03 2009

Truth Unmade

Productivism and Factography

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Verum esse ipsum factum ("truth itself is fact" or "the truth itself is made")
Giambattista Vico, De Italorum Sapientia, 1710

A fact is something which is made. In our times, this seems like an obvious statement. Giambattista Vico already phrased it in 1710: *Verum esse ipsum factum*, or shorter: *verum factum*. This means that truth is something which is produced and constructed. Vico's statement also condenses contemporary views on the question of documentary: documentary truth claims are seen as constructed and essentially made up. Documentary truth is considered as a product combining power and knowledge.

But actually hardly anybody believes in this product. The distrust of this instrumental type of documentary truth has meanwhile become a habit. People are well aware of the instrumental truths disseminated by institutions and corporations. But this distrust paradoxically does not affect the documentary's power. People are affected by the velocity and intensity of news media, they are informed, interpellated, instructed, governed. Their "resonant

body"[1] as Suely Rolnik puts it, that is the sphere of bodily affect, is targeted, excited, appeased, mobilised, activated as well as passivated. Media realisms engage in the desire for participation in the world; they create sensation as spectacle. To underpin their truth claims, they draw on scientific, legal or journalistic technologies of truth, which are now also strongly augmented by a politics of spectacle, speed and intensity. Doubt in the truth value of these realisms is meanwhile embedded in their construction. A habitual anxiety is thus produced, which centers around the question of truth and manipulation. Disbelief and uncertainty characterise this double-bind[2]. But in all of this uncertainty, there is something few people doubt: the production of facts itself, their manufacturing and construction.

But why believe in the production of truth in the first place? Why think of truth as a product, a ready-made or commodity? Which assumptions are grounding the belief in the concept of production itself? Perhaps the answer lies in a reversal of Vico's slogan. Instead of *verum factum*, lets think about *factum verum*, or *factum esse ipsum verum*. We could translate it like this: The things which are *made* are true. Or even: Truth lies in production. The things which are made or the making itself provides or produces truth.

Now, the focus shifts to the process of production itself. Production is the situation, in which documentary truth can be generated and harvested for different pedagogical and governmental purposes. And paradoxically hardly anyone doubts the truth value of production itself.

But isn't there ample reason to be suspicious of a paradigm of production?

Critique of Production

The critique of labour and the figure of the producer is articulated differently by Hannah Arendt and Jean-Luc Nancy. While Arendt is dismissive of the unpolitical nature of labour (as opposed to politics)[3], Nancy accuses the fixation on labour as the reason for the failure to realise communism[4]. To center on production means for him to subscribe to norms of productivity, of usefulness, of identity. Community cannot be produced he claims, community does not exist either, it happens. Wouldn't it be equally justified to think of laziness, excess or geometry as paradigmatic figures grounding or ungrounding our implicit understandings of truth? What does it thus mean to base truth (or indeed any creation of meaning) on production?

I would like discuss this question as well as the relation of the principles of "verum factum" and "factum verum" by reflecting on two visual examples.

Ironically, both examples have been created by one and the same director, namely Chris Marker, and both make use of the same material, an interview with the Soviet filmmaker Aleksandr Medvedkin, filmed in 1971. It centres on his time as a productivist filmmaker in the early 30s. Both films deal with the relation of documentary and production, although in very different ways. One could be described as more productivist and the other as more factographic. While factography revolves around the production of facts and sees art works as factories of facts, productivism sites the field of its intervention within production itself and aims at its transformation. Productivism is (or was supposed to be) involved in creating reality. If factography is related to the principle of *verum*

factum, productivism could be related to *factum verum*: the making itself is the realm of true meaning.

The first example, *Le Train en Marche* (1971), is interested in alternative models of film production, while the second, *The Last Bolshevik* (1993), constructs its propositions in a much more complex and essayistic way: it questions the manufacturing of facts. One grounds truth in production, while the other produces (and constructs) truth. But at the end of this process, something very different emerges, which opens up a different dimension.

Le Train en Marche

In the early 30s, Soviet film director Aleksandr Medvedkin was director of the so-called cine train, a moving film studio and lab. The train would travel to different sites of production, like mines, factories and kolkhozy, and film the workers' practices in order to immediately develop and edit the footage and discuss them on the spot with the protagonists. The cinetrain was a good example of productivist art practices: two years later, Walter Benjamin would describe those practices as trying to change the system of production instead of just displaying a politically correct tendency[5]. Medvedkin's cinetrain did attempt just that. Yet, how much the cinetrain really achieved in relation to its objective is debatable. The film reels were never distributed. Whether they were ever even seen except in the location of their production is not related in any of Marker's films.

But in 1971 Marker and his colleagues were so inspired by Medvedkin's practice, that they founded a film collective called SLON and went to the factories to document the workers' struggles. After strikes at the Rhodia factory at Besançon, a

workers' filmmaker group named "Group Medvedkin" was created as well. *Le Train en Marche* was filmed to be screened as an introduction to Medvedkin's movie *Happiness*, which SLON helped to redistribute. Marker prefers not to show it in public anymore.

More than half of the film consists of the interview with Medvedkin intercut with illustrative archival material, and its main purpose seems to be the production of counter-information and inspiration for the new film collectives of the period. The information given by the firsthand witness is treated as fact, we are made to entirely rely on Medvedkin's buoyant account of his activities. In terms of its politics of truth, *Le train en Marche* relies almost entirely on its value as realist evidence. Words like useful and necessary abound in Medvedkin's description of the cine train. Cinema is clearly seen as a means to an end, and this also largely applies to *Le Train en Marche*. The end is to improve production and to facilitate alternative film production.

Yet the matter becomes much more complicated 21 years later, when Marker directs another film dedicated to Medvedkin called *Le Tombeau d´Alexandre* or *The Last Bolshevik* (1993). The changes in political context could not be more dramatic: while the first film is made with the slightly forced optimism of people for whom the revolution seems to be within reach, the second film is made after the demise of real existing socialism. And it takes up the same material in a very different way, both in terms of message and above all form.

In "Letter 3" of the film, Medvedkin's interview recorded in 1971 is strongly contextualised, reflected, even criticised. A considerable amount of supporting or conflicting material is provided: interviews with archivists and film scholars as well as Medvedkin's daughter. But most importantly the productivist film reels

themselves are retrieved from the archive and Marker subjects them to a close reading. A few different reels emerge (one of which is not made by Medvedkin in the first place). They are set in a locomotive factory, a mine, and in a kolkhoz[6].

By repeating and slowing down parts of these reels, Marker sees elements he might have preferred not to see back in 1971. For example, the treatment of a Kulak, condemned to death for stealing from the cooperative. In the complex montages of *The Last Bolshevik*, productivist practices of the early 30s are not set outside of their political context – rising repression and the first instances of the purging of purported class enemies. But Marker also shows us discussions with workers in the factories. He highlights the depressing settings of a working environment characterised by bureaucracy and neglect, by idle talk of committees and the destitute situation of the people.

Paradoxically, it is only within the essayistic treatment of the previous interview, only within its deconstruction, dismantling, and re-editing that the original material emerges (and is able to). And only then can we see for ourselves what Medvedkin was talking about so vividly in the 70s.

In Marker's second film, the whole enterprise of productivist filmmaking acquires a much more ambiguous character. The picture becomes much more ambivalent. The productivist enterprise is portrayed as being implicated at least partly in oppressive politics. Apart from that, the question is raised about how much it could have accomplished within an economy firmly steered from above. How could a reform within individual factories have taken place, when key resources were both centralised and wasted by neglect?

The optimistic portrait from the 70s is thus replaced by a much more sceptical and cautious one. At least partly, this more ambiguous picture seems to be mediated by the different form of the film. The film is clearly an essay film, which combines different materials according to a subjective point of view; according to Maria Muhle's description, it does so in terms of an aesthetic realism[7]. No unspoken claims to veracity and objectivity are underlying this version of documentary articulation. The constructedness of Marker's proposition is evident. The second version of Marker's interview with Medvedkin thus seems to correspond much more to factographic techniques than to productivist ones. *Verum factum*, or truth is constructed and made – this seems to be the underlying principle of Marker's second filmic argument. Obviously, in this version the fact or filmic truth is being made within montage. *The Last Bolshevik* does not locate the truth in the factory, but positions itself as a factory of truth.

Actually, this is the defining difference between the two versions of the Medvedkin interview. While in the first one the truth lies in the factory, the second one functions as a factory of truth. The truth is manufactured, made, produced, while in the productivist paradigm production is the real, where meaning is created.

On the one hand *verum ipsum esse factum*. On the other *factum ipsum esse verum* – or the truth resides in production.

Rupture

But the revelation which surpasses both of these paradigms is less its intricate technique of montage, so praised by Jacques Ranciere in his essay about documentary fiction[8]. But the striking and truly surprising part of *The Last Bolshevik* is the opportunity to see

the original productivist films themselves (at least a few parts of them).

Because something in them – as they are presented – escapes the cycle of truths being made and the making itself providing new truths. They show – as Marker notes in his voice over – much more than Medvedkin would perhaps have liked to have seen. They record the destitution, corruption, neglect, misery and apathy which has beset those parts of the Soviet economy. They also record the filmmakers' very earnest attempts to face the situation, as well as their endorsement of some of the incipient Stalinist policies of oppression. So clearly, the productivist film reels reveal far more than they are supposed to – despite the fact that they are goal-oriented, produced in the context of an instrumental pedagogy based on usefulness and necessity, and operate mainly within a realist paradigm of representation.

But the examples present a realism, which clearly exceeds the limits of its own system of truth production, the boundaries of its acceptable meanings. They become strong documents of the contradictions of the early 30s. Yet – for us – they only acquire this strikingly immediate outlook within Marker's strongly mediating essayistic and factographic set up. It is important to emphasize the contradiction Ranciere exposes in Marker's technique: he presents the material as if to speak for itself – yet he is constantly explaining it to us, underlining meanings, pointing out, revealing[9].

So how should we describe the impression, that those productivist films exceed and even partially undermine their instrumental function? How should we describe this form of evidence, which is obviously produced, but breaks free from its own parameters of production? Can we assume that the truth effect of these images relates less to production than to its excess?

The evidence emerging from Markers interpretation of the actual footage seems to pertain to another dimension. It seems to strike us, rather than to be produced as a result or intention. It is in excess of its supposed meaning, of its function as an instrument of education and control. Its truth is less produced than emerging from the rupture with its original situation or context. The rupture temporarily suspends its ties to power and knowledge. This rupture impacts us because its meanings contradict and cannot be resolved within any single interpretation. It presents a complication which remains unresolved. While the context may be produced as well as all the elements belonging to it, the striking element proceeds from the rupture with whatever is being produced, not from the production itself.

Perhaps documentary truth thus cannot be produced, just as community cannot be produced. If it were produced, it would belong to the world of the *verum factum* or the paradigm of instrumentality and governmentality, which traditionally imposes itself on documentary truth production (and which I have elsewhere called *documentality*). But this other mode of the documentary emerges at a point, where *documentality*, as well as the instrumentality, pragmatism and utility that go along with it, are ruptured. It strikes us, it imposes itself on us. This can happen, as in Marker's essay, within the disjunction between a voice-over that knows too much and an image that speaks itself without knowing itself. Or in a situation that contains an internal disjunction– the confrontation of a fervent believer in communism with socialist state bureaucracy and a nascent rule of terror. Or in the disjunction between what is represented and its presence, between the heroic figure of the worker and the struggling and decidedly unheroic human beings in the factories. It is not the real life of the workers, which is somehow congealed in the image and

transmits its vital drive. Instead, the force of these images lies in what Walter Benjamin called the violence of critique – in this case a forceful act of tearing away from their context.

I have often quoted Godard's phrase: A single shred of 35mm film is able to redeem reality. Because in certain situations the rupture of the documentary image from the bonds of knowledge and power happens. And this event is even capable of paradoxically and temporarily liberating the documentary image from its ties to power, usefulness, pedagogy and knowledge. This truth is not produced. It cannot be calculated, manufactured or anticipated. It becomes a *factum verum*, a true fact precisely by being unmade, so to speak, by happening, being contingent and uncountable. In this case the real is not, as Ranciere brilliantly notes, an effect to be produced, but a fact to be understood.

At this point a new reading of Vico's slogan emerges. *Factum verum* not only means that facts are produced. Simultaneously it also means: a fact can be true, precisely because it cannot fully be contained by the power relations of its production. (Of course this doesn't apply to all so-called "facts"). It means that some documentary articulations cannot be wholly controlled by dominant discourses. Their truth can be produced, and it will also always be produced, since images are usually produced by somebody or something. But if there is a sudden rupture with the situation of production, it also could also simply happen.

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[1] For example in Suely Rolnik: The Geopolitics of Pimping, http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/rolnik/en

[2] See also Hito Steyerl: Documentary Uncertainty. In: A Prior #15 (2007).

[3] Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

[4] Jean-Luc Nancy: *The Inoperative Community*. Theory and History of literature, vol 76. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991. pp1-43.

[5] Walter Benjamin: "The author as producer"; In: New Left Review I/62, July/August 1970.

[6] Their names are: Journal Number 4, How Do You Live Comrade Miner?, and The Conveyor Belt.

[7] Maria Muhle: Fictional Documents. For an Aesthetic Realism Workshop Medvedkin! Medvedkin! Medvedkin! (ICI Berlin March 2nd 2009)

[8] Jacques Rancière, "Documentary Fiction. Marker and the Fiction of Memory" in: *Film Fables*, Oxford/New York: Berg 2006. In his text, Ranciere is referring to the necessary construction of documentary narration by the term fiction – a move bound to generate more confusion than anything else. Although Ranciere brilliantly analyses Marker's *The Last Bolshevik* in terms of literary criticism, I don't think that reintroducing the term fiction to the discussion of documentary forms is helpful at this point. The relation between fiction and documentary has proven to be extremely confusing and impossible to resolve. Moreover, the two terms have never formed an opposition but are embedded in different types of discourse, where they assume vague and instable meanings, especially in relation to each other. Harun Farocki once described the difference between documentary and fiction in very

convincing terms: while the fiction film maker owns a swimming pool, the documentary film maker doesn't.

[9] Jacques Rancière, "Documentary Fiction. Marker and the Fiction of Memory" in: *Film Fables*, Oxford/New York: Berg 2006.