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Documentarism as Politics of Truth

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There is a famous scene in the Marx Brothers film "Duck Soup". Groucho Marx plays the corrupt president of the banana republic Freedonia, which is dependent on US aid. The spy Chico Marx disguises himself as Groucho and tries to steal his plans for war. When his masquerade is not entirely believable, he finally yelps with irritation: "Who are you going to believe – me or your own eyes?"

This paradoxical statement leads us directly into the heart of the problem: whom should we believe? The president or our own eyes? Does truth determine politics or politics truth? It is a question of how the production of truth has always been influenced and standardized by social power relations – in Chico's picture by the president himself. Michel Foucault called this process the "politics of truth". He describes it as a set of rules that determine the production of truth, distinguishing true statements from false ones, and fixing procedures of the production of truth. Truth is thus always also politically regulated.

I would like to discuss the concept of the politics of truth using the example of documentary forms. Here too, procedures are

developed for separating true statements from false ones, just as there are preferred procedures for staging and producing true statements. Here too, politics is not made from truth, but truth from politics.

An example of this kind of documentary politics of truth is, for instance, the image politics carried out in the Security Council of the United Nations with regard to the question of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in 2002 and 2003. In this controversy there were two approaches; that of the Bush administration and that of the UN agency *Unmovic*. The Bush administration worked on backing up their assertions – exemplified by Secretary of State Powell's infamous presentation before the Security Council – with visualizations of testimonies such as drawings or by subtitling acoustic documents such as telephone conversations. A further component of their visual arguments were labeled satellite photos and aerial surveillance pictures, in which the main statement was made by inserting interpretive written elements. Every indexical sign reference, which is traditionally regarded as a characteristic of documentary authenticity, was quite paltry in the pictures and charts and was mainly supported by "secret" sources. Nevertheless, this politics of truth prevailed over that of the weapons inspectors, who had developed considerably more complex and codified procedures for determining truth – such as comparing hypotheses prepared from photo material and witness accounts with measurements and information attained on site.

Government through Truth: Documentality

As we clearly see in this example, documentary forms can take effect as a kind of government through the production of truth. The concept of "governmentality" was developed by Foucault and defined as a specific form of exercising power, which operates through the production of truth.[1] According to this, the essential political problem is not the untruth of social conditions, but rather their truth, i.e. the way in which certain concepts and production forms of truth generate, support or circumvent and question domination. Media productions can also assume the role of governmental structures and function as governmental "hinges" between power and subjectivation.[2]

I call this interface between governmentality and documentary truth production "documentality". Documentality describes the permeation of a specific documentary politics of truth with superordinated political, social and epistemological formations. Documentality is the pivotal point, where forms of documentary truth production turn into government – or vice versa. It describes the complicity with dominant forms of a politics of truth, just as it can describe a critical stance with regard to these forms. Here scientific, journalistic, juridical or authentistic power/knowledge formations conjoin with documentary articulations – as we saw it exemplified in Powell's speech.

The truth politics of the US administration is a perfect example of the documental interplay between power, knowledge and the organization of documents. Contrary to this, however, documentality can also mean an attempt to thwart and to problematize not only dominant forms of truth production, but also of government, for instance as in the attempt by the group *kinoki* to create a Soviet Red Cinematography.[3] Their goal was to revolutionize practices of reception and production through the mechanization of the eye and the planned organization of

production, and through the displacement of the dominant feature film with the documentary "film of facts". The organization of film and the organization of society consequently followed the same materialist, scientific and simultaneously constructivist-revolutionary principles.

In both cases, the function of the documentary corresponds to that of governmental techniques as a "form of power that structures the field of possible actions of subjects through the production of truth."[4] Analogously, in the area of the documentary it is also a matter of structuring the field of possible actions, i.e. suggesting, proposing, evoking, preventing or reshaping actions (or attitudes) – as in the case of Powell's presentation before the Security Council. According to this reading, documentary forms do not depict reality as much as first producing it. The document functions here more as a heuristic instrument that does not adhere to a status quo, but rather seeks to induce a target state.

Documents thus often assume the character of catalysts for actions; they are supposed to first create the reality that is documented in them. From this, however, it cannot be derived – and this is the problem of Foucault's concept of truth politics – that every concept of truth is contingent and relative. On the one hand, the articulation, production and reception of a document is profoundly marked by power relations and based on social conventions. On the other hand, though, the power of the document is based on the fact that it is also intended to be able to prove what is unpredictable within these power relations – it should be able to express what is unimaginable, unspoken, unknown, redeeming or even monstrous – and thus create a possibility for change.

Ambivalent "Redemption"

In reference to the possibility of depicting the real, Walter Benjamin formulated this paradox of truth when he completed his concept of the "dialectical image" in the theses "On the Concept of History"[5]. This concept proposes a materialistic concept of truth in the representation that conveys the constructedness of every depiction together with the impossibility of relativizing truth that continues to persist despite this. This dialectical image is documentarist to the extent that it shows a particular, namely historical materialist likeness of history. At the same time, for Benjamin its truth, which can only be fixed under clearly delineated conditions, is not relative and contingent:

"When history is brought to a standstill in the flash of an image, this image is not a subjective manifestation, but rather the pictorial expression of a real place. Subject and object coincide in the dialectical image."*[6]*

This image is a radical anti-realistic construction, in which "the real place" is nevertheless depicted, or as Adorno writes: the "objective crystallization of historical movement"[7]. According to Benjamin, it is "identical with the historical object"[8]. It takes place in an in-between space, which is blasted out of the homogeneous empty time and the power relationships constituting it. The abrupt, revolutionary bursting open of dominant time in the dialectical image, the moment of danger, and the other form of temporality that flashes in this interval, allows a gate to emerge, which Benjamin interprets as the possibility of the appearance of the Messiah and thus of redemption.[9]

Not only the difference between object and subject collapses in this image, but also the opposition between truth "in-itself" and

"being-for-self" is dialectically suspended, and thus perhaps also "redeemed", in the ambivalent sense of the dialectical suspension that simultaneously negates the opposition, raises it to a higher level and preserves it. This possibility is emphatically affirmed by Siegfried Kracauer, for instance, who hopes for the "redemption of external reality" through the medium of film, but founds this with technological terms in an "affinity" of this medium to reality.[10] And Jean-Luc Godard has a similar view: "even terminally scratched, a small rectangle of 35 mm is capable of redeeming the honor of the whole of reality."[11]

In the face of the only four surviving photographs of the process of mass extermination, which were made by inmates at Auschwitz at the risk of their lives, George Didi-Hubermann also writes about "pictures despite everything"[12], pitting themselves against a monstrous procedure of obliterating reality and memory. Two of the four pictures were taken from the "shelter" of the dark gas chamber and show those murdered being burned in giant pits. Another photo shows the procedure of stripping a group of women outside. The last photo shows a blurred view of the sky and several branches and was obviously taken without looking through the viewfinder. The production of these photos was carried out according to a complicated schedule that had to be precisely adapted to the presence/absence of the German guards. It is almost unnecessary to say that the prisoners risked their lives to take these pictures.

Auschwitz was a territory that had its own photo workshop, but it was not to be photographed by unauthorized persons under any circumstances. Thus thousands of "official" photographs of Auschwitz were made, in which nothing, absolutely nothing of the mass murders carried out there is to be seen. For this reason, members of the Polish resistance decided to have photos made of

the monstrous crimes by members of the special commando assigned there. After four of the photos were exposed, they were smuggled out of Auschwitz with great difficulty in a toothpaste tube. The purpose of this image production was to prepare proof of the mass extermination.*[13]* Didi-Huberman explicitly compares these photos, the only ones made by prisoners in a concentration camp and still preserved, with Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image and points out that Hannah Arendt also used similar descriptions of unexpectedly and suddenly articulated truth, when she wrote in light of the Auschwitz trial:

"Instead of the whole truth, however, the reader will find moments of truth, and only by means of these moments can this chaos of horror and evil be articulated. These moments arise unexpectedly, like oases in the desert. (...)"[14]

The moments of truth are scattered throughout the accounts and pictures of the procedures of the crime, just like messianic time in Benjamin's conception of the presence of the now. Didi-Huberman accordingly points out that the four photos made by prisoners at Auschwitz under incredible exertion also represented "moments of truth". However, this formulation has a twofold meaning: on the one hand, like Benjamin's dialectical images, they undoubtedly participate in truth. On the other hand, it would be inadmissible *to demand "the whole truth*" from these pictures. They are

"tiny samples taken from a highly complex reality, brief moments of a continuum that lasted less than five years. Yet for us – for our gaze today – they are the truth itself, which means its relic, its meager remnant: the visible that is left from Auschwitz."[15]

The pictures thus show truth – but precisely not the "whole" truth. They prove to be a Janus-like construct, in which "moments of truth" can be articulated.

Moments of Truth

Didi-Huberman also articulates the paradox here that this concept of pictoriality is conceived as simultaneously mediated and immediate, constructed and participating in reality. The picture shows truth and "darkness" at the same time, in other words blurs and other parameters that allow the picture to glide into unintelligibility.[16] Nevertheless, this incomplete, partially darkened and often unbearable truth is the only one at our disposal. The difficulty for historians in dealing with these pictures is that too much and too little is required of these pictures at the same time: if one demands too much of them – the "whole truth" – then disappointment results; suddenly the pictures are just torn shreds, pieces of film, thus inadequate. If one demands too little of them and relegates them to the realm of the simulacrum, they are thus excluded from the historical field. For historicists then conclude from the simulacrum character of the pictures that the universe of the concentration camp is not representable at all, because "there is no truth of the picture at all, not of the photographic nor of the filmic image, nor of the painted or formed image."[17] At both poles of this placement in relation to truth, the pictures fail. The picture is not capable of truth, which simultaneously means that it is subsequently subject to the abyss of extinction that it sought with tremendous exertion to escape.

What if these pictures insist, though? If they represent "despite everything" and specifically represent not just anything, but rather

truth? Here Didi-Huberman again names the poles, between which the paradox of truth is played out: on the one side the ethically absolutely necessary insisting on/of a historical truth, which would still remain true, even if every evidence of it were obliterated; on the other side the insight that the perception of it can only happen within a construction conveyed through media (society, politics), which is therefore manipulable and opaque.

The four photos that Didi-Huberman discusses can be understood as moments of truth, which break through the almost closed ceiling of National-Socialist documentalities within a brief interval created under incredible exertions, in which it was nevertheless possible to show what was supposed to remain invisible and pictureless in the fascist system at all costs. At the time, however, it was not seen, and even today, as Didi-Huberman recounts with disgust, historian do not flinch from manipulating the pictures in sometimes repulsive ways, in order to make them "plausible" as historical documents. What is cut out of the frame in this way – the slantedness of the segment, the dark outline of the gas chamber, from which two of these photos were taken, the blurs and smudges – are precisely the aspects clearly imprinted with the Benjaminian moment of danger, the moment of an endangered production of a tiny interval of time, which strikes through the National-Socialist control of all image production in a precisely delimited place.

However, the "whole" truth first results from a precise contextualization or "labeling" of these kinds of pictures, as can be read from the example of the controversy surrounding the way the Wehrmacht Exhibition dealt with some of its photos documenting crimes. After other historians questioned whether the exhibited photos actually showed real crimes committed by the Wehrmacht or those of the Soviet secret service, an exact reconstruction of the

progression of events was needed, which could not at all be directly concluded from what was to be seen, and which required from the historians the same task of meticulous reading and labeling that Benjamin predicted to his photographer: uncovering "guilt" in the pictures and "naming the guilty ones". The reconstruction did not lead to newly labeling the questionable pictures then, but rather to a more precise reflection on the status of photographs as documents.[18]

On the basis of this discussion, however, it is clear how urgently the question of a politics of truth insists, which can not at all be rejected because of purely relativist objections. The relativist objection against the picture as pure construction plays into the hands of the revisionist objection against investigating the perpetrators here. The result would be a continued extinguishing of moments of truth. The "urgency" of the documentary is grounded in the ethical dilemma of having to give testimony to an event that cannot be conveyed as such, but instead contains necessary elements of truth as well as of "darkness". On the other hand, this necessity of a "redemption" can turn into an appellative moment that can be appropriated by humanitarian and charitable motives and transferred into a liberal-humanitarian documentality mode. The imperative of "redemption" is reinterpreted here as an interventionist appeal and thus directed into new forms of governmentality and a humanitarian politics of truth focusing on "victims". The misery-voyeuristic picture forms developed by this "redemption" idea are among the most potent documentalities of the present and legitimize both military and economic invasions.

The problem that arises here is both an ethical and a political one. The concept of "redemption" proves to be ambivalent, in keeping with the politics of truth into which it inscribes itself: On the one hand, it refers, as in Didi-Huberman's example, to the

Benjaminian "tradition of the oppressed"[19], which requires of us an understanding of history that rejects the massive obliterations of fascist representations and shows proper respect for the few counter-images that could be created under unspeakable exertions. In this case we must insist on reading and rescuing the "moments of truth" preserved in the photos, otherwise it no longer makes sense to speak of truth at all. On the other hand, the concept of "redemption" is deeply enmeshed in vitalistic conceptions of an authenticity that is all too often to be secured with a voyeuristic and instrumentalizing reference to "naked life", according to Giorgio Agamben the zero mark of human existence.[20] The concept of "redemption" may succeed, as in Didi-Huberman's example, in challenging a dominant, in this case fascist politics of truth. At the same time, however, this politics of truth appealing to naked life is first constituted through the figure of "redemption", for example in the humanitarian politics of truth at the turn of the millennium.

It is this paradox that was summarized by Chico Marx in his irresistible flash of thought: "Who are you going to believe – me or your own eyes?" There is hardly a visibility that is not steeped in power relations – so that we can almost say that what we see has always been provided by power relations. On the other hand, the doubt in these visibilities insists with a vehemence that is capable of constituting its own form of power. Chico's question is therefore principally unanswerable. We have to leave it open – and hope that this confusing gap will open up the path to other visibilities.

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[1]Lemke 1997, p. 32.

[2]On these concepts, cf. Lemke 1997, p. 31.

[3]Vertov 1998a, p. 88.

[4]Lemke 1997, p. 348

[5]Benjamin 1978, p. 93.

[6]Anderson 2000, p. 147-185, p. 181

[7]Adorno 1970, p. 24.

[8]Benjamin 1982, p. 595.

[9]Benjamin 1978, p. 94.

[10]Kracauer 1964, p. 11.

[11]Jean-Luc Godard, Histoire(s) du Cinéma, Paris 1998, p. 86, quoted from Didi-Huberman 2003.

[12]Didi-Huberman 2003, p. 17f.

[13]Didi-Huberman 2003.

[14]Quoted from Didi-Huberman, p. 18. Original quotation from: Hannah Arendt, Der Auschwitzprozess. In: Nach Auschwitz. Essays und Kommentare I. Ed. Eike Geisel and K. Bittermann. Berlin, edition Tiamat, p. 99-136, p. 102. Italics in the original.

[15]Didi-Huberman 2003, p. 23.

[16]Didi-Huberman 2003, p. 19.

[17]Quoted from Didi-Huberman 2003, p.20. Original quotation from Laurent Gerverau: "Représenter l'univers concentrationnaire". In: BÉDARIDA François, GERVEREAU Laurent, La Déportation et le Système concentrationnaire nazi, musée d'Histoire contemporaine, BDIC, 1995, p.244.

[18]See also Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung 2002, especially p. 108-120: "The photograph is regarded as *the* medium that purely and truthfully depicts reality. Yet the picture is always only a segment of that which took place in front of the lens, it shows a small moment from a progression of time. Like every written document, photography also requires dealing critically with the sources. Unlike the abstract text, the figurative picture suggests

to the viewer that he or she is a witness to events. Photography is still too little used as a source. The problems of verifying authenticity and truthfulness seem too diverse. At the same time, missing or contradictory information in the archives reinforces the existing insecurity in dealing with pictorial sources. Methodological tools for appropriately interpreting photos have hardly been developed yet." p. 106.

[19]Benjamin 1978, p. 84.

[20]Agamben 2002, e.g. p. 17-21.