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Elastic realities – documentary practices between cinema and art.

Realidades elásticas – práticas documentais entre cinema e arte.

Artigo inédito

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Recently, documentary practices, including those working with moving images, have known an unprecedented boom in the art field, which provoked criticism but also led to fruitful discussions between the two fields of artistic documentary practices and the more traditional documentary cinema. This article aims to contribute to this discussion by analyzing some pivotal arguments of the ongoing debate, mainly the question of documentary practices and their relation to reality, art and politics. For a better understanding of the current situation, the analysis of key moments in the history of documentary discourse is the basis for the discussion of contemporary documentary practices between cinema and art, considering seminal examples combining moving images with questions of performativity.

Recentemente, as práticas documentais, incluindo aquelas que lidam com imagens em movimento, experimentaram um aumento sem precedentes na área artística, o que provocou críticas mas também levou a férteis discussões entre o campo de práticas documentárias artísticas e os documentários cinematográficos mais tradicionais. Este artigo visa a contribuir com essa discussão a partir da análise de alguns argumentos centrais ao debate existente, principalmente a questão das práticas documentais e suas relações com a realidade, arte e política. Para uma melhor compreensão da situação atual, a análise de momentos-chave na história do discurso documental é a base para a discussão de práticas documentais contemporâneas entre cinema e arte, considerando exemplos seminais que combinam imagens em movimento e questões de performatividade.

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Documentary practices with moving images have never been reserved solely to the cinematic field; they have always made occasional appearances in the art context. Of late, however, they have known an unprecedented boom in the art field, which has sometimes provoked criticism but also led to fruitful discussions between representatives of a more traditional understanding of documentary cinema and of the diverse practices employed in artistic experiments with documentary forms. This article wishes to contribute to this discussion by investigating how documentary practices, especially those working with moving images, are situated and defined between the two fields of cinema and art. This topic surely cannot be fully explored in this article; the aim is, however, to give insight into the ongoing debate by analyzing some of its pivotal arguments, such as the question of documentary practices and their relation to reality, art and politics. As this is, however, by no means discussed for the first time with regard to documentary, it seems useful to go back to key moments in the history of documentary discourse, moments that already address the triangle of documentary, art, and politics, as well as the related question of documentary and its reference to reality. The insight gained from visiting this historic ‘problem area’ shall then form the basis for the discussion of contemporary documentary practices between cinema and art. For a better understanding of the complexities of this discussion, the discourse analysis will furthermore be complemented by the analysis of contemporary examples of artistic documentary practices using moving images in various ways: Ming Wong’s *Bilent Wongsoy: Biji Diva!* (2014), Renzo Martens’ *Episode 3 (Enjoy Poverty)* (2008), and Noor Afshan Mirza and Brad Butler’s *The Unreliable Narrator* (2014).

The aforementioned historical ‘problem area,’ which is at the basis of what seems to be a definitional dilemma, can be condensed in John Grierson’s seminal definition of documentary film as a “creative treatment of actuality”¹. With these words, Grierson aims at an organized arrangement of the filmed material to support a certain argument or documentary narrative. His definition, however, does not stand alone; around the same time, Ron Stryker, the director of the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration, which was responsible for vast photographic documentary projects, develops a similar approach to documentary photography by stating that “the mass of social and vital data can be nothing more or less than an indiscriminate accumulation of details which have to be submitted to a process of selection and organization before there is meaning”² – a task which has to be carried out by the documentarian.

In her analysis on the history of the concept of ‘documentary,’ Renate Woehrer shows that the recognition of photography as an art

1. GRIERSON, John. The documentary producer. *Cinema Quarterly*, Edinburgh, v. 2, n. 1, p. 7-9, 1933. p. 8.

2. STRYKER, Roy; LOCKE, Edwin. **Documentary photography**. In: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, Washington, DC, [19--]. Series II, Part B, Reel 6. Non-paged.

3. WOEHRER, Renate. **Wie Bilder Dokumente wurden:** Zur Genealogie dokumentarischer Darstellungspraktiken. Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2016. p. 12.

4. Ibidem, p. 13.

5. Ibidem.

6. WINSTON, Brian. **Claiming the real II:** documentary: Grierson and beyond. 2. ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. p. 22.

7. GRIERSON, John. The documentary idea: 1942. In: HARDY, Forsyth (ed.). **Grierson on documentary.** London: Faber, 1966. p. 249.

form in the 1920s cannot have been the cause for the introduction of a clear border to documentary photography – the hitherto accepted explanation in photography theory – because, at the precise moment the concept was established, the borders between documentary and art had already become porous³. From this, what can one infer about the concept of documentary and its relationship to art? Ron Stryker in his text on documentary photography, as well as John Grierson in his definition of documentary film make a clear distinction between the process of simply recording an image and documentary practices, stressing the process of selecting and arranging significant elements in order to represent reality⁴. This focus on the creative part of the process allowed them to distinguish photography and film as documentary practices from journalism or other practices of recording visual material. At the same time, however, the active process of selecting and arranging material, which transforms images into documentations, shows striking parallels to artistic practices and, thus, opens a space where the two fields overlap. According to Woehrer, documentary practices should therefore not be defined as separate from the art field but as offering a way for a potential transfer to it⁵.

This is exactly where the discursive dilemma is situated, or as Brian Winston's words it in *Claiming the Real II: Documentary: Grierson and Beyond* (2008):

Clearly, documentary needed to make a strong claim on the real, but at the same time Grierson did not want it to be a mechanical, automatic claim arising from nothing more than the very nature of the apparatus. He defined documentary therefore as “creative treatment of actuality” and thereby created a problem⁶.

The problematic tension lies between the “strong claim on the real,” defining the documentary film as a privileged mode of evoking reality, and the proximity to artistic practices. Not much later, Grierson consequently changes his approach by saying that “documentary was from the beginning (...) an anti-aesthetic movement”⁷. This change of definition is, however, not permanent; Grierson, as Ron Stryker and many other of their contemporaries, fluctuates between both poles.

Such inconsistency in their position can be traced back to a discursive change that took place at the beginning of the 20th century and opposed, in brief, the concept of artistic subjectivity to the concept of scientific objectivity. Alongside the latter, the idea of indexical objectivity was introduced, based on media allowing for indexical visual recordings that would guarantee truthful representations of reality.

While it was necessary to distinguish documentary photography and film from the mechanical, indexical processes of recording, to establish them via the proclaimed use of subjective-creative practices as creative genres in their own rights, this creative subjectivity had to disappear or to be negated, at least in the discourse, because it would compromise the other founding parameter of documentary practices: their reference to reality.

The claim to reality is, however, not only relevant to documentary film for intrinsic reasons – being an indispensable characteristic; it was also relevant for Grierson and his Film Unit from an economic perspective: whereas it was almost impossible to convince political and economic entities to sponsor experimental art films, the ‘Griersonians’ managed to get funds by claiming to produce realistic documentary films that would help to change for the better the social conditions they were portraying. Whether this concept ever succeeded is open for discussion. Brian Winston’s verdict is, in any case, clearly negative: “I believe that running away from social meaning is what the Griersonian documentary, and therefore the entire tradition, does best”⁸.

He takes an ironic stance on the elegantly filmed slums in *Face of Britain* (1935)⁹, stating that the film structure presenting grievances as “problem moments,” in this case “slums sandwiched between a wonderful past and a beautiful future”¹⁰, stops every *élan* to act in the viewers right from the start. Winston sees this way of structuring a cinematic argument as a strong reference in the tradition of documentary cinema, in his eyes, “the victim documentary is the Griersonians’ most potent legacy”¹¹. And it certainly has a big part in what Michael Renov qualifies as the development of a “documentary anti-aesthetic”¹² in the 1930s and 1940s, which means, for him, a rupture with documentary concepts of the early avant-garde, where the borders between cinema and art context were not yet clearly marked and the poetic or expressive function of documentary – or the poetic mode, as in Bill Nichols¹³ – was not yet looked down upon¹⁴. As a result of this rupture, documentary was “cut (...) off from its avant-garde roots”¹⁵ and subsequently transformed into a modernist progressive project¹⁶ that, while heavily criticizing societal problems in the present, wanted to generate an impulse to change things and therefore still contained a utopian moment. Consequently, the contemporary discourse in art history developed a very clear position regarding this form of documentary that defined it as being in opposition to art¹⁷.

Let us set aside for a moment the historic discussions that generated the unclear status of documentary between its claim on

8. WINSTON, Brian. Op. cit., p. 42.

9. **The Face of Britain** (1935), Paul Rotha, United Kingdom.

10. WINSTON, Brian. Op. cit., p. 49.

11. *Ibidem*, p. 47

12. RENOV, Michael. *Away from copying. the art of documentary practice*. In: PEARCE, Gail; MCLAUGHLIN, Cahal (ed.). **Truth or dare: art and documentary**. Bristol: Intellect, 2007. p. 13-24, p. 15. Renov sees this development mainly as a result of the historical situation with the big depression and the wars, when “aesthetics tended to be seen as a luxury, ill-suited to the urgency of the times” (*Ibidem*, p. 16).

13. NICHOLS, Bill. **Introduction to documentary**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. p.105ff.

14. RENOV, Michael. Op. cit., p. 15.

15. *Ibidem*, p. 17.

16. Cf. HOLLAND, Patricia. Foreword. In: DANIELS, Jill; MCLAUGHLIN, Cahal; PEARCE, Gail (ed.). **Truth, dare or promise: art and documentary revisited**. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013, p. XII; LIND, Maria; STEYERL, Hito. Introduction: reconsidering the documentary and contemporary art. In: LIND, Maria; STEYERL, Hito. **The greenroom: reconsidering the documentary and contemporary art #1**. Berlin: Sternberg, 2008. p. 16.

17. *Ibidem*, p. 12.

the real and its proximity to artistic practices, as well as the asserted ambitions of documentary to generate a socio-political impact, to take a closer look at more recent developments at the intersection between documentary and art: the so-called “documentary turn” and the resulting boom of documentary practices in the art field fuels this discussion anew while also adding new facets.

There is a widespread consensus when it comes to situating this documentary turn in time: it is normally dated at the end of the 1980s respectively the beginning of the 1990s with the year 1989 and the following changes in the political landscape as landmarks¹⁸. These events decisively contributed to the repoliticization of art¹⁹, which went hand in hand with an increasing interest of artists in documentary practices as a form of gaining access to the real world²⁰. Interestingly, such development starts exactly at the time when the belief in the indexicality of the image and, thus, in its direct reference to reality, is unraveling for good, one reason being the image politics during the Gulf War of 1990/91 – which is, of course, also linked to the increasing dissemination of digital imagery. These are the most common explanations for the vast impact of the documentary turn in the art field, and they are surely meaningful, even though not the only ones.

Jan Verwoert offers an interesting alternative explanation that does not seem without plausibility either: he sees documentary approaches as a way to establish communication and mutual understanding in a just recently opened art field, where the lack of knowledge about the socio-political and geographical contexts of the fellow artists often prevails. The documentary work would, thus, in his view, fulfill the function of “I’ll show you mine, show me yours”²¹.

With the documentary turn, documentary moving images enter the art field, but they decidedly do so as an artistic practice among other documentary practices. Therefore, their reference is not so much to the cinematic context, as they become part of an ensemble of different media practices, of a documentary field²². The latter comprises not only photography and film as (former) indexical practices but also, for example, performative practices such as theatre or dance.

The documenta 11 in 2002, curated by Okwui Enwezor, can be considered as the first climax of this development, at least in numerical terms since more than 40% of the presented works used documentary practices²³. This boom of documentary practices at documenta 11 also spurred critical and theoretical expressions; particularly critical comments can be found in an issue of the German magazine *Texte zur Kunst* published 2003 under the title “Nichts als die Wahrheit” (Nothing but the truth),

18. Cf. KREIMEIER, Klaus. Was ist das: Filmgeschichte?. 2010. Available from: <http://dokumentarfilmforschung.de/dff/cms/?p=245>. Access in: 12 Dec. 2018; LIND, Maria; STEYERL, Hito. Op. cit., p. 14

19. LUCCHESI, Silvia. It’s hard to touch the real. In: BERTOLLOTTI, Francesca (ed.). **Lo schermo dell’arte**: bulletin #1: the documentary in contemporary art practice. Florence: Archive, 2012. p. 9-18, p. 10.

20. The topic of the “real” and “reality” in the field of art will be discussed in further detail in the following.

21. VERWOERT, Jan. Zeig du mir deins ich zeig dir meins: Dokumentarfilm als Kultur des Austauschs. In: HOHENBERGER, Eva; MUNDT, Katrin. **Ortsbestimmungen**: das dokumentarische zwischen Kino und Kunst. Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2016. p. 94. Another important condition for the documentary turn is, surely, the technological changes in the cinema and art context caused by the digitalization. We won’t dwell on them here, however, as they have been extremely well analyzed by Erika Balsom in her seminal book: BALSOM, Erika. **Exhibiting cinema in contemporary art**. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013.

22. PELEG, Hila. Documentary practices across disciplines. In: PELEG, Hila; REBHANDL, Bert. (ed.). **Berlin Documentary Forum 1**. Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2010. p. 4.

which already shows that the critical analysis targets the question of how the artworks reference reality, and thus also addresses their political pretense and attitude. The preface deplores that a large number of works from the field of documentary practices only presents some sort of professional management of global political problem zones while showing a predominant preference for modes of presentation with a certain proximity to software and communication standards used in commercial design²⁴. According to this preface, these works only assume a political pose based on the assumption that the discursive premise that images never reproduce reality but construct their own has long been established as common knowledge in image theory and has shaken the confidence in the iconicity of images. While this only leads to a pseudo-iconoclastic attitude affirming the image as construct, the image becomes at the same time “consumable” as its reference to reality becomes relativized.

The artist Paola Yacoub makes a similar observation regarding the Lebanese art scene, as she describes the 1990s as a period of “play with the veracity of documents” (*joué avec la véracité des documents*) and “respectable skepticism” (*scépticisme de bon aloi*) when the use of documentary practices was informed by a sort of fashionable, generally accepted doubt (*doute convenu, mondain*). This pose of cool doubt, when combined with a reference to reality which finds itself in question, ultimately leads to a politically and socially soothing effect, similar to the one that Brian Winston criticizes in the Griersonians – or even worse, in the case of Lebanon, it leads to a stabilization of the political regime in power²⁵.

This very critical assessment of documentary practices regarding their political ambitions or attitude leads us to the question whether the rupture between, in brief, a socially- and politically-engaged documentary cinema and art that Renov has diagnosed for the 1930s and 1940s has created an unbridgeable gulf between the two fields; or if there are any examples of documentary practices in the art field which do not only assume an iconoclastic pose and use the reference to reality for a pseudo-political intellectual game without any consequences, but which actually try to develop critical political, or even activist propositions.

In the following, I propose to look at three examples, which have been developed for and presented in different contexts, from commercial art galleries to independent venues and festivals. While their political stance might not be exactly the same, as they address different topics, they are comparable in that they all use moving images as part of a bigger arrangement of documentary practices based on a very elastic reference to reality.

What does that exactly mean? In the *Bulletin* of the 2010 “Lo schermo dell’arte” festival, dedicated to the “Documentary in

23. Cf. BARTL, Angelika.

Andere Subjekte: dokumentarische Medienkunst und die Politik der Rezeption. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012. p. 10.

24. Cf. GLUDOVATZ, Karin; KRÜMMEL, Clemens. Vorwort: nichts als die Wahrheit. **Texte zur Kunst**, Berlin, v. 13, n. 51, Sept. 2003. p. 4-5.

25. YACOUB, Paola. Faites nous confiance. Unpublished manuscript, extract of an intervention, ARP-ALBA at Museum Surssock, 15 Oct. 2015.

26. LUCCHESI, Silvia. Op. cit., p. 10.

27. Ibidem, p. 11.

28. I do not want to dwell on this specific debate here, as I have discussed it in depth elsewhere: LUND, Cornelia. Die Elastizität des dokumentarischen: der Dokumentarfilm zwischen Kino- und Kunstkontext. In: HEINZE, Carsten; WEBER, Thomas (ed.). **Medienkulturen des dokumentarischen.** Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2017. p. 253-267.

29. LUCCHESI, Silvia. Op. cit., p. 10.

Contemporary Art Practice,” Silvia Lucchesi uses the notion of “elastic documentary”²⁶, referring to a lecture held by Katharina Gregos in 2010. The “elasticity” consists, according to Lucchesi, in the fact that “by moving beyond the mere adherence to reality, the value of truth can emerge more powerfully through artistic abstraction”²⁷. To achieve this, different strategies such as reenactments, found footage or fictional elements are used. There might be a slight misunderstanding of the traditional documentary – if such a thing exists – at the bottom of this assumption, meaning its “mere adherence to reality”²⁸. What is interesting to me is, to put it in other words, the idea of an elastic reference to reality: of it being widened, stretched, bent and getting bumps – and, with it, the way credibility is produced. Evidently, the reference to reality does not undergo a test of elasticity because of a simple reenactment or the use of found footage, but because of how the elements come together in a piece that is produced with “great methodological freedom”²⁹ regarding the documentary form, as stated by Lucchesi.

And how does this look and sound like? There is no single answer to this question; however, a look at examples might provide some ideas of how an elastic reference to reality might be constructed and what its effects could be.

The first example, Ming Wong’s exhibition “Bülent Wongsoy: Biji Diva!” was presented at earlier | gebauer in Berlin, in 2014, as a mixed media installation featuring different videos, sound and light installations, a vinyl record and cassette covers, a cassette wig, photographs, and archival material.

The installation refers to the Turkish singer and actor Bülent Ersoy, who started her career in the 1970s as a male singer of *Arabesk* and *Türk Sanat Müziği*. Being transsexual, Bülent Ersoy got repeatedly into trouble with the government and even had to leave Turkey for Germany during the military dictatorship in the 1980s, before being able to return to Turkey and finally getting the pink, female passport in 1988. The so called “diva” – a honorific title – could pass as a symbol for a growing tolerance towards the LGBTQ+ community in Turkey but, as a close friend of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Bülent Ersoy can hardly be regarded as fierce LGBTQ+ activist.

And this is where Ming Wong’s project comes in: taking Bülent Ersoy’s life and career as a starting point, he invents the biography of an Asian double, a doppelgänger, called Bülent Wongsoy – a libertarian protest singer who records her songs in Kurdish, Arabic, Russian, Vietnamese and Cantonese.

The first stage of the project was a performance at the “In Transit Festival” (2011) at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, where Ming Wong and his mother reenacted Ersoy’s performances from different periods of her life.

With the second stage, the exhibition at carlier | gebauer in 2014, the project shifted from the festival context to the (commercial) art milieu, which becomes striking in the fact that Ming Wong had produced “sellable goods” such as a limited vinyl record for the exhibition. What prompted Ming Wong to further develop his work on Bülent Ersoy was not only the connection to Berlin – he had discovered her work in Berlin, where she had acted in some Turkish films during the 1980s – but more specifically the protest at Gezi park in 2013 and the fact the carlier | gebauer gallery is located in close proximity to Berlin’s biggest Turkish wedding venue and some related wedding shops and photo studios³⁰.

The show spread over five rooms at the gallery. The main room contained, among other elements, an installation of vinyl record and cassette covers, originals and reenactments, and a two-channel video projection. The latter developed an alternative biography of Bülent Wongsoy, mixing the documentation of the performance at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt with scenes from Bülent Ersoy’s/Wongsoy’s life. Another room was dedicated to the audio documentation of Ming Wong taking Turkish singing lessons.

Thus, the installation consisted not only of a mix of different media but also of different instances and levels of documentary material coming together at the same time in the same place: filmic, photographic, and printed archival material from Bülent Ersoy’s life and career neighbored with the reenactment of this material, documents of the performance preparation and the documentation on the performance itself. The latter is, however, not shown alone, as a simple documentation; Wong brought it together with archival material and moving images showing reenactments made for the camera, to produce a sort of documentary film, a complex play with the different levels of documentation and documenting, mixed with fictional elements. The interesting thing about the project is not that it uses familiar documentary forms, but that they are combined with other, fictional elements and that, all together, the different artifacts produce a colorful yet fissured portrait of the double diva Bülent Ersoy/Wongsoy, who become somehow one in a new, hypothetical and potential biography. Thus, not only the portrait shows fissures where the – well-calculated – inconsistencies of reenactments become apparent: the reference to reality is stretched to the point of disappearing. Or almost.

30. Cf. WONG, Ming. **Bülent Wongsoy**: Biji Diva!. Berlin: Ming Wong, [2015]. Available from: <http://www.mingwong.org/bulent-wongsoy-biji-diva>. Access in: 12 Dec. 2018.

In the operation of questioning and, to this effect, bending and stretching the documentary form, the “documentary” in documentary practices might get vaporized, but it does not lose its meaning and never gets completely dissolved. On the contrary, it has a key function in the organization and production of the project’s meaning, as the analysis of Ming Wong’s project has shown: the performative transformation of documents of the existing historic figure into another fictionalized version of herself and the juxtaposition of the two allow to generate a very subtle critical political statement that draws its force from the performative embodiment of the double diva Bülent Ersoy/Wongsoy: while Ersoy has become friends with Erdoğan, Bülent Wongsoy “continues to be a freedom fighter”³¹ that takes position against Erdoğan, as is indicated e.g. by a cover where she is playfully attacked by a policemen with hairspray. The doppelgänger carries a potential for political impact that the real Bülent Ersoy does not fulfill any more. The reference to reality is thus turned away from the question of sheer truthfulness into a more elastic understanding, allowing the documentary form to become a “catalyst for a different kind of reality instead of being its representation”³², as Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl put it.

31. WONG, Ming. Op. cit.

32. LIND, Maria; STEYERL, Hito. Op. cit., p. 25.

The second example, which, at first glance, could be filed under the much criticized category of “professional management of global political problem zones,” also produces its own reality by performative means, but moving images and performance come together in a quite different way than in “Bülent Wongsoy: Biji Dival!,” and it takes the liberties with the documentary form to quite different ends: Renzo Marten’s feature length film *Episode 3 (Enjoy Poverty)* (2008)³³. This is part of a bigger project also comprising another film about Chechnya, and an exhibition. Taking the Democratic Republic of the Congo as an example, it addresses the image economy of conflict photography as a “vicious circle of profit, objectification, and sympathy”³⁴, an exploitative structure which mainly profits the western agents.

33. EPISODE 3 (Enjoy Poverty) (2008), Renzo Martens, Belgium.

34. DEMOS, T. J. The Haunting. Renzo Martens’s *Enjoy Poverty*. In: DEMOS, T. J. **Return to the postcolony**: specters of colonialism in contemporary art. Berlin: Sternberg, 2013. p. 97-124, p. 98.

The scenes of the film include a UN refugee camp, the local headquarter of the NGO *Médecins sans Frontières* (Doctors without Borders), a cocoa plantation and its owner, as well as the workers and their impoverished families – and international photographers. The film makes a strong argument that images showing African victims of hunger and violence are one of the most important export products of the DRC, as they spur the international aid industry. As one scene in the film with a World Bank representative shows, the DRC’s revenues from international aid largely exceed those from natural resources such as gold, copper, and coltan. But the ones making these images are white

journalists paid by western press agencies. Therefore, the Congolese are excluded from the profit generated through their most important resource, that is, poverty, as Martens provocatively puts it in the film.

All this could still be presented and explained in the manner of a traditional, socially engaged documentary film. Martens, however, combines the documentary approach with a carefully scripted performance by Martens as the protagonist of the film, sometimes incorporating an altruistic teacher persona, sometimes an eccentric artist. As this persona, Martens enacts the very problems the film addresses by creating his own kind of small aid organization: he sets up a school for the local party and wedding photographers where he familiarizes them in a somewhat cynical version of self-empowerment with the neoliberal logic of the aid industry and of the image economy of conflict photography. He takes the photographers on training excursions, where they learn how to make the most shocking images. One scene also shows them discussing with a representative of the *Médecins sans Frontières* who is, however, reluctant to accept Martens' explanations and to break the established image economy by giving the Congolese photographers professional access to the clinic run by the NGO – which would enable them to finally profit from poverty as a resource, according to Martens.

Martens' performance could be interpreted as the somewhat strange social engagement of a European artist, but this would be completely missing the point. What Martens' performance in the film really does is that it “exposes this system of Congolese poverty, an exposure that is in itself a significant act of new politics of documentarism”³⁵ – however, not as a documentary film following the rules of cinema, but as an art project. Renzo Martens is not a documentary filmmaker, he is an artist, and his appearances in the film are performances that are carefully interwoven with the documentary film elements. And it is as an artist that Martens includes the much discussed scene where a dying child is exposed to the camera; where a documentary filmmaker might follow certain ethical standards and might be bound to the rules of an established institutional framework (TV, cinema)³⁶, Martens breaks with these standards that ultimately allow us to sit back and be content with our critical approach that makes us think that, by being critical, we are not part of the vicious circle of the image economy, that “because it is assumed that, since we are willing to watch the piece, we are contributors to the critical mass that will, one day, undo the harm”³⁷.

By unmasking the parallels between the production of politically- and socially-engaged images and the international humanitarian aid

35. DEMOS, T. J. Op. cit., p. 105.

36. LUND, Cornelia. Op. cit., p. 260.

37. Quoted in: DEMOS, T. J. Toward a new institutional critique: a conversation with Renzo Martens. *Atlántica*, Las Palmas, n. 52, p. 90-103, Feb. 2012. p. 93.

38. DEMOS, T. J. Op. cit., 2013, p. 118.

39. DEMOS, T. J. Op. cit., 2012, p. 93.

40. Cf. e.g. MOYO, Dambisa. **Dead aid:** why aid is not working and how there is a better way for Africa. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009. Maybe an answer can also be found in Renzo Martens' model project of a reversed gentrification in which he collaborates with the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League. Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/catpc.rdc/> and <http://www.humanactivities.org/en/>.

41. This text refers to the single channel version which can also be accessed through the related website. MIRZA, Noor Afshan; BUTLER, Brad.

The Unreliable Narrator. 2014. United Kingdom. Available from: <http://www.museumofnonparticipation.org/detail.php?id=34>. Access in: 12 Dec. 2018.

42. Cf. <http://www.museumofnonparticipation.org>. Access in: 12 Dec. 2018.

43. SEYMOUR, Tom. The unreliable narrator: how should we represent terror?. **British Journal of Photography**, London, 16 Mar. 2015. Available from: <https://www.bjp-online.com/2015/03/the-unreliable-narrator-mirza-butler-mumbai-attacks/>. Access in: 12 Dec. 2018.

44. Ibidem.

industry, Martens also puts up for questioning his own role as an image producer and, thus, as a part of the criticized image economy³⁸. The film is not a critical documentary investigating a problem, it reduplicates the problem, so to speak, by exposing and, at the same time, reproducing it: “The film copies, in itself, existing modes of production, and unfolds them for all of us to see and feel. That’s how the film reveals reality, through making its inner policies tangible”³⁹, Martens explains his strategy.

And it seems only logical that, in the end, his efforts to deliver aid fail; art does not offer solutions for problems in the DRC – on the contrary, the art system Martens is a part of mirrors the global power structures. Martens is often criticized for leaving this blank, for not unfolding at least a discursive proposition for a solution; but maybe this blank follows a decolonial strategy and indicates that, in this case, solutions cannot come from representatives of the former colonial powers and the global system of a neocolonial international aid industry⁴⁰.

Global power relations and the related role of media are also at the core of the third example, Noor Afshan Mirza (formerly Karen Mirza) and Brad Butler’s work *The Unreliable Narrator* (2014). This piece deals with the 2008 Mumbai attacks and has been shown as a single channel video or as part of an installation as double channel video⁴¹.

The Unreliable Narrator is part of the ongoing project *The Museum of Non Participation*, with which Mirza and Butler investigate non-participation as a “threshold, (...) an international neo-liberal life condition”⁴², at the same time questioning the institution of the (western) museum, its power of interpretation and discourse, its hierarchical structures and its roots in colonial structures. *The Museum of Non Participation* has no defined venue, it materializes in different projects at different times and in different spaces, combining various artistic practices – documentary and other – such as video, performance, photography or writing with other collaborative and collective practices such as a reading group.

Mirza and Butler experienced the Mumbai attack in Pakistan, where they became witnesses to a quite polyphonic echo in the media. The film drew its inspiration from the “differing global interpretations of events,” a sort of concert of “diverging forces of interests”⁴³ in the situation – which again lead to the question of reality and its representation.

The video approaches this question from different angles: as the title already suggests, Mirza and Butler are interested in the position of the narrator, not so much as a person but as a condition⁴⁴. Consequently, they explore this condition by alternately narrating the events from the position of the terrorists, through footage of phone calls between

attackers and their controllers, for example; and from the position of a seemingly impartial commentator, incorporated by the voice of the writer and journalist Rahil Gupta, with whom Mirza and Butler collaboratively wrote the text. The neutral voice-over commentary would normally stand as a guarantee for the truthfulness of the explanations we get in a documentary film; here, however, as it is combined with material from quite different sources, the answer to the question of who gives the right explanations becomes uncertain.

The audio, together with the images, consisting of CCTV footage of the attacks and footage of feature films dealing with the events, raises the question whether the events were already performed for the camera from the beginning⁴⁵. The cinema industry, in any case, has immediately ceased the dramatic potential of the *mise en scène*, and 18 movie titles were quickly registered, some as early as November 28, a day before the siege was over, as the commentator's voice informs us.

With their subtle arrangement of the documentary and fictional found footage coming from different sources, Mirza and Butler question the workings and interplay of the media and the media apparatus, the images, stereotypes, and power structures it produces and provokes. Sometimes, no further explanation is given and the chosen material speaks for itself, as in the excerpt showing the wounded attacker on a hospital bed telling the story of his recruitment through promises of wealth; sometimes, however, the voice-over commentary marks a critical position, when, for example, commenting a scene from a feature film where the attackers enter the hotel hall full of dead people as follows: "Bollywood closes in, too. The meaning of an act lies not in its doing but in its being seen, filmed, screened. Muslim gunmen in burning five-star opulence, Hindu gods in the foreground. The unstated clash of civilizations is a popular narrative, here too." As Ming Wong in his project, they produce an alternative narration, one that is, despite the seemingly authoritative voice-of-God-commentator, polyphonic and multi-layered. By doing so, the problem of "staged reality" is shown in a different light. As they did not shrink from integrating very violent footage of the attacks into the video, Mirza and Butler have been criticized for having produced an "ethically dubious"⁴⁶ but "highly conceptual snuff-movie"⁴⁷. When asked about this criticism, Mirza and Butler answered by quoting Stuart Hall: "The process of representation has entered into the event itself. In a way, it doesn't exist until it has been represented, and representation doesn't occur after the event; representation is constitutive of the event"⁴⁸.

Therefore, *The Unreliable Narrator* develops a polyphonic discourse about an event and its relation to media that goes beyond the predominant

45. This seems to follow the same logic as Bin Laden's video messages or the *mise en scène* ISIS uses for e.g. videos of decapitations, that seem to happen in order to be recorded and distributed.

46. QUAINANCE, Morgan. Karen Mirza and Brad Butler's "The unreliable narrator". *Art Agenda*, New York, 27 Jun. 2014. Available from: <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/karen-mirza-and-brad-butler%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cthe-unreliable-narrator%E2%80%9D/>. Access in: 12 Dec. 2018.

47. SEYMOUR, Tom. Op. cit., 2015.

48. Ibidem. The quote is from a lecture by Stuart Hall published in: HALL, Stuart. *Representation and the Media*. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1997. p. 7. Available from: <https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Representation-and-the-Media-Transcript.pdf>. Access in: 12 Dec. 2018.

Western/Indian perspective. A discourse in which the reference to reality is multi-layered and polyphonic as well, as it is based on different material: fictional, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, its main source is footage of a staged attack that is at the same time real and its own documentation or representation, impossible to tell exactly, as they are already part of the event or even the event itself. Thus, by stressing the relationship between an event, its real-time documentation and its fictionalization, Mirza and Butler show how the reference to reality has already become elastic in “real life” itself. This highly complex approach *The Unreliable Narrator* takes to the Mumbai attacks might lead one to think the video only “attempt(s) to address today’s key political issues, but end(s) up staging a critique that raises more troubling questions than galvanic answers”⁴⁹. But this would be missing the point, as the political strength of this work is exactly that it raises these polyphonic questions about a very complex, multifaceted international political situation, while other instances, such as the mass media or the quoted feature films, went for partial interpretations, depending on where they come from. Answers would pretend to know how the situation can be fixed and, hence, potentially simplify it, just as the partial interpretations which, to close the loop, are a part of the very international power game which generates such situations in the first place.

49. QUAINANCE, Morgan.
Op Cit.

As the analysis of these three examples has shown, the question whether there are any examples of documentary practices in the art field sincerely trying to develop critical political positions can be answered in the affirmative. But what does this imply for the other questions we have raised at the beginning of this article, that is, the position of documentary practices between cinema and art and their relation to reality, art, and politics? These two questions are, as we have seen, interwoven, as documentary and art are sometimes defined as opposite, sometimes as overlapping practices throughout time. Renate Woehrer, however, was able to show that these divisions are discursive strategies, while actual documentary forms open up a space for overlapping practices. It is exactly this space that the contemporary examples we have discussed in this article inhabit in a very imaginative and constructive way: they take up the key characteristic of the documentary, its reference to reality, which was also used as an argument for qualifying the documentary as anti-aesthetic but close to political issues. They free this reference from a very strict, rather indexical interpretation and stretch it until it becomes elastic enough to undergo aesthetic operations, such as the combination with fictional material and performative strategies, without completely losing touch with the real. Or, to put it with Lind and Steyerl again, they free it from pure representation to produce a different kind

of reality⁵⁰ – or realities, as the three examples clearly show there is no such thing as one reality that documentary practices could refer to. In consequence, this elastic reference to reality also, in a way, solves the aforementioned dilemma between the “creative treatment” and the “actuality” in Grierson’s definition. The examples clearly treat “actuality,” although with an artistic approach that combines artistic practices with an elastified reference to reality, which even allows them to address political questions more conservative definitions would previously have banned from the art field.

This critical investigation of reality and how it is constructed, not only in the cinema and art fields, but also in mass media and, more widely, in global power discourses, is not only relevant for the defined field of documentary practices but also raises questions and develops strategies that can potentially be interesting for other areas of artistic production dealing with complex constructions of and references to reality, especially those situated at the intersection of art and more recent technological developments, such as AI or VR.

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⁵⁰ Cf. LIND, Maria; STEYERL, Hito. Op. cit., p. 25.

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