will take place in another forum (the art world, for instance).

- H S Yes, although contrary to this history, of course, there is that naive kind of enthusiasm in the art world for documentary as the embodiment of reality. At last, a fusion of art and life! And then it still ends up looking like Guido Knopp or the History Channel. (Laughs)
- H F Yes, exactly. Television documentaries have become formulaic, something that isn't necessarily lost in the transition from television to art world. For this reason alone, I am a devotee of *cinéma vérité*. It doesn't allow you to shoot in series; it doesn't allow you to anticipate when something will happen that looks like a story. One exception is the maternity unit: here there is something with all the qualities of a story occurring every day, and this has already been much exploited by docu-soaps. We're back to biology again!
- H S Yes, alright. But you, too, have sought out narrative situations in your "*cinéma vérité*" films, such as in *Nicht ohne Risiko* (*Nothing Ventured*, 2005), where it was fairly likely that some kind of drama would unfold because the situation made it such.
- H F Yes, of course. But before we could film a sequence of events that seemed to play out its own story, we had already attempted to capture something like it in fourteen other locations. In one instance, we filmed an inventor who wanted to sell

something that only a computer expert would have been able to follow, and on another occasion, we shot a conversation between investors and entrepreneurs, which turned out to be utterly boring because it wasn't clear enough what the mutual and opposing interests were. Another time, we started filming something we couldn't pursue for reasons of banking confidentiality.

H S What was your experience with *Immersion*? Did you also film far more than we saw on screen for that project?

H F We flew to Seattle, Washington, where we shot for two days—as long as the seminar ran—and then only spent one more day in the States. We recorded lots of material, but hardly any of it was fit for use. The computers that were supposed to show images intended to assist with the recall of a traumatic war experience often didn't work. And the Air Force psychologists were thoroughly uninspired—they just rattled through their scripted role-play. But the psychologist who was not working for the Air Force (but rather trying to sell something to it) was a different kettle of fish entirely. He plays the role of a traumatized patient so well that nearly anyone watching would think he must have actually experienced what he is talking about. As if something can only be true if one has experienced it first hand! Nearly everything fit for release is in that twenty-minute montage. Normally, I am forced to make difficult decisions, but not here.

H S In a number of your works, but especially in some of your more recent films, it strikes me that the conditions of exhibitions in the art world seem to influence their form. I have noticed in particular that there has been a return to silent film. Could you say something about this? I find it fascinating.

H F It was fifteen years ago that I first made something specifically intended for an exhibition. It took me a long time to realize that exhibitions gave me a freedom because entirely different kinds of perception are possible in the context of art. I made something (*Übertragung/Transmission*, 2007) which was screened at a tram stop in Zurich for a whole year. You had to wait either 2 or 20 minutes at this stop. So I compiled a montage, which gets repeated twice with variations. It is intended to make passengers think they already know it and then notice that it isn't always quite the same. Only two homeless people whom I once saw sitting on a bench in front of the screen knew the whole video. I noticed that this was the case when they shouted something at one of the protagonists. But now, to the question of silent film: do you know why I am going back to making silent films?

H S Well, it seems logical, given it is impossible to hear a thing in art exhibition spaces. If you can hear anything at all, it's normally so unclear as to make it completely incomprehensible.

- H F That's a very good point—I hadn't thought of it like that! In television, silent films were always shown with music or even sound effects. Apparently, this was because otherwise viewers might think there was something wrong with their TV set. I have made a film (*Aufschub/Respite*, 2007) from material that was recorded in 1944 in the Westerbork concentration camp in the Netherlands. It was recorded without sound, and I didn't know what to put with the images that would have similar documentary value. I didn't use any commentary either, only captions. Commentary all too easily sounds like reassurance. Silent film can have a strong impact in the movie theater. Enforced silence has an oppressive effect. It is possible to hear reactions from the audience that would otherwise have been lost behind the film score and sound effects. Inge Classen from 3-Sat once told me that no one had ever shown a film without sound on her channel—with the exception of *Un chant d'amour* by Jean Genet. She then proceeded to show *Respite* without sound.
- H S Your work on Griffith is also silent, and you probably have other silent films, too. I know *Transmission* isn't a silent film, but it is easy to imagine how the sound would just disappear with it being shown at a tram stop.
- H F You're quite right. I hadn't really taken in that it has something to do with where a film is being shown.

Even when headphones are offered, many viewers don't make use of them.

H S That's right. What about this issue of conceptualization you are describing with *Transmission*—the fact that viewers should be put in a position where, so to speak, they only have one or two glances in which to work out what a film is all about? The loss of narrative. The kind of documentary idealism that, as Alex Alberro has shown to be the case with conceptual art, can be traced back to public relations strategies. To my mind, it also comes down to conditions in the exhibition space. You have to grab people's attention as quickly as possible and somehow cajole them into investing some of their time; visitors to exhibitions really do seem to have a tight time-budget. They have to be put in a position to grasp the whole setup in a single glance.

H F I think you can challenge the visitors of art spaces more easily than movie audiences. Cinema follows far stronger fixed codes and spectators feel entitled to get something they expected, whereas art spectators are prepared to find out which code might be at work.

H S And in terms of the duration of a film, you could say that exhibition spaces tend to demand something shorter. An inclination towards serial and conceptual forms, rather than essayistic and narrative modes.

- H F I have just finished three works, all of which are less than 8 minutes long.
- H S In spite of all the changes over the last twenty years, there are themes that recur throughout your work. These might be summarized in terms of the categories of work, war, and image. I know that's a very crude summary. Nonetheless, if I take just one of these strands, it strikes me how, in your *Das Silber und das Kreuz* (*The Silver and the Cross*) for instance—which features an eighteenth-century painting of a silver mine in Bolivia—it strikes me how motifs keep cropping up that can be found throughout your work. Reading images, reading to the end of images, skimming images... *Das Silber und das Kreuz* is a particularly interesting example, since it is all about investigating an image—a panel painting—in connection with the living conditions of the workers it depicts. I found myself once again strongly reminded of that introductory chapter in Peter Weiss's *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, which explores the way the Pergamon frieze was used in class struggles. It really is interesting that there are some themes you keep returning to, regardless of the conditions in which you are filming.
- H F Hopefully this won't sound too banal: it has to do with the fact that, of course, documentary film makers don't have a field of expertise or knowledge. Therefore they must repeat themselves—only in repetition can some knowledge be accumulated.

Private detectives also try to specialize; they try to be experts in forensic details or in coital theft (a term I only know from a Kluge film.)

H S It is interesting that you should mention forensics, because it seems to me that there are strong similarities between forensics and documentary filmmaking, not just because both involve a science of trying to read objects, decoding their language and giving voice to things, but also because the very word “forensics” is derived from “forum speech”—something I recently learnt from Eyal Weizman—which is the particular kind of rhetoric used by people speaking in a forum. On the one hand, forensics is all about the objects themselves and reading for patterns in order to reconstruct events, but on the other hand, there is a strong link to rhetoric, a rhetoric used to make the objects’ voices heard in public, but also to speak on behalf of them. The forensic scientist is, in a manner of speaking, a kind of ventriloquist.

H F Just like the term “forensic medicine”: medicine carried out in a forum, or in other words “at the bar.” Is that the reason it’s called that?

H S It was already called that in the past. It’s a real expression that was used in Roman times, I think.

H F Now that is interesting! I had no idea. Perhaps that’s a wonderful place to end.