UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA PORTUGUESA

DOCUMENTALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ART: PARAESTHETIC STRATEGIES IN THE WORKS OF SALOMÉ LAMAS, JEREMY SHAW AND LOUIS HENDERSON

Thesis submitted to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to obtain a PhD Degree in Culture Studies

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Under the supervision of Isabel Capeloa Gil
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Abstract

This thesis intends to critically reflect on the particularities of the field of documentary film in the context of contemporary art. For that purpose, it seeks to mobilize various theoretical and aesthetical approaches to the field in order to answer the following questions: How do documentary film and contemporary art relate to each other? What are the aims and applications of self–reflexivity in documentary filmmaking? Drawing on Hito Steyerl's notion of "documentality," which she describes as being of crucial importance to the development of the documentary film in either becoming a form of governmental policy or a critical stance against it, it is asked: how can the concept of documentality be relevant to the study of the self–reflexive documentary? And finally, how does self–reflexive documentary filmmaking probe contemporary notions of documentality?

This thesis undertakes four distinct tasks: first, it draws a historical path that puts into perspective the conjunction between documentary and art. Secondly, it explores how documentary practice and theory have influenced one another and how this influence ultimately affects the boundaries of documentary film's very definition. Thirdly, through the direct engagement with the work of Salomé Lamas, Jeremy Shaw and Louis Henderson it conducts a close reading of films that experiment with the boundaries of documentary and fiction, and identifies different strategies as being "paraesthetic"– in that they do not blur the limits between fiction and documentary, but aim at challenging these limits beyond their normative understanding. Lastly, it engages with the Steyerlian concept of documentality in order to grasp the oscillations between, on the one hand, what constitutes documentary practice conventionally, and on the other, what constitutes documentary as a critical practice. Effectively, the dissertation is essentially a two-fold investigation: first, it aims to identify how contemporary artists are working with the frame of documentary and what strategies they employ in doing this; and secondly, the thesis aims to present these strategies as constituting a documentality of its own within contemporary art.

KEYWORDS: Documentary film, Contemporary Art, Documentality, Paraesthetics, Self-reflexivity, Parafiction, Post-Truth, Globalization

Resumo

O objetivo desta tese é fazer uma análise crítica acerca das particularidades que constituem o campo dos filmes documentais no contexto da arte contemporânea. Para tal, várias abordagens estéticas e teóricas ao campo do documentário serão convocadas, de forma a responder ao seguinte: de que modo o filme documental e a arte contemporânea se relacionam entre si? Quais são os objetivos da autorreflexão e de que modo se aplica esta ideia na realização de filmes documentais? A partir da ideia de "documentalidade" de Hito Steyerl - descrita como tendo uma importância crucial para o desenvolvimento do filme documental, seja como forma de política governamental ou como posicionamento crítico de oposição - pergunta-se ainda: de que modo pode o conceito de documentalidade ser relevante para o estudo do documentário que reflete sobre si próprio? E, por fim, como é que a realização de filmes documentais questiona noções contemporâneas de documentalidade?

Em suma, esta tese leva a cabo quatro tarefas distintas: primeiro, traça um percurso histórico que põe em perspetiva a ligação entre documentário e arte. Em segundo lugar, explora o modo como a prática e a teoria documentais se influenciam mutuamente e de que forma tal influência acaba por afetar as fronteiras da própria definição de filme documental. A terceira tarefa consiste num exercício de análise de filmes de Salomé Lamas, Jeremy Shaw e Louis Henderson, autores que experimentam os limites entre documentário e ficção. Através desta análise são identificadas diferentes estratégias como "paraestéticas", no sentido em que os filmes não diluem estes limites, mas procuram antes desafiar as fronteiras entre ficção e documentário, forçando-os para lá do seu entendimento normativo. Por fim, a tese utiliza o conceito Steyerliano de documentalidade de forma a apreender as oscilações que existem, por um lado, entre o que constitui a prática documental convencional e, por outro, em que consiste o documentário enquanto atividade crítica. Efetivamente, a presente dissertação é uma investigação que segue dois sentidos essenciais: começa por tentar identificar o modo como os artistas contemporâneos trabalham o documentário e que estratégias aplicam ao fazê-lo, além de procurar, de seguida, apresentar as estratégias encontradas como algo que constitui uma documentalidade própria no contexto da arte contemporânea.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Filme Documental, Arte Contemporânea, Documentalidade, Paraestética, Autorreflexão, Paraficção, Pós-verdade, Globalização

For Alva.

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Reality is more fabulous, more maddening, more strangely manipulative than fiction.
Trinh T. Minh–ha (1990)

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Introduction

From science to surveillance, from anthropology to digital media, from mainstream television to contemporary art spaces, the scope of application of documentary media are varied. All of these formats are shaped by cultural and political forces, just as they influence each other in many ways. However, each branch also relies on particular understandings of the relation between reality and its representation, audiovisual form and knowledge production, and aims at specific scopes and objectives. This thesis intends to critically reflect on the particularities of the field of documentary film's development in the context of contemporary art, and to analyze how it addresses a contemporary global condition. One of the specificities of documentary film in this context seems to be its resistance to categorization as a predetermined mode of representation. At the same time, however, it appropriates, utilizes, and rearticulates all other modes of documentary representation, especially those that claim to produce specific knowledge about the empirical and social world. It presents itself thus as an inherently unstable and complex object for analysis within the field of Culture Studies, even more so because the notion of what constitutes documentary is constantly challenged from within through self–reflexive practices. Therefore, approaching forms of documentary film which have appeared in the context of contemporary art means, first and foremost, recognizing it as an erratic object which resists static theorizations and definitions. Accordingly, this thesis will not attempt to provide a comprehensive definition of documentary film. Over the course of six chapters, it rather seeks to mobilize various theoretical and aesthetical approaches to the field in order to answer the following questions: How do documentary film and contemporary art relate to each other (chapter one)? What are the aims and scopes of self–reflexivity in documentary filmmaking? For what reason has contemporary art assumed such an important role in documentary's self–reflection? Which concepts may help us grasp the complex interrelations between reality and its visual and conceptual representations (chapter two)?

Through the direct engagement with works by Salomé Lamas, Jeremy Shaw and Louis Henderson, another set of questions are raised such as: how does the notion of

paraficton allow us to grasp a particular trait of contemporary documentary (chapter three)? What does the idea of a documentary about the future make us think (chapter four)? And, how can a documentary, created through organizing existing film material on the filmmaker's desktop, reveal some of the structure of affects of our transglobal society (chapter five)? Moreover, drawing on Hito Steyerl's notion of documentality (Steyerl 2003a, b), which she describes as being of crucial importance to the development of the documentary form in either turning into a governmental policy or becoming a critical stance against it, this work asks: how can the concept of documentality be applied to the study of the self–reflexive documentary? How does self–reflexive documentary filmmaking probe contemporary notions of documentality (chapter six)?

Much has already been written about the plasticity of the documentary form. This thesis, however, refutes the idea of plasticity as a tendency to blur boundaries with fiction. Instead, it claims that documentary and fiction are important frameworks for documentary filmmakers which allow them to articulate and rearticulate the boundaries between the two. My aim is thus to look at how filmmakers do not completely blur categories but subvert their frames in order to make them more inclusive. This dissertation is essentially about two things: firstly, it is about identifying how a select group of filmmakers are working with the frame of documentary, which artistic strategies are being employed and which conceptual framework they thereby challenge. Secondly, it presents the thesis that these strategies constitute a documentality of its own within contemporary art – a documentality that mirrors another kind of documentality that is structural to our contemporary society.

The initial proposal of this PhD project was to study images of migration as well as to question the way images migrate from one context to another. From the beginning, I aimed at exploring how some of the most compelling artistic practices today are reinventing divergent notions of documentary and, at the same time, opening spaces for critical engagement with, and resistance to, structures of cultural and political dominance. Although my focus has shifted in the course of my research, it maintains a particular concern for documentary films that deal with borders, wastelands and other in–between places. Also, the question of how artists propose to work with, through and against the conventional frames of documentary, and the question of the critical significance of such works, have been informing my work since the beginning of this project.

The focus of my project thus shifted: while at the beginning of my research, I placed emphasis on the study of the representation of concrete geographical borders and the implication of such borders on a local community, I later shifted my focus towards a more theoretical notion of the border as a site of self–reflection within a documentary practice. The work of Portuguese artist and filmmaker Salomé Lamas, and in particular her film *Extinction* (2017), has been my initial inspiration to analyze self–reflexive strategies dealing with both geographical and conceptual borders today. Although Lamas can be considered a young artist, she already has a prolific practice as a documentary filmmaker. In fact, several of her films incite us, in one way or another, to extend the limits of what we commonly understand as constituting documentary film. Therefore, her work offered the possibility to productively discuss potential strategies implemented to challenge the boundaries of documentary filmmaking today. While I initially intended to engage exclusively with Lamas' work, I later decided to place Lamas' work in a constellation with other documentary filmmakers whose work is primarily considered within the context of contemporary art. Therefore, I also engaged in extensive readings of particular films by Jeremy Shaw and Louis Henderson, and broadened the scope so as to include the works and writings of contemporary artists–researchers such as Trinh T. Minh–ha and Hito Steyerl.

One of the most significant challenges I was confronted with while engaging with Lamas' works, however, was that to develop an understanding of the type of filmmaking she was committed to, I needed to find an approach which was able to speak to the self–reflexive strategies that her practice involves. Therefore, I was initially interested in French novelist and essayist Nathalie Sarraute's notion of the *tropism* (1938) and specifically how she incorporated it as a writing method. Taken from natural sciences, the concept of tropism is defined as the ability of an organism to direct itself towards a stimulus. According to Sarraute, the notion of a tropism makes it possible to describe certain "movements [...] hidden under the commonplace, harmless appearances of every instant of our lives" that "slip through us on the frontiers of consciousness in the form of undefinable, extremely rapid sensations" (Sarraute 1938, vii). Rather than an analytic tool approaching its object from a distant perspective, she opts for a poetic response to the kind of movement self–reflexive practices are seeking. However, Sarraute's approach turned out not to be expansive enough to encompass the whole scope of my interest. Instead, a more appropriate approach for tackling the particular articulations of documentary film and contemporary art was the idea

of "paraesthetics" proposed by David Carroll (1987) in his eponymous book – a theoretical proposition that, to my knowledge, has not yet been considered in terms of discussing documentary strategies within contemporary art as proposed in this thesis.

In *Paraesthetics*, Carroll develops a theoretical tool to discern the particularity of certain moments in the works of philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean–François Lyotard, which constitute performative crossings of the boundaries between theory and art/literature (Carroll 1987, xi). The concept of paraesthetics draws attention to the intersection of differential logics operating in theory and art, thereby opening up new ways of reflecting on both. In my thesis, I intend to transpose this conceptual tool in order to address the intersection between art and documentary, or between documentary and fiction. The works discussed during this thesis involve a transgression between diverse conventionalized modes operating according to a certain logic, aesthetics or function. And it is precisely through the crossing of conventional boundaries that they produce a specific movement, a movement that can be considered self–reflexive. Moreover, those artworks also employ particular visual strategies that can be described as paraesthetical self–reflexive strategies.

Salomé Lamas, Jeremy Shaw and Louis Henderson are all artists currently living and working in Europe who work mainly with documentary film. I have had the opportunity to directly engage with all of them, to different degrees, during the process of developing this research project. There is an inclination to study the art/documentary conjunction from a Western standpoint, although non–Western perspectives are not excluded, nor do I intend this to be a division. There is no other reason for assuming this position than cultural, geographical and temporal proximity to their practices, and I believe it is this proximity that has allowed for the productive critical work this thesis proposes to take place. Often, their work engages critically with both Western and global politics and culture – even if for that purpose, artists such as Lamas and Henderson, in particular, tend to leave familiar grounds and search elsewhere for imperialist implications or that which resists it. They might even evoke imaginary places or experiment with unconventional modes of representation. Lamas, Shaw and Henderson are all mid–career artists who are actively involved within contemporary art and exhibit their work in museums, galleries and film festivals worldwide. In spite of these general common aspects that bind them together, their works represent entirely different approaches to documentary filmmaking. It is precisely because they

employ distinct documentary strategies that I consider them representative, a sample of a much wider field of artistic creation not only in Western cultures but also globally, that is still and increasingly influenced by documentary forms.

Commonly we experience self–reflexive works of art that tend to mirror some aspects of the artist's life. This is a topic that does not define the focus of my analysis. Instead, I have attempted the more elementary but still challenging exercise of film/object description. If we want to fully grasp the complex and diverse strategies that are undertaken in the frames of the documentary films these artists produce, then the attempt to methodologically describe what is happening in the films is an important step in this process. The attention that is required to register what is unfolding not only in the film's narrative but also in its formal structure is an underestimated component of cultural and film analysis. As this research evolved, I have become more convinced that close description is an essential task that informs all other learnings. Moreover, I would claim that it is through description that it is possible to gain an insight into the paraesthetic self–reflexive strategies embedded within each work. For that reason, each work is approached in its singularity and according to its own internal logic. It is, nevertheless, important to recognize the limits of description. The process of describing a film is indeed a deeply personal process that seeks to lead the reader to "see" something in the work that is relevant to a certain argument. Therefore, there are always other possible descriptions for the same work and each resulting in different outcomes.

The decision to include the works and writings of Hito Steyerl and Trinh T Minh–ha is based on a different concern. Their work is central to the development of this thesis as they allow a careful consideration of the way filmmakers can combine practice with a theoretical investigation, in order to unfold the politics of representations, particularly documentary representations. For instance, Steyerl (2007) proposes to problematize the significance of an increasing tendency within contemporary art to adopt documentary strategies. This thesis takes a close look into the critical insights she has to offer given that her observations tend to emerge from the constraints she, as an artist, encounters while producing artworks that also adopt documentary aesthetics. Steyerl organizes her thoughts on documentary within a logic of globalization and, taking the standpoint of documentality, she outlines the contours of this practice in a contemporary context. Steyerl's writing is particularly important for two parts of this thesis: the first chapter: "The Moving

Compositions of the Real", and the final chapter: "Towards a Theory of Documentality in Contemporary Art."

The first part of chapter one is a historical overview of some of the most vital and compelling discourses associated with documentary film and contemporary art – from the avant–garde to postcolonial movements, including feminist and independence movements. Drawing primarily on writings by Bill Nichols, Hal Foster and Okwui Enwezor, but also on other sources related to the writings from filmmakers such as Maya Deren and Trinh T Minh–ha, this section intends to situate the reader within a paradigm that has for a long time bound documentary and art together.

The rupture in tradition and the challenge to the autonomy of art set forth the central issue between traditional art and the avant–gardes. While the documentary form has been driven, from its beginnings, by an inherent claim to truth, verifiability and authenticity, the avant–gardes used the documentary as more than a tool, for them, it embodied a form and concept that needed to be reimagined. Throughout the course of this chapter, it is possible to observe how the documentary as a form has been continuously reimagined to resist both the established tradition of art and societal conventions. Therefore, it is argued that a continuous repurposing of some of the concerns that linked documentary and art together were already present in the early twentieth century and that the understanding of documentary film's early history allows us to situate the ongoing presence of documentary in art today.

The second part of chapter one discusses how documentary practices within contemporary art create a framework open to debate and, most importantly, allow for an examination of the current conditions within the context of globalism. This section questions how artists today are responding to the post–truth age by employing documentary forms. Furthermore, it considers how documentary film has critiqued as well as informed this very notion of post–truth, and examines how it has contributed to guiding the documentary into speculative realms. For this purpose, I discuss Steyerl's text "Documentary Uncertainty" (2007) in relation to Erika Balsom's "The Reality–Based Community" (2017). The outcome of this encounter is the discovery of two contrasting discourses currently in use. Steyerl, on the one hand, engages in a formalist criticism focused on documentary filmmaking's structural purposes, addressing uncertainty as a principle that works within and through this practice. Balsom, on the other hand, subscribes to a realist model that sees in the recording of reality the possibility of reparation and redemption, proposing explicitly the rehabilitation

of observational documentary in order to counter the politics of fakery. Though their positions are very different, Steyerl and Balsom agree that currently, we live in a risk society in which accountability is not taken for granted, and that certain contemporary globalized media circuits have tended to encourage alternative facts and as such have perpetuated anxiety, paranoia, and mistrust. Moreover, both Steyerl and Balsom maintain that documentary practices provide an opportunity to investigate this social and political environment. Lamas, Shaw and Henderson's documentary films feature within this thesis as possible scenarios through which this contemporary condition can be assessed from different angles.

In a similar vein, Minh–ha's practice, through both her films and writing, constitute the focus of chapter two, which addresses her creative process as a paradigmatic example of paraesthetic self–reflexivity. The chapter "Paraesthetic Self–Reflexivity in Trinh T. Minh–ha's Documentary Filmmaking and Theory. (Or) *When* is Self–Reflexivity?" intends to find out whether mechanisms of self–reflection have any inherent aesthetic or critical meaning in themselves. Through an overview of her work – and more specifically an analysis of how Minh–ha positions her practice throughout several published interviews, it is possible to respond positively to this question. Within the interviews, Minh–ha describes the mechanisms of self–reflection she adopts in her practice – although not intended to be prescriptive (Minh–ha 1999, 213), it is possible to observe how she is engaged in a practice that constantly challenges the limits of the categories she works with. For example, Minh–ha avoids defining her films as documentaries, opting instead for calling them 'boundary events' (Minh–ha 2005, 28), thereby referring to the idea that she operates in the boundaries – sometimes referred to as frames or borders in this thesis – between categories of documentary and fiction. Yet, these boundaries are not limited to the genre itself, very often she crosses boundaries between self and other, local and global, personal and political, etc.

Minh–ha's notion of the 'boundary event' resonates with Carroll's (1987) theory of paraesthetics in the sense that it also proposes a movement between boundaries – in his view a self–reflexive movement with critical significance. The conception of paraesthetics indicates the limits of categories established by cultural and social aesthetic practices, either resulting in theoretical activity or in artistic objects and identifies the benefits of a mutual transformation attributed to both when these limits are crossed. Carroll argues that authors such as Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard – to whom I would like to add Minh–ha – often resort

to aesthetics in order to problematize the limits of theory and art (Carroll 1987, 21). How they do this is variable – we can infer this difference by the discrepancy between the authors he cites as examples. This chapter intends to demonstrate, however, that paraesthetics is an effective tool to identify the different ways in which the crossing between frames, boundaries or borders of different categories can occur – especially categories that work according to different logics. Normally, this crossing is performed between previously established boundaries that are disrupted; and, by being disrupted, they are also problematised.

One of the fundamental findings resulting from this approach taken through the idea of paraesthetics, is that existing categories do not necessarily blur or disappear. Instead, it is argued that these very definitions are important for the authors (filmmakers) working with them, for it is in relation to the categories or genres that the critical potential of self–reflexivity is directed. In other words, the boundaries between categories offer a space for reflection and by critically working within or around these boundaries it is possible to shift their limits or make them more porous and inclusive, not necessarily to break them down altogether. Minh–ha, but also Lamas, Shaw and Henderson, produce documentaries that shift the limits that conventionally define these forms. Therefore, rendering the frames of documentary more inclusive and porous to other elements that traditionally sit outside the frames of documentary – such as fiction, for example. In the second chapter, I present the theoretical backbone of this thesis, which also provides practical implications in the close reading of the films by Lamas, Shaw and Henderson where moments of paraesthetical self–reflexivity emerge throughout the descriptions of the works.

Each of the following three chapters presents a selection of films by Lamas, Shaw and Henderson. Each particular film is discussed in its singularity, I introduced the films by first describing my own personal encounter with that specific work. This personal introduction appears systematically at the beginning of these chapters in italics, detached from the rest of the text. The purpose of this introductory note, in addition to my initial impressions of the work, is primarily to provide the readers with an overview of one specific example of the context in which the work was presented. By doing so, a microcosm is enacted to illustrate the major problematic in the opening section, delimiting a space that will be saturated in the course of my analysis. The initial description of the films also indicates the key points within the film as a whole, indicating different paraesthetic self–reflexive strategies embedded within the work. Hence, these opening descriptions attempt to

create a mirror to reflect back upon some of the pivotal moments of the film's narrative, revealing both my first principal assumptions and the critical strategies that will be used further in the close reading.

Chapter three, "The Parafictional Documentary", focuses on two films by Lamas: (*Extinction* (2017) and *Fatamorgana* (2018). In *Extinction*, Lamas seeks to problematize the notion of borders. Located in the fringes of Europe, in the territories of what was once the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the filmmaker develops a character resorting to an unusual assortment of strategies described here as parafictional (combining fiction and nonfiction). In a dialogical structure, the film shifts between the real and the imaginary as we follow the main character Kolya, who declares himself to be of Transnistrian nationality – thus identifying himself with a country that officially does not exist. In the film, he plays a double role: that of himself and Ryszard Kapuściński (1932–2007) – a Polish journalist and novelist, who in 1993 published a novel reporting his travels between the former USSR borders, at a time when these borders were being redefined to become what is now Russia, leaving several frozen conflicts until today unresolved. Lamas sets out a series of creative constraints by filming Kolya as they attempt to cross several borders throughout this region and that spark decisive moments at the borders' checkpoints, thereby revealing a tense environment of suspicion and uncertainty that surrounds Kolya's status as Transnistrian. The main emphasis within this chapter is to articulate and define Kolya's character as a parafictional subject and to draw a parallel between the crossing of physical borders and borders between reality and fiction as a parafictional strategy, thus questioning what the parafictional subject might mean for documentary?

The second part of chapter two focuses on another of Lamas' recent films, *Fatamorgana,* to reiterate the question above by looking at other ways in which parafictional strategies manifest in Lamas' work. This time Lamas creates a political parody divided into two parts, which is set in contemporary Lebanon. The film's first part involves interviews with five actresses as part of the audition process in order to select one to play the part of Hanan, the main character who will feature in the second part of the film. The actresses are not only interviewed about their motivations to play the role of Hanan, but also asked to react to the film's script provided to them in advance. In the second part, we see this script being performed by one of the actresses. The scripted and unscripted elements of the film are problematized in the chapter by calling attention to how the interplay between these two

elements already envision a crossing between borders, temporalities and affects that shift from fiction to reality, and vice–versa, within the film's structure. The second part of the film is set in a wax museum in Beirut. Here we find Hanan, the main character, engaging in a fictional conversation with key political figures, both historic and contemporary, about post–World War II global history as well as sharing personal stories. This part of the film is saturated with information, merging and overlapping multiple languages and levels of textuality, as well as with a rich collection of fictional and nonfictional material. Moreover, it integrates a vast array of references and (in)direct citations through adding footnotes to what is said in the conversation. This chapter focuses on a discussion of the parafictional effect these footnotes have in the film, which do more than provide information – they mimic the means by which such information is mediated while playing with our expectations of the veracity of such information. Thus, the footnotes create an impression of trust, the feeling of being offered a factual basis. At the same time, they overload the viewer with information, thereby provoking the feeling that it is impossible to process all this information and to distinguish between what is factual and what is not. The performative outcomes of the parafictions used in both films are addressed later in the chapter, which concludes with an attempt to situate these strategies within a broader context of post–truth.

In the realm of contemporary art, the question of what distinguishes documentary from fiction does not always have the same significance as it does if we look at other disciplines such as science or anthropology. Referring to documentary film as an art form, film philosopher David LaRocca (2017) writes, "[d]ocumentary film is just another form of poetic imitation, in its variety of instances and complexity of fabrication, it is just as much caught up with the limitations—and effects—of mimetic art, including fiction film" (LaRocca 2017, 4). The question of whether a work of art refers accurately to reality or not takes on a similar bearing in the field of art if we can accept that art has the capability of deceiving, which contrasts with the notion that documentary tells the truth. The study of the connection between documentary form and artistic creation can be seen as a study of these opposing forces: the power to deceive and the ability to tell the truth.

Though the French philosopher Jacques Rancière is generally more interested in working with the notion of fiction film than with documentary as a genre, in his text "Documentary Fictions" (2001) he states: "Documentary cinema is not bound to the "real" sought after by the classical norms of affinities and verisimilitude that exert so much force

on so–called fiction cinema. This gives the documentary much greater leverage to play around with the consonance and dissonance between narrative voices, or with the series of period images with different provenances and signifying power" (Rancière 2001, 161). The idea here is that documentary is perhaps freer to combine heterogeneous materials, as well as different temporalities, in order to develop an argument about its subject – in particular, absent or unattainable subjects. While this could be contested, it does provide an entry point to consider how the 'future' may feature as a subject for documentary film. Chapter four: "Documentary future–tense, *The Quantification Trilogy*," considers precisely what the future–tense in a documentary film could imply. This tripartite chapter is made up of a close reading of Jeremy Shaw's enigmatic trilogy of experimental documentaries: *Quickeners* (2014), which portrays an event set around five hundred years into the future; *Liminals* (2017) which takes place around seventy years from now, and *I Can See Forever* (2018), which is based on a speculative event set in 2023 seen through its resulting effects twenty–five years later. As we move forward in the trilogy, we move closer to our present time. The trilogy alternates between utopian and dystopian landscapes, in each of *The Quantification Trilogy's* films, the trauma of human extinction is accompanied by a sense of death drive and hope at the same time. E. Ann Kaplan (2015) assigns the meaning of "trauma future–tense" to the oscillation between utopian and dystopian narratives and the anxiety that this oscillation causes as they become closer to the present day. Based on the anticipation of human extinction and the possibility of a post–human existence, all three films depict a crisis of faith. In each film, fictional turning points or epistemological shifts are directly linked to biological changes and modes of knowledge production in different imagined human societies. Each film also contains two main layers of textuality: that of the narrator describing the event (through a seemingly neutral/objective voice–over) and the event itself (which aesthetically appears to be already outdated due to Shaw's choice of cameras and recording technology, despite addressing a future time period). Additionally, the process of making the films follows a progression, starting with scientific observation and ending with artistic experimentation. Even with an obvious break from conventional documentary filmmaking, the trilogy establishes its own convention with its approach.

This chapter discusses how the documentary frame is shaped and transformed on a variety of levels. The films employ self–reflexive paraesthetic strategies that push the boundaries of conventional documentary practices. Among these strategies are

détournements of documentary imagery, ventriloquisms of characters in interviews, and speculations on the concepts of ecstatic truth (Herzog 2010) and liminality (Turner 1977; 1999), all produced through a method of "assisted vérité" (Shaw 2020, 23) in which the filmmaker assumes his intervention even if the resulting images resemble conventional documentary. Overall, the trilogy can be considered a form of "documentary fiction," in the sense Rancière (2001) thought of it: a practice that disrupts the doctrine of truth associated with certain images, thereby producing an open–ended space able to host infinite relations. One can see the documentary future–tense in this context as a series of images linked to different chronological periods that gradually approximate our present.

The temporal disjunction observed in this series of documentaries by Shaw illustrates the meaning with which this thesis approaches the notion of the contemporary, and, by extension, contemporary art. Drawing on Peter Osborne's *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013) and Boris Groys "Comrades of Time" (2009), the contemporary is understood here as a coming together "of times" and "with time" (see chapter two). Implicit is the idea that the contemporary is a projection of unity even if it is a unity that is internally disjunctive. As such, the contemporary often resembles a utopian ideal, insofar as it imaginatively projects nonexistent unity onto the disjunctive relations between contemporaneous times. In his book on the contemporary, Osborne (2013) notes that the contemporary projects into existence a concept of time that is, in principle, futuristic or anticipatory. Therefore, the concept of the contemporary is intrinsically speculative because it anticipates the future in its very structure: "it functions as if the speculative horizon of the unity of human history had been reached" (Osborne 2013, 23). As he explains, by presenting a unity that doesn't exist, the contemporary creates a fiction of unity, in other words, it creates a narrative that brings the disjunctive pieces into harmony.

For Groys (2009), being "with time" means, among other things, that the contemporary, instead of serving as a bridge from the past to the future, is a place where the past and the future should be simultaneously questioned and re–articulated. An experience present in both Lamas and Shaw's films, and more evidently in the latter as it not only rearticulates past temporalities, but also projects the past into the future and vice–versa. With regards to the making of his films where the past is projected into the future and vice–versa, Shaw (2020) states that: "The works comment largely on the present, told through images seemingly from the past, presented as the future. There is a perpetual cognitive dissonance

attached to the use of media and its position in time" (Shaw, 2020: 24).

The conflation of different temporalities and geographical places is again observed in Henderson's film *All That is Solid* (2014), which is in focus in chapter five. The film uses Henderson's own computer desktop to create a juxtaposition of heterogeneous materials displaying multiple temporalities and geographies, as well as diverse discursive formations. By connecting information sourced from his computer and the internet, Henderson creates a narrative by merging images he has previously captured in Agbogbloshie, Accra, the largest e–waste site on the planet, with images found online of one of Google's data centers, one of the largest data centers today. The juxtaposition signals the exploitation of racialized workers in postcolonial wastelands resulting from predominantly Western, consumer economies. Drawing primarily on the writing of sociologist Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018), this chapter aims at discussing the film's images through the lens of "racial capitalism." It is argued that Henderson uses the desktop to replicate a "structure of feeling" (Williams 1954) that plays a role in perpetuating labor inequality, thus furthering racial capitalism's affective relations (Bhattacharyya 2018). In essence, the film presents racial capitalism not by defining it but by evoking how it is sensed.

Moreover, the desktop's database, in this film, is interpreted as a "symbolic form" (Manovich 1999), of cultural expression that competes to replace the dominance of other traditional narratives. In the film, the database serves as the vehicle to enable access to a complex set of relations, the "structure of feeling" implicit in actual practices of racial capitalism that are often invisible. Hence, the desktop's database takes the function of a paraesthetic critical strategy that bridges these relations, thus making them affective for the viewer. To some extent, the film employs elements of paraesthetic strategies similar to those identified in the works of Lamas and Shaw discussed in previous chapters. The desktop in Henderson's film acts in a parafictional way: it pertains to our everyday experience, however it changes its orientation when regarded as an aesthetic tool within a work of art (cf. chapter 3). Its purpose is to model a para–experience, where in the film we watch Henderson working on the desktop, opening and closing video files, only to discover that several visual effects are generated simultaneously. Henderson thus applies the practice of "assisted verité" (Shaw 2020, 23) by manipulating the desktop while maintaining an aesthetic of non–intervention (cf. chapter 4). Furthermore, it is because the desktop represents the "database as a symbolic form" that it prefigures a paraesthetic critical strategy to reflect on conventional modes of

documentary representation.

Chapters three, four and five, discuss examples of films engaging with experimental documentary forms. Through a close reading of these films, paraesthetic self–reflexive strategies are highlighted in order to problematize issues related to borders, wastelands, and speculative futures. Moreover, these strategies point at and expand the limits of what is conventionally associated with documentary filmmaking. By analyzing the films of Salomé Lamas, Jeremy Shaw and Louis Henderson, we observe how they have adopted forms of expression generally associated with documentary and, at the same time, transgressed documentary definitions.

Chapter six: "Towards a Theory of Documentality in Contemporary Art," expands on the theoretical terrain already initiated by Hito Steyerl in "Documentarism as Politics of Truth" (Steyerl 2003a) and "Politics of Truth: Documentarism in the Art Field" (Steyerl 2003b), by specifically focussing on her theory of documentality mentioned in both texts. This theory of documentality is further developed with readings on Michel Foucault's concepts of "governmentality" and "politics of truth," as well Maurizio Ferraris' book *Documentality: Why is it Important to Leave Traces* (2013) and Vicky Bell's "Between documentality and imagination: Five theses on curating the violent past" (2016) that present us with an insightful take on documentality and how it plays into curatorial approaches to the memory of state violence.

The idea of documentality, for Steyerl (2003a, b), presents a double–bind: on the one hand, it is correlated with conventional procedures for the production of truth; and, on the other hand, when placed in the context of contemporary art, documentality takes on a critical stance, problematizing how these procedures are produced. Even if Steyerl assumes two different outcomes for documentality that change according to context of production, she argues that they cannot be completely separated since the latter reflects the former. As an example, Steyerl observes that conventional documentary images have historically been closely associated with technologies of control, surveillance, normalization, and other police techniques, which explains why colonial and fascist regimes created their own imagery closely related to the ethnographic gaze, racist politics and militarism (Steyerl 2003a). Yet, Steyerl argues that documentality can also be seen as an attempt to both counter and problematize dominant forms of truth production and government, such as the ones just mentioned. According to her theory, documentary practices, when shown/produced in the

context of contemporary art, produce their *own* documentality (Steyerl 2003b). Documentality in contemporary art can be called an activity, more precisely a dissensual activity (Rancière 2010), which transforms the lines along which conventional modes of documentary filmmaking are constructed, introducing new variables into its production. This thesis introduces the films of Salomé Lamas, Jeremy Shaw and Louis Henderson, as examples of documentary filmmaking that pertains to this kind of documentality, since they reflect on certain modes of documentary production that have been stabilized or normalized, and thereby challenge the frames within which they exist.

Chapter 1

The Moving Compositions of the Real

Part I: Documentary Film from the Avant–Garde to Postcolonial Movements

> What is art? What is documentary? Shows like Documenta 11 ultimately redefine the parameters of the 'artistic.' But while everyone is surely bored by the 'Is it art or something else?' question, one does crave, amid all the exempla of the documentary mode at this exhibition, works that are less problematic in their genre typology, works full of sensuousness and color. Or one wants the definitely nondocumentary, imaginative, sexually focused yet politically charged sculptural installations (Linda Nochlin in *Artforum*, September 2002).

To circumscribe the documentary form within the field of art, it is vital to focus on some of the crucial historical, discursive, aesthetic and political dimensions binding them together. Drawing on Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real* (1996), I propose that the art/documentary conjunction is a "continual process of protension and retention," a layered project involving both the reconstruction of the past and the anticipation of the future (Foster 1996, 29). The relation between art and documentary can be seen as a series of 'returns' with renewed questions both in practice and theory. In what follows, I argue that a continuous repurposing of some of the concerns that linked documentary and art together were already present in the early twentieth century and that an understanding of documentary film's early history helps us to situate the ongoing presence of documentary in contemporary art today.

In her book, *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*, Elizabeth Cowie (2011) writes, "[t]he moral—and political—requirement to distinguish between the real and illusory is central to modern Western culture and is part of a privileging of the serious over illusion, the imagined, and fantasy, which are usually assumed to be the domain of fiction" (Cowie 2011, 21). It could be added that the distinction between documentary and fiction is of critical importance to contemporary Western culture. That which is seen as being serious, factual, real, is usually considered more valuable than that which is illusion, fantasy, and imagined

reality, all of which are ascribed to the domain of fiction. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious, in which fantasy and dreams play a central role, challenged this division already at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Freud (1958), unconscious desires and imagination are not mere auxiliary areas of the human condition, but intermingled with consciousness on many levels; they have real physical effects on every subject and vice versa (224). Later, Jacques Lacan extended the challenge Freud had first posed to the separation between reality and fantasy through his tripartite distinction between the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. These terms are not directly related to what is commonly called 'everyday reality' – which would more likely fall into Lacan's category of the Symbolic. The "Lacanian Real," contrary to that, refers to the "unrepresentable," the traumatic, that which interrupts the logical order of the Symbolic (Lacan 1977).[1] It is with reference to this 'unrepresentable real' that art critic and historian Hal Foster writes in *The Return of the Real* (1996) that recent artistic practice has demonstrated: "a turn to the real as evoked through the violated body and/or the traumatic subject, and a turn to the referent as grounded in a given identity and/or a sited community" (Foster 1996: xviii). Foster's use and understanding of the Lacanian Real is central to the discussion that follows; it has helped to draw a relation between the historic avant–gardes, postcolonial movements in Western art traditions, and the moving compositions of the real afforded by documentary film.

The question of how documentary film pierces through the field of art can be traced back to several key moments, namely the avant–garde, feminist and colonial independence movements that occured during the twentieth century. Another key moment within the specific context of contemporary art, is Documenta 11 (1998–2002), curated by the Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor in Kassel, where Documenta happens every five years since 1955 – a major exhibition that once again brought to the stage the discussion about the art/documentary conjunction. As typified by the quote at the beginning of this chapter, one of the biggest claims against the work curated by Enwezor in 2002, was that his curatorial approach too heavily focused on documentary film practice/s.[2] While this could be read as a negative critique of the curatorial program of the exhibition, there might be a positive side

[1] I will return to Lacan and his concept of the real in the section with the title 'The real and the abject.'

[2] See, for instance, Linda Nochlin's (2002) review of Documenta 11 in *ARTFORUM*, from which the opening quote was extracted; see also a review of the exhibition by Kim Levin (2002), which the author titled 'The CNN Documenta'; and the review of the exhibition by Michael Kimmelman (2002) for *The New York Times*, with the title 'Critic's Notebook; Global Art Show with an Agenda,' which implies that there is a political agenda behind the documentary approach in the exhibition.

to it. The quotation above demonstrates some people's understanding of the qualities that separate 'art' from 'documentary,' where art's sensuousness, colorfulness, and imaginativeness contrast with documentary's dryness, grayness, and didacticism. Crucial here is a binary reading of art and documentary as opposites, one illusionist and the other realist, a battle between abstraction and representation. This reading reduces the documentary form to a journalistic practice, which has led to its interpretation as patronizing or educative. Whereas conceiving the documentary as an artistic practice can reveal its sensuous, colorful and imaginative approach to issues that can be framed as political. In what follows, I focus specifically on the art/documentary conjunction and the main theoretical discourses devoted to this practice.

1.1.1. The myth of origin in documentary's history

The art/documentary conjunction is not a 'new' phenomenon. If it appears to us as new(ish), perhaps this is due to the fact that most of the historical background to the current art/documentary dynamic tends to see art and documentary as independent fields of culture, even as opposites,[3] and thus ignores for example the discussion surrounding the Surrealist notion of documentary (including, for example, Georges Bataille's *Documents* project (1929–1930), the nature films of Jean Painlevé, such as *The Sea Horse* (1933), and Maya Deren's experimental film explorations), as well as the Dadaist and Situationist ones. Moreover, it is devoid of any systematic reflections on the films by Alexander Kluge, Trinh T Minh–ha, and Werner Herzog, just to name a few, and even the prolific field of essay films, which have been circulating in the field of art ever since, at least, Jean Vigo's *A Propos de Nice* (1930). This lack indicates that a systematic investigation of the ways in which notions of 'documentary' emerged alongside art is still underdeveloped.

When Olivier Lugon (2009) states that "'[d]ocumentary' is often taken as the antonym to 'artistic,' yet it stems primarily from the artistic field—beyond art, yet very much a part of it," (35), he is mainly pointing at an ambivalence that exists at the core of documentary's definition. It is generally accepted that the documentary is born out of a

[3] See, for instance, modernist art historian Clement Greenberg in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, whose seminal critique of the status of documentary as art influenced most critics until the 1980s (Greenberg 2008, 60).

concern with the real, historical world, in order to provide reliable and authentic information about its subject matter. This assumption is sustained by a myth that has proliferated up until very recently, namely that the origin of documentary coincided with cinema's own origin in 1895 and Louis Lumière's first films (Barsam 1973; Ellis 1989; Rotha 1966, 1952; Winston 1995).

Bill Nichols, who is recognised as one of the first authors to develop an academic study of documentary film, proposes a different take on documentary's early history: "rather than the story of an early birth and gradual maturation, the documentary film only takes form as an actual practice in the 1920s and 1930s" together with international avant–garde movements (Nichols 2001, 581–582).[4] Rejecting the idea of a documentary origin, he emphasizes the importance of modernist techniques to both the historical avant–gardes and those documentaries that set the documentary tradition in the truest sense of the word. For Nichols, documentary is the result of the convergence of three underlying features: "photographic realism, narrative structure, and modernist fragmentation," which comes along with "a new emphasis on the rhetoric of social persuasion" (Nichols 2001, 582) – just like for the historical avant–gardes, modernist fragmentation is one of the most subversive elements with the greatest disruptive potential. "It is the acts of contestation, more than the acts of affirmation, that dissociate documentary tradition from the work of photo leagues in the 1930s and from newsreels in the 1970s" (Nichols 2001, 552). Because the documentary has such a radical potential, it can be considered an "unruly ally" for governmental power. Accordingly, Nichols states, "[d]ocumentary, like the avant–garde film, casts the familiar in a new light, not always that desired by the existing governments" (Nichols 2001, 583).

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[4] A more recent study about the relationship between documentary film and the avant–garde can be found in the book *Avant–Doc: Intersections of Documentary and Avant–Garde Cinema* by Scott MacDonald (2014). MacDonald, however, reads the origins of the avant–garde movement and of documentary filmmaking together with the origins of cinema and even with that of early experimentations with photography by authors such as Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne–Jules Marey. He states, "I began to realize the obvious: that the histories of avant–garde film and documentary have been intersecting in a wide variety of interesting ways since the dawn of cinema" (Macdonald 2015: 23), which goes against Bill Nichols's argument mentioned above and which I build upon. Despite this argument about origins, it is interesting that MacDonald identifies a practice that he terms the 'avant–doc,' a confluence that merges documentary's interest in 'real phenomena' with the avant–garde's preoccupation with exploring new topics and new forms of representation interested in texture, form, and abstraction. He asserts that "the current value of the term is its inclusiveness, rather than its designation of any particular approach, though generally speaking, the films included can be understood as explicit or implicit critiques of commercial media and the audience that has developed for it" (Macdonald 2015: 20). More specific issues about the documentary and avant–garde conjunction are explored within the set of interviews that gives body to the book. One idea prevails, if loosely tackled: the avant–garde movements and the documentary form work against the norms and conventions of their time, including documentary's own norms and conventions, which I consider valid to my discussion.

Nichols (2001) explains that the official narrative of documentary's history maintains that it was film critic and filmmaker John Grierson who, in 1929, approximately thirty years after the first Lumière films, had coined the term and created an institutional basis for documentary (581). Grierson founded a filmmaking department within the Empire Marketing Board and thus started the first official documentary film movement. For Grierson, who was committed to finding an institutional basis for documentary counting on state support, it was the modernist techniques of fragmentation together with a new order of understanding that documentary film proposes that represented a threat because they afford the documentary with the capacity to promote radical change. From Grierson's perspective, this was not desirable. Instead, he intended to use documentary film to address issues that are of public interest and that would, at the same time, affirm the power of the state in relation to such issues. Grierson turned out to be more inclined to use documentary for propagandistic purposes than what his famous definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson 1966, 45) might allure.[5] As Nichols (2001) notes, what is at stake here is a tension between different forces and agendas surrounding documentary practices at the time it was given a name. Grierson's resistance in relating his definition of the documentary to the avant–garde might reveal that he was all too aware of documentary's disruptive potential as an artistic mode of practice. In Grierson's view, the documentary needed to be disciplined in order to bring to light the political and social issues that served the ideological agenda of the nation–state (Nichols 2001, 583).

Considering how modernist fragmentation influenced the emergence of the documentary form in the period between the wars is a much more productive line of investigation than to attempt to trace it back to the birth of cinema. This is because, as Nichols (2001) notes, the modernist avant–gardes of the 1920s provide both representational techniques and a social context conducive to a documentary movement that differs from the

[5] One problem with the discussion of Grierson and his real intentions when he opted for the term documentary to describe an emerging film practice is that he changed his position. If, at the beginning of his career in the 1920s, Grierson supported artistic claims of documentary such as "the creative treatment of actuality," and was interested in films that revealed an otherwise hidden truth and were very much against simple information, later he became more and more institutionalized. In the mid 1960s, we hear Grierson making statements such as the following: "There is money for films which will make box–office profits, and there is money for films which will create propaganda results. These only. They are the strict limits within which cinema has had to develop and will continue to develop" (Grierson 1966, 165). This illustrates his take on documentary from a much more institutional point of view.

Griersonian tradition (591).[6] Moreover, Foster argues that the drive of the avant–garde was to transform the institution of art according to the materialist practices of a revolutionary society, as did Russian Constructivism, or to attack its formal conventions, as did Dada. Thus, in both cases, the drive was to reposition art in relation not only to mundane space–time but also to social practices (Foster 1996, 4–5). To touch the realm of the social and to intervene in it was the avant–gardes' aim and considering this ambition artists of the avant–gardes agreed that the documentary form is effective to achieving this. Documentary's claim to truth, verifiability, assertion, and authenticity, represented a form that needed to be reimagined.

Despite their aesthetic and political differences – the European avant–garde, with its Dadaist readymades and Surrealist interventions, and the Soviet avant–garde, with its constructivist structure[7] – both practices contest the bourgeois principles of autonomous art and the concept of authorship. The central problematic between traditional art and the avant–garde is established by recognizing the discontinuity in tradition and publically contesting the autonomy of art. Two well–known examples of this discontinuity are what once was referred to as "The Duchamp Effect" (Buskirk and Nixon 1994), and Walter Benjamin's famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935).

The first relates to the legacy of French artist Marcel Duchamp, a pioneer of Dada, who threw into question traditional ideas about what art is and how it should be made. Duchamp had some success as a painter immediately before World War I in Paris, but he gave this formal practice up after a short while, explaining, "I was interested in ideas – not merely in visual products" (Duchamp 1946, 20). As an alternative the artist selected mass–produced, commercially available objects, many of which were utilitarian, and titled them as pieces of art. He declared to have opted for everyday objects "based on a reaction of visual

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[6] Nichols states: "The modernist avant–garde of the 1920s introduces a third contribution to the appearance of a documentary film form. It is this milieu, with its own formal conventions and social purpose, its own amalgam of advo–cates and practitioners, institutions and discourses, and its own array of assumptions and expectations on the part of audience and artists that provides both representational techniques and a social context conducive to a documentary movement" (Nichols 2001, 591). This statement is central to the relation between art and documentary that follows.

[7] These are in fact generalizations of the avant–garde movement, and although early histories of cinema and of documentary do not acknowledge any formative work prior to World War II beyond the European and Soviet context, there are traces that documentary and avant–garde formations existed in Mexico and other places during this period. One example of its recognition within Western and Soviet contexts comes from Aurelio de los Reyes's 'The Silent Cinema,' in *Mexican Cinema* (Reyes 1995, 63–78), after which much work in this field was made.

indifference, with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste…." (Duchamp as quoted in *The Art of Assemblage: A Symposium* 1961). Thereby, Duchamp changed the way we think about the artist's role as a producer of original objects with his readymades, which he defines as "ordinary object[s] elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist" (Duchamp 1961). Duchamp's helped to define the idea that it is the artist who decides what an object of art is or can be. The second example, highlights how the mechanical reproduction of art changes the very notion of the aura surrounding the singular art object. Benjamin states,

> Insofar as the age of technological reproducibility separated art from its basis in cult, all semblance of art's autonomy disappeared forever. But the resulting change in the function of art lay beyond the horizon of the nineteenth century. And even the twentieth, which saw the development of film, was slow to perceive it. (...) [T]he difficulties which photography caused for traditional aesthetics were child's play compared to those presented by film (Benjamin 2006, 109 – original emphasis).

In this text, Benjamin argues for a complete rethinking of the categories of the aesthetic, for the invention of photography and film profoundly challenged the appearance of art and thus its function in society. According to him, mechanical reproduction expands the limits of art, emancipating it from notions of originality and the aura which surrounds a singular object. The manner in which contemporary perception has changed can be thought of as the decay of the aura. One of the main changes of mechanical reproduction is a change in how we think and perceive reality: "The alignment of reality with the masses and of the masses with reality is a process of immeasurable importance for both thinking and perception" (Benjamin 2006, 105).

The question of how to approach reality,[8] which seems so urgent to us still today, was already being posed by artists and theorists that marked avant–garde movements, such as

[8] With this I am not implying that they were the first to pose this question, for the question of how to represent reality can be traced back to the origins of Western philosophy if we like. David Larocca in his introductory text to the book he edited *The Philosophy of Documentary Film: Image, Sound, Fiction, Truth* (2017) acknowledges this question as one of the oldest philosophical questions and intimately related to the quarrel between philosophy and poetry: "Plato would say the seventh art is, doubtless, part of the regime of poetic expression and as such is dubious as a resource for truth, or the proper guidance of the (private) soul [psyche] and the (public) city [polis]. What of the quarrel remains then? (...) Perhaps nowhere in the broad expanse of types of film is the old "quarrel between philosophy and poetry" more evident—and also more vitally relevant— than in the genre or mode of film known as documentary. Put tersely, the nature of documentary for

German theatre director and poet Bertold Brecht and Hungarian Marxist philosopher, literary historian and critic György Lukács. Rethinking what realism is, was considered at the time to be of utmost urgency, for it had to respond to Nazi Germany's cultural, social and racial politics. Thus, realism, for both Brecht and Lukács, raises a question that goes beyond aesthetics it is a fundamental political, philosophical and artistic problem. There are, however, well–documented differences in their understanding of realism.[9] Lukács defends the idea of reality as totality and of realism as its comprehensive reflection, rejecting all kinds of modernist strategies of fragmentation. This idea was criticized by Brecht in "Against George Lukács" (Brecht in Taylor ed. 1980). Brecht tackled the problem of realism from a different perspective: he asked whether it could be possible that the reality at stake cannot be understood as a whole because capitalism and modernity have themselves transformed it to such an extent that it no longer makes sense as a whole. In this case, realistic art that aims to represent reality as totality would necessarily be inadequate. Therefore, Brecht defended the idea that artistic forms should adapt to represent the current socio–political environment, otherwise they would only produce an illusionary and thus ideological vision of the present.

While their take on realism differs, both Brecht and Lukács agree that in order to raise awareness of a specific socio–political situation, reality must be shown in its dynamic state. It is the intention of realistic art in a Marxian sense to transmit a specific, though complex and dialectical political content, either through a reflexive representation of the underlying forces generating historical dialectics or through an enhanced experience of estrangement. "What is at stake in this [approach to] realism is thus the very problem of reality itself, as well as the relation between reality, artistic production and the latter's potential to mobilize the public in order to engage in a course of political action" (Baumann 2017, 116). Thus, the question of what realism is becomes transversal to several disciplines and practices such as art, documentary and philosophy, which take the field of the social and political as a common ground to think this question through.

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many theorists involves a debate about what is real (or authentic) on film and what is fake (or fabricated); the binary interestingly, if stubbornly, persists" (Larocca 2017, 3–4).

[9] See for instance "Aesthetics and Politics" (1980), a collection of existing texts by Ernst Bloch, George Lukács, Bertold Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno, with an afterword by Frederik Jameson, which gathers the main discussion on realism that became known as the "Expressionist debate," a debate that was set within the left–wing journal *Das Wort* in 1937/38. See also, Stefanie Baumann's "Prisms of Realism. On the Question of Emancipation and Authority in Art (Lukács, Brecht, Adorno, Kluge)" (2017), which offers an insight into the main differences and similarities in the approach to realism made by these authors.

A representative and well–known example of an avant–garde documentary is "The Man with the Movie Camera" (1929) by Dziga Vertov, a Soviet avant–garde documentary filmmaker and film theorist whose filming practices and theories motivated the *cinéma vérité* of the 1960s in France, as well as observational cinema in the USA. In this film, Vertov applied a range of cinematic techniques, such as multiple exposure, fast and slow motion, still frames, split screens, oblique angles, intense close–ups, tracking shots, and reversed footage, among others, to illustrate how modernist fragmentation can be formally achieved. Writing after the film's release, Vertov states,

> In fact, the film is only the sum of the facts recorded on film, or, if you like, not merely the sum, but the product, a "higher mathematics" of facts. Each item or each factor is a separate little document. The documents have been joined with one another so that, on the one hand, the film would consist only of those linkages between signifying pieces that coincide with the visual linkages and so that, on the other hand, these linkages would require intertitles; the final sum of all these linkages represents, therefore, an organic whole. (…) it sharply opposes "life as it is," seen by the aided eye of the movie camera (kino–eye), to "life as it is," seen by the imperfect human eye (Vertov 1984, 84–85).

Vertov's contribution to documentary film combines formal effects from the modernist tradition with the intention to produce effects of social impact from the documentary impulse, the impulse to show 'life as it is' from the perspective of the flawed human eye. Like Vertov, many artists of the avant–garde were drawn to film because of the combination of montage and indexical representations of the documentary image. Favoring an open–ended, ambiguous play between film fragments, the documentary impulse within a modernist tradition intended to construct ways of understanding the world separate from conventionally established ones. From these contributions, we can understand the implications of the historical avant–gardes which are now familiar and which have migrated to a critique of the documentary such as the ideology of progress and the claim of originality. However, while it is relevant to find a link between documentary and the historical avant–gardes, it is no less productive to question its extension *into* the neo–avant–garde, a postwar art movement joining artists from North America and Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s, who repurposed and refined some avant–garde approaches of the 1910s and 1920s, such as collage and assemblage, and the readymade.

In "Who's afraid of the Neo–Avant–Garde," Hal Foster (1996) proposes a reading of the historical avant–garde and the neo–avant–garde following a structure that rejects any vision of origin or evolutionary progress.[10] Instead, Foster proposes "a temporal exchange between historical and neo avant–gardes, a complex relation of anticipation and reconstruction" (Foster 1996, 13). In order to approach these two historical moments, he applies a model that conceives history itself as a subject with its own psychic temporality. From this perspective, Foster relies mainly on Freud's psychoanalytic theory, particularly as it is read through Lacan, to apply it to history. History's subjectivity is thus understood as something that cannot be "set once and for all; it is structured as a relay of anticipations and reconstructions of traumatic events" (Foster 1996, 29). Events are registered and re–coded and can only be comprehended through deferred action. The events registered in the historical avant–garde – with its drive to rupture, including the mimetic and utopian dimensions of this rupture, directed at the bourgeois principles and conventions – returns in the postwar period of the neo–avant–garde with a new target, the institution, mainly the art institution, which "is now extended to other institutions and discourses in the ambitious art of the present" (Foster 1996, 25).

Such a method makes it possible to link political concerns that were already present in the early twentieth century with more recent developments in art, as well as to link aesthetic concerns and practices tied to such developments in which the documentary form falls into place. Considering Foster's proposition, I will question whether there is a documentary return within the neo–avant–garde, and if so, how and when this return occurred. Pursuing Foster's argument makes it possible to extend Nichols' suggestion that "movements involve historical contingency, not genetic ancestry" (Nichols 2001, 589), as well as to expand this research to the motives and contributions that documentary and art share considering specific moments.

1.1.2. Documentary returns

> The process upon which psychoanalysis is based lies at the heart of Freud's discoveries – the return of the repressed. This "mechanism" is linked to a certain conception of time and memory, according to which

[10] See, for instance, *Theory of the Avant–Garde* by German critic Peter Bürger (1974), in which the author describes the historical avant–garde as having a single origin.

> consciousness is both the deceptive *mask* and the operative *trace* of events that organize the present. If the past (that which took place during, and took the form of, a decisive moment in the course of a crisis) is *repressed*, it *returns* in the present from which it was excluded, but does so surreptitiously. One of Freud's favourite examples is a figuration of this detour–return, which constitutes the ruse of history: Hamlet's father returns after his murder, but in the form of a phantom, in another scene, and it is only then that he becomes the law his son obeys. (Michel de Certeau 1986, 3, original emphasis).

If there is something from psychoanalysis and its history that persists in our comprehension of time (past, present and future), as French scholar Michel de Certeau (1986) indicates above, it is the way in which it effectively proposes an alternative to our understanding of historiography. If psychoanalysis and historiography share the same interest in 'time and memory,' they also have two different ways of distributing them. History conceives the relation between the past and the present as one of succession, correlation, cause and effect where events are seen as succeeding one another, with greater or lesser proximity, but never simultaneously. In turn, psychoanalysis as a method proposes the relation between the past and the present as one of imbrication, of repetition, of the equivocal. Events are recognized when one is in the place of the other, or when one reproduces the other in another form. Thus, psychoanalysis identifies games of masking, reversal and ambiguity in the way events unfold. With this in mind, what would it mean for the documentary film to reappear after a period of repression? Would documentary return surreptitiously, in other words, clandestinely or secretly? Or would it return like Hamlet's dead father, to effectively become 'the law his son obeys'?

The research project *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, edited by Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl (2009), begins by asserting that "the documentary is a form that emerges in a state of crisis… to mirror the effects of past or recent political and economic upheaval" (Lind and Steyerl 2009a, 12). This idea that the documentary as a political art form[11] resurfaces after a period of social and political crisis or after a traumatic event encourages the appliance of a method of analysis that captures the psychic temporality of such practice, namely psychoanalysis.

[11] Documentary as a political art form is linked to crisis, while journalistic and propagandistic formats always existed to affirm the *status quo*. This clarification is useful for differentiating between traditional documentary and art-documentary, which is the one relevant to the current discussion.

Hal Foster (1996) applies the psychoanalytic method to investigate the "ways the neo–avant–garde acts on the historical avant–garde as it is acted on by it" as well as the way "the avant–garde project, in general, develops in deferred action" (Foster 1996, 29). The relation between pre– and post–World War II avant–gardes is established through an extension of the critique of the institution of art through an empirical investigation of its aesthetic categories with the aim of repositioning art in relation to social practice (Foster 1996, 5). According to Foster, the neo–avant–garde not only repeats this critique, but also extends it. The historical avant–garde is repeated because it fails in its ambitions, "the dadaist [fail] to destroy traditional art categories, the surrealist to reconcile subjective transgression and social revolution, the constructivist to make the cultural means of production collective" (Foster 1996, 13). The neo–avant–garde 'extends' this critique, or perhaps, as is advanced by Foster (1996), 'comprehends' it for the first time (15), while producing a range of new aesthetic possibilities, conceptual links, and political responses. He uses the words 'extend' and 'comprehend' instead of 'completed' because in art, as in psychoanalysis, critique is a never–ending task. In his analysis, Foster's main goal is to create a distinction between convention and institution that differentiates the initiative of the avant–garde and the neo–avant–garde.

> On the one hand, the institution of art does not totally govern aesthetic conventions (this is too determinist); on the other hand, these conventions do not totally comprise the institution of art (this is too formalist). In other words, the institution of art may *enframe* aesthetic conventions, but it does not *constitute* them. This heuristic difference may help us to distinguish the emphases of historical and new–avant–gardes: if the historical avant–garde focuses on the conventional, the neo–avant–garde concentrates on the institutional (Foster 1996, 17, original emphasis).

This move from the conventional to the institutional conveys a sense of continuity that is performed by the repetition of some aesthetic principles that were already present in the historical avant–gardes. Repetition is suggested by the author in the Freudian sense: something in the past has failed and created a trauma, and that trauma, or experience, returns from the past to be not solved but reworked—repetition is thus what is generated by this failure. This idea of reworking past events is useful to more recent concerns in art. However, something that is not accounted for in Foster's mapping of the avant–gardes is the fact that

the neo–avant–garde produced a chasm in the relationship between the documentary and the historical avant–gardes.

Returning to John Grierson and to his implication in the establishment of a documentary practice, Bill Nichols (2001) notes that as Grierson's institutional support to the documentary became increasingly predominant, this practice also became strongly associated with narrative conventions. Moreover, World War II introduced much interest in documentaries which diverged in two opposite directions: as state propaganda, on the one hand, and as a concern with a traumatic social reality, on the other. These two forces were in tension and did not reconcile easily within the art field. In fact, the art field was more like a motor for the critical endeavors of one against the other. An example arrives through filmmaker and writer Maya Deren's *An Anagram of Ideas of Film, Form, and Art* (1947), where Deren took the lead in advocating a postwar avant–garde that used cinema as a medium of artistic expression, yet (carefully) excluding documentary objectiveness.

> I am distressed (...) by the current tendency to exalt the documentary as the supreme achievement of film, which places it by implication, in the category of an art form. Although an explicit statement of this is carefully avoided, the implication is supported by an emphasis upon those documentaries which are significant not for their scientific accuracy, but for an undertone of lyricism or a use of dramatic devices – values generally associated with the art form. Thus, the campaign serves not so much to point up the real values of a documentary – *the objective, impartial rendition of an otherwise obscure remote reality* – but to cast suspicion upon the extent to which it actually retains those documentary functions. A work of art is primarily concerned with the effective creation of an idea (even when that may require a sacrifice of the factual material upon which an idea is based), *and involves a conscious manipulation of its material from an intensely motivated point of view*. By inference, the unconsidered and unmodified praise which has recently attended the documentarist requires of him, again by inference, that he functions also in these latter terms.
> …
>
> If we accept the proposition that even the selected placing of the camera is an exercise of conscious creativity, then *there is no such thing as a documentary film*, in the sense of an objective rendition of reality (Deren 2005, 79, 83, my emphasis).

This statement by avant–garde filmmaker and writer Maya Deren, reveals an ambivalence in the relation between art and documentary in the period after the war, as well as a type of

thinking that started to distance itself from a praise of documentary registered in the avant–garde, and to question the real values of documentary. It is a type of thinking that indeed augments the gap between art and more conventional forms of documentary used for state propaganda, but, in turn, straightens a path between philosophy and documentary, a path that includes ethical questions related to the manipulation of social reality.

Filmmakers, such as Deren, produced conceptual and abstract films throughout the 1940's and 50's, stepping away from a classic documentary style that was strongly associated with an undesired tone of scientific accuracy. Although the documentary form was not so prolific within the art field[12] at the time of Deren's writing, it was prolific within the theoretical/philosophical field. It was as if this practice was repressed for a period of time, only to return more critical of its own means of representation, more aware of the problematics between form and content, and more attuned to its surrounding social reality.

As the quote above shows, already in 1947, Maya Deren stated the following: "There is no such thing as a documentary film." This sentence would, in fact, become a statement made again in the early 1990s by Vietnamese writer and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh–ha, who restates Deren's claim in order to extend and actualize it:

> There is no such thing as documentary – whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques. This assertion – as old and as fundamental as the antagonism between names and reality – needs incessantly to be restated, despite the very visible existence of a documentary tradition. In film, such a tradition, far from undergoing crisis today, is likely to fortify itself through its very recurrence of declines and rebirths. The narratives that attempt to unify/purify its practices by positing evolution and continuity from one period to the next are numerous indeed, relying heavily on traditional historicist concepts of periodization (Minh–ha 1990, 76).

This statement indicates two things that are still crucial to the relationship between art and documentary. One is the recognition that this relationship is constituted by recurrent declines and rebirths, in other words, by turns and returns, rather than by a precise, or pure, origin

[12] Although it is true that the art/documentary was not so prolific during the period between the First and Second World Wars, traces of avant–garde radicalism persisted in some forms of documentary expression, such as the work by Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens. Ivens adopted some of the avant–garde strategies, such as reenactment and defamiliarizing juxtapositions, in his films made during and after World War I, for instance, in *Rain* (1929).

and a progressive evolution of the documentary form. Deren's claim needed to be restated forty years later is, perhaps, indicative of the time necessary to re–open an inquiry into the documentary form, which can suggest a signal of documentary's 'return.' The other crucial aspect that can be extracted from Minh–ha's statement is that the documentary resists being defined in opposition to fiction.

The documentary exists, but as an accurate reproduction of a factual reality, it is an impossibility. "There is no such thing as a documentary" (Deren 2005, 83) is the sentence that announced this impossibility. Yet, we may question, is there still no such thing as documentary after at least ninety years of documentary filmmaking? What is the spectral persistence of this practice in the field of contemporary art? As is possible to see with the example of Minh–ha, a filmmaker and writer who, to this day, mainly works with documentary forms, in order to produce not only films but also theory in which the documentary film becomes in itself a critical practice. This multidisciplinary aspect of documentary within the field of art only intensifies its relationship with ethics and aesthetics. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and in particular the 1990s, feminism, gay rights and black liberation movementts increasingly informed the practice of video artists who took up documentary as a means of articulating their concerns. Since then, documentary practice has been positioned entirely differently within the context of contemporary art.

1.1.3. The real and the abject

It is possible to argue that the art/documentary conjunction as manifested in the works of the historical avant–gardes did not return with the neo–avant–garde in the same way other expressions of the avant–garde did.[13] Documentary was prone to be criticized by artists who were focused on establishing paradigms like the readymade "from an object that purports to be transgressive in its very facticity," as well as on developing a proposition that explores the enunciative dimension of the work of art, as in conceptual art, or on reflecting the reproduction of objects and images in advanced capitalism, as did minimalism and pop art,

[13] A similar argument can be found in Shilyh Warren's (2019) recent book *Subject to Reality: Women and Documentary Film*, where the author reconsiders the history and study of women's documentary filmmaking in the United States during two key periods—1920 to 1940, and the long 1970s—when significant transformations in cinematic technologies coincided with major transformations in socio political discourses surrounding gender and race.

as Foster (1996, 24) emphasizes. In this way, artists continued to struggle against a singular idea or regime of representation. Yet, another trend of art since the 1960s was committed to realism, for example, some pop art, superrealism and appropriation art. This pop genealogy, as is detected by Foster (1996, 127), takes on a new interest today, because it complicates the reductive notions of realism and illusionism in a way that illuminates contemporary reworkings of these categories. In *Return to the Real*, throughout the chapter with the same title, Foster adapts the notions of the real, in a Lacanian sense, and of abjection, as is conceived by Julia Kristeva (1982), as a way to map a shift in artistic practice. The relevance of these terms – the real and the abject – for art produced in the 1960s and 1970s, in particular in the works of Andy Warhol, Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Martha Rosler and Chantal Akerman, contributed, to a certain degree, to a shift in the understanding of the referential value of the photographic image, which arises with the postmodernist critique of representation. The real and the abject are thus two important aspects for the art/documentary conjunction at the time, and for that reason they deserve further unpacking.

As already mentioned, Foster's idea of 'return of the real'[14] and his theory of art was informed by Lacan's method of psychoanalysis and his conception of the real.[15] As one of the most influential interpreters of Freudian psychoanalysis, Lacan has significantly shaped theories of subjectivity and visual representation. Lacan's conceptual map is outlined by his theory of the three registers of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. As he labored over many years, he revised and shifted his characterizations of each of the three registers, as well as their relationships with one another. Finding a definition to the register of the real in Lacan's work is challenging, as it eludes succinct definitions. Lacan's many and shifting pronouncements regarding the real are partly due to the lack of directness of the real itself.

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[14] It is noteworthy that the title of Foster's (1996) book, 'The Return of the Real,' is closely linked to Lacan's statement, "I wanted to point out where the split in the subject lay. This split, after awakening, persists—between the *return to the real*, the representation of the world (...)—and the consciousness re–weaving itself, which knows it is living through all this as through a nightmare, but which, all the same, keeps a grip on itself" (Lacan 1978, 70).

[15] Lacan described his psychoanalytic project as a 'return to Freud,' and Swiss linguist, semiotician and philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure, whose influence is felt in Lacan, closely informed this 'return' and shaped Lacan's attempt at structuralizing Freudian psychoanalysis. A 'return to Freud' also refers to Lacan in the 1950s, which represents one of the three main periods that scholars tend to identify within Lacan's oeuvre—the period characterized by the essential role of the register of the symbolic, influenced by Saussurian signifiers in the structures and dynamics of the unconscious and speaking subjectivity. Preceding this period is one when Lacan was committed to the phenomenal–visual register of the imaginary thanks to the focus on the mirror stage. And the end of the 1950s is widely associated with the rise of the real as the register of a new focus of Lacan's thinking.

In other words, as something outside of imaginary – symbolic reality – a realm containing consciousness, communication, and otherwise meaningful concepts – the real is intrinsically enigmatic, resisting capture in the comprehensively meaningful combination of imaginary–symbolic signs. Lacan often emphasized that the real is an 'impossibility' in relation to reality. He states: "This method would bring us here to the question of the possible, and the impossible is not necessarily the contrary of the possible, or, since the opposite of the possible is certainly the real, we would be lead to define the real as the impossible" (Lacan 1978, 167).[16] The real is, therefore, a register of fluctuating oscillations and instabilities between excesses and lacks, surpluses and deficits, presences and absences, as Lacan (1978) would put it. Lacan's theories of the real take on ever more connotations throughout the 1960s and into Lacan's last teachings. The real becomes associated with libidinal negativities (*object petit a*, *jouissance*, and sexual difference, material meaninglessness, contingent trauma, unbearable bodily intensities, anxiety, and death). However obscure, Lacan's emphasis on the real is an attempt to define it with conceptual precision, even if only as a means of locating the exact limits of the imaginary, the symbolic, and their overlaps.[17]

In *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan (1978) argues that the concepts of 'unconscious' and 'repetition' are related to other two terms, namely, the 'subject' and the 'real' (Lacan 1978, 19). For Lacan, repetition exists solely because the encounter with the real is missed. He states, "[t]he place of the real, which stretches from the trauma to the phantasy—in so far as the phantasy is never anything more than the screen that conceals something quite primary, something determinant in the function of repetition" (Lacan 1978, 60). For Foster, Lacan's conception of the real offers a way to conceive a conceptual and practical shift noticeable in the repetitions of the avant–garde into the neo–avant–garde. Moreover, it offers a different perspective from most accounts of post–World

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[16] Or, as Alan Sheridan in the translator's note of *Book XII: Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1978) wrote, "Hence the formula: 'the real is the impossible'" (Lacan 1978, 280).

[17] In *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*, Elizabeth Cowie (2011) offers a dense account of the ways in which the documentary film may also be a document of the 'real' in Lacan's sense. She states, "The excess of signifying that arises in what is shown and what is said that is uncontained and uncontrolled by the speaker—or filmmaker—is designated by Lacan as the real and as an 'unrepresentable'" (...) "We desire evidence of something real separate from the orchestrated view of the photographer or documentarist, but as a result, we may at the same time become aware of what is not represented. That is, we become aware of not only what is off frame and out of sight but also what is felt to be unexplained and inexplicable in the reality shown, negating its givenness—its radical contingency" (Cowie 2011, 118-122). Cowie expands on the differences between the real, the imaginary and the symbolic, how they are interrelated in our account of reality and how they affect the way we personally relate to documentary films. My understanding of Lacan's theory of the real is in debt to both Hal Foster and Elizabeth Cowie perspectives on his theory.

War II art based on art that is predominantly photographic that divide the image either as simulacral or as referential,[18] a conundrum within art theory felt at the time of his writing. Foster states,

> I find them both equally persuasive. But they cannot be right… or can they? Can we read the "Death in America" images as referential *and* simulacral, connected *and* disconnected, affective *and* affectless, critical *and* complacent? I think we must, and we can if we read them in a third way, in terms of *traumatic realism* (Foster 1996, 130, original emphasis).

What is important to retain is Foster's (1996) notion of 'traumatic realism' that he articulates after seeing Andy Warhol's "Death in America," a series that includes the repetition of images of traumatic events and objects such as an electric chair and the aftermath of a recent car accident. In Foster's reading, these images "not only *re*produce traumatic effects; they also *produce* them" (Foster 1996, 132, original emphasis). The same way in which Lacan was concerned with defining the real in terms of trauma,[19] so too is Foster in his approach to pop art. Lacan, according to Foster (1996), defines the traumatic as a miss–encounter with the real, therefore the real cannot be represented, it can only be repeated (132). Lacan (1977) writes in reference to Freud while claiming that repetition is not reproduction;[20] so too does Foster when he argues that "repetition in Warhol is not reproduction in the sense of representation (of a referent) or simulation (of a pure image, a detached signifier). Rather, repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic" (Foster 1996, 132). Accordingly, Warhol updates the idea of a traumatic image, or traumatic realism, in response to the post–World War II *society of the spectacle* (Debord 1967). Hence, the problem of the real remains:

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[18] Variations of simulacral reading of photographic images can be found in the works of Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Giles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault. Photographic referential authority is intimately related with a photograph's indexical status, which distinguishes it from other representative media. Several authors have dedicated attention to the issue of indexicality, namely Susan Sontag, who's writing on photography remains influential today. In particular, her book *On Photography* (1977) is predicated on the assertion that the photographic referent is inexorably coupled with the photograph itself. Sontag warns that despite possible distortion, the photograph always provides "incontrovertible proof" of the subject's past existence (Sontag 1977, 5). However, Sontag concludes, "For it is the nature of a photograph that it can never entirely transcend its subject (…) Nor can a photograph ever transcend the visual itself" (Sontag 1977, 95).

[19] In Lacan's words, 'The function of the *tuché*, of the real as encounter—the encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter—first presented itself in the history of psycho–analysis in a form that was in itself already enough to arouse our attention, that of the trauma" (Lacan 1978, 55).

[20] Lacan states, "I will take this opportunity to point out to you that in Freud's texts repetition is not reproduction. There is never any ambiguity on this point: Wiederholen is not Reproduzieren" (Lacan 1978, 50).

how to represent something which supposedly cannot be represented? The real is, in a Lacanian sense, the opposite of the symbolic; it is the lost object, the missed encounter. This real 'migrates' into the practice of documentary filmmaking in relation to documentary's often claimed factuality and its assertion of the "knowability of the world" (Nichols 1991, 57), together with the referential value of representation. "Thus the vaunted critique of representation in this postmodernist art: a critique of artistic categories and documentary genres, of media myth and sexual stereotypes" (Foster 1996, 145).

It is useful to turn towards Bulgarian–French feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, to consider the impact it had on artistic practices and subsequently on Foster's argument about the return of the real. Abjection in everyday speech refers to dejection and despair, but in the humanities, it is best known as a psychoanalytic concept denoting the infant's desire, need and dread to detach from the body of the mother. As such, it represents a painful and violent expulsion from a familiar space. In *The Powers of Horror* (1982) Kristeva defines the abject as "neither subject nor object" (Kristeva 1982, 1). She grounds the concept of abjection on the traditional psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan to refer to a breakdown in meaning with respect to the blurring of the lines between self and other or subject and object. Kristeva states,

> Deprived of world, therefore, I fall in a faint. In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us (Kristeva 1982, 4).

Abjection is related to reactions such as nausea, distaste, horror, which are the signs of a radical revulsion. According to Kristeva, the human corpse is a primary example of what causes such a reaction. In this sense, the abject (the 'object' of revulsion) can also be seen more as a process than a 'thing' (Kristeva as interpreted by Moi 1986, 238). Taking the notion of abject as a point of departure, Foster states that "for many in contemporary culture truth resides in the traumatic or abject subject, in the deceased or damaged body" (Foster 1996, 166). Abject is a term that Foster puts in accord with Lacan's notion of the real. The

real in Lacan is that which is impossible in a symbolic order of meaning, that which has to be excluded/overseen if the symbolic order aims at persisting. Similarly, the abject subject "is radically excluded and draws me toward the place – where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982, 2). As Kristeva further explains, "[a]bjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre–objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (Kristeva 1984, 10). For Foster (1996), the abject appears as this kind of phantasmagoric substance, at the same time alien to the subject and intimate with it: "In this way the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, the fragility of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides as well as of the temporal passage between the maternal body (...) and the paternal law" (Foster 1996, 153). For this reason, abjection is a state or a process in which it is possible to problematized subjecthood. Foster believes that the notion and applicability of abjection is appealing to artists who wish to upset both conventional identity and cultural concepts, since it is a term that involves a disruption of subjects and societies. In one sense, Kristeva's notion of abjection has been frequently used to explain cultural images of horror and discrimination including that caused by misogyny, homophobia and genocide, while in another sense it has proven useful in the construction of alternative subjectivities and identities representing issues of sex and gender, ethnicity and race, personal identity and collective memory.[21] The idea of the abject plays a central role in the development of a sense of communal identity among specific subcultures and minority groups which is also the target of documentary filmmaking that intends to resist established conventions. The perspectives, histories, and initiatives of such abject subjectivities become pivotal as documentary subjectivities. Collaborations between artists and subjects have replaced artistic collaborations with state government agencies (Nichols 2001, 608). The style and form of documentary representations changed in response to this shift, allowing for the inclusion of new positions and values not included in representations that envisioned a universal subject within an idealized nation–state. An example that is inescapable here is the feminist documentary film movement, a cinematic genre alongside a political movement, namely, the women's movement that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States.

[21] Women, homosexuals, transgender people, and those with differently abled bodies or bodies that differ from the dominant ideal have been called 'the abject' and subject to social marginalisation. See, for instance, Minae Inahara's (2009) *Abject Love: Undoing the Boundaries of Physical Disability*.

In the 1970s, feminist film theory became one of the most important forces in the development of film studies. Such was its influence in the field of film theory that its effect began to be felt in the very process of filmmaking, with many avant–garde, independent, but also mainstream films combining theory and practice. Two examples, among many, of avant–garde independent women filmmakers are the Belgian artists Chantal Akerman, who makes use of domestic environments as a setting to explore the intersection between femininity and domesticity, and Agnès Varda, known for her experimental approach to documentary realism addressing women's struggles and other social concerns. Of utmost importance to these artists was the feminist film theory put forward by Laura Mulvey's pioneering essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), and many of its insights arguably still apply to film production today. Originally published in the academic film studies journal *Screen*, Mulvey's essay argues that the gaze that controls cinema has been predominantly male. Mulvey's concept of the 'male gaze' became a key topic of feminist film debates. The essay is heavily influenced by the theories of Jacques Lacan, and as a result of this influence she remarks,

> There is an obvious interest in this analysis for feminists, a beauty in its exact rendering of the frustration experienced under the phallocentric order. It gets us nearer to the roots of our oppression, it brings an articulation of the problem closer, it faces us with the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the moment of arrival of language) while still caught within the language of the patriarchy. There is no way in which we can produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides, of which psychoanalysis is not the only but an important one (Mulvey 1975, 7).

Mulvey sets out to understand how patriarchal society's unconscious has shaped cinema. With the use of psychoanalysis as a political weapon, she can turn her focus from the mere description of 'woman as spectacle'[22] to the psyche of the man whose needs the spectacle serves.

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[22] The representation of 'Woman' as a spectacle to be looked at pervades visual culture. In such representations, "Woman' is only defined by her sexuality, as an object of desire in relation to, or as a foil for, 'Man." In her essay, Mulvey (1975) examined the inscription of this tendency in mainstream narrative cinema, where it is arguably having the most profound effects. According to her, mainstream cinema is designed for a male gaze, providing for men's fantasies and pleasures. Introducing the first attempt to consider the relationship between the spectator and the screen in a feminist context, the essay investigated male viewers' voyeuristic and

In "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film," American film critic Julia Lesage (1978) identifies what connects this movement with the sphere of art. Lesage explains how the 'abject body,' the woman's body, becomes a site for personal exploration forming a structure that aims at social and psychological change and a form of political expressiveness. Through film, women had hoped to show and define sexuality on their own terms, "not with the thrill of possession and not with objectification, but with the excitement of coming to knowledge" (Lesage 1978, 13). Responding to Lesage's succinct framing of this new way of approaching the female autonomous subject, no women are filmed with the intention of being represented as an object; rather, they are presented as physical, emotional, intellectual and political subjects that wish to reclaim 'the lost territory' of women's bodies. The documentary form is appropriate in the sense, not only as the medium becomes more accessible, but because it also allows for entering into women's lived environments, reinforcing the relation with their subject, often seen as collaborative and sharing the same political goals.

One aspect that defines early feminist documentary films is their formal and topical similarity, despite some distinct specificities. Many feminist filmmakers chose to film women telling their story to the camera, usually a woman struggling to deal with issues related to labor or sexuality, as, for instance, in the films "Three Lives" (1971) by Kate Millet, "Joyce at 34" (1972) by Joyce Chopra, "Woman to Woman" (1975) by Donna Deitch, or Deborah Schaffer and Bonnie Friedman's "Chris and Bernie" (1976). For Lesage (1978), the formal similarity of these films reveals the 'deep structure'[23] at work in them (pp. 515–516). This deep structure serves a specific social and psychological function, that of raising conscience, thus setting the filmmaker in a mutual, nonhierarchical relation with her subject. The act of naming previously unarticulated knowledge, of seeing that knowledge as political, and of understanding the power of this knowledge, allows for collective change. Moreover, according to Lesage, delivering collective testimonials of women's oppression aims to heal and create new knowledge and identity. She states,

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fetishistic reactions to images of women. Despite the fact that Mulvey was more inclined to identify the male gaze in mainstream cinema, her theory was and still is very relevant to documentary practices that traverse the art's field.

[23] Lesage applies to the structure of the films she analyzes the concept of 'deep structure' as defined by Noam Chomsky (1964), which is a theoretical construct that seeks to unify several related structures.

> In testimony to the psychological condition of living out one's life in a state of mental colonization and in a sphere where one's labor is not valorized socially by either a salary or public power, many women's narratives are about identity, madness, and the fluidity or fragmentation of woman's ego' (Lesage 1978, 516).

Such feminist documentaries as mentioned above, take part in a political movement which sees women as in the midst of a struggle for expression and self–identification. They strive to find a way of articulating, expanding and commenting on "women's own subcultural codification of the connotation of those visual elements and icons familiar to them in their private sphere," therefore "[f]eminist films look at familiar women's elements to define them in a new, uncolonized way" (Lesage 1978, 518). The aim is that films may form a new structure that will facilitate women's entry into the public sphere of work and power and, altogether, systematically alter such a sphere. Hence, feminist documentary has a purpose:

> (...) in part being realized now, of what the shift in relations in the public sphere would be and how power would be enacted if women were to gain and use power in a Feminist way. The Feminist documentaries represent a use of, yet a shift in, the aesthetics of cinéma vérité due to the filmmakers' close identification with their subjects, participation in the women's movement, and sense of the films' intended effect. The structure of the consciousness–raising group becomes the deep structure repeated over and over in these films (Lesage 1978, 521).

This vision described by Lesage, ensured that the 1970s saw a new type of opposition in which the state was dislodged from its central role in documentary production. From then on, artists returned to documentary to probe sexual, racial, and ethnic differences, and to test the deconstructive capacity of the documentary and avant–garde conjunction, which could not only be applied to the critique of the art institutions, but also to other institutions and dominant discourses. What supports this extension is indeed a shift "from reality as an effect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma", which came to guide contemporary art and theory, for with this shift in conception has come a shift in practice as well (Foster 1996, 146).

1.1.4. Paradigm shift: from the 'author as producer' to the 'artist as ethnographer'

In "The Artist as Ethnographer," Foster (1996) argues that contemporary art resides in a new paradigm similar to that presented in Walter Benjamin's "The Author as Producer," a lecture delivered for the first time in April 1934 at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris (Benjamin 1998). In his presentation, Benjamin (1998) seeks to define the role of the author as a member of a society who unquestionably must address class struggle and to critically address their own position and means of production in relation to this struggle – urging authors to side with the proletariat (85). What mattered for Benjamin was solidarity in practice, not in artistic theme or political attitude alone. Therefore, Benjamin claims:

> Before I ask: what is a work's position vis–à–vis the production relations of its time, I should like to ask: what is its position within them? This question concerns the function of a work within the literary production relations of its time. In other words, it is directly concerned with literary technique (Benjamin 1998, 87).

As Benjamin suggests, rather than seeking to understand a work of art's relationship to its time, it is more important to understand what position the artist occupies in that time. He goes on to explore how a work can side with the proletariat by employing progressive techniques. As a first step, he describes how the literary process in Russia, and Russian journalism in particular, has changed (Benjamin 1998, 90). There is no question that the paradigmatic change in Russian journalism Benjamin is referring to represents the dissolution of the old paradigms; genres, media and relationships between the author and the writer (Benjamin 1998, 90). In line with the demise of traditional paradigms, Berthold Brecht is praised by Benjamin (1998, 99) for his ability to create an illusion in the audience that is constantly rebutted by a theatrically orchestrated moment that exposes the absurdities of modern life (1998). Benjamin states,

> (...) Brecht went back to the most fundamental and original elements of theater. He confined himself, as it were, to a podium, a platform. He renounced plots requiring a great deal of space. Thus he succeeded in altering the functional relationship between stage and audience, text and production, producer and actor. Epic theater, he declared, must not develop actions but represent conditions (Benjamin 1998, 100).

Accordingly, Brecht affected the relationship between art and its public. A change in technique illustrates Brecht's reflexive process: while reflecting upon his position in the process of production, he consciously changed the technique of production to stand against the *status quo*. By changing his techniques and apparatus, the "author as a producer" can fight alongside the proletariat by confronting and even denying his class origins and the modes of production from which his work is informed.

Using Benjamin's influential text as his point of departure, Foster (1996) identifies the 'ethnographic turn' in art since the 1980s (171). For Foster, Benjamin was responding to the aestheticization of art under fascism and reinforcing the task of the artist to operate with an understanding of a political commitment; the same way Western or Western–based artists were responding to the capitalization of culture and the privatization of society in the 1970s and 1980s. Foster argues that the way artists are responding to these issues underlines a structural problem similar to the one assigned by Benjamin in "The Author as a Producer" into a new paradigm: "the artist as ethnographer." In this new paradigm, the object of contestation remains the same – the bourgeois–capitalist institution of art. However, the subject of association has changed: it is the cultural and ethnic Other who comes to replace the proletariat. In other words, the site of political transformation is perceived in the repressed *Other*—for the modern artist in the proletariat, and for the post–modern artist in the post–colonial, the subaltern Other. "However subtle it may seem, this shift from a subject defined in terms of *economic relation* to one defined in terms of *cultural identity* is significant," says Foster (1996, 173, original emphasis).

The problem with an artistic practice that holds the 'cultural other' as its subject is not that it utilizes documentary forms to express itself, but rather because it might insist on some assumptions already critiqued in Benjamin's "The Author as Producer."[24] When Foster writes about "the artist as ethnographer," he is indeed pointing at a tendency to intertwine anthropological methods within contemporary art. Foster is highly critical of artists 'using' the 'repressed other' as the subject; he identifies and is provocatively scathing in his critique

[24] According to Foster, there are three main assumptions: First, the assumption that the site for political transformation is also the site for artistic transformation. But also the assumption that this site—the politically transformed site—is always elsewhere, in the field of the Other—the exploited proletariat, or the cultural Other, the oppressed postcolonial, subaltern, or subcultural, and that it is from this point of departure that the dominant culture will be subverted. Lastly, the assumption is that, on the one hand, if the artist is not perceived as socially and cultural Other, he or she has but limited access to this transformation; and, on the other hand, if he or she is perceived as Other, he or she has automatic access to it. Because of that, Foster (1998) argues, the artist may be required to assume both the roles of native, informant and ethnographer simultaneously (172–178).

of artists who, in creating their work, move from site to site, repressed subject to repressed subject. While Benjamin encouraged artists to be self–reflexive and critical of their own position and means of production, Foster calls out artists who claim political relevance by using their privilege and mobility to move from political subject to political subject. Both Benjamin and Foster urge a collaboration with the proletariat/repressed Other, instead of exploiting the Other as subject, thereby reproducing the hegemonic structure from which they are already exploited. Foster (1996) insists that artists must resist the tendency to project political truth onto this constructed Other because it can lead to self–absorption, ethnographic self–fashioning, and narcissistic self–refurbishing (196). Although the model of the artist as ethnographer intends to undermine the authority of the anthropologist, it may actually strengthen it by placing the anthropologist in a position of authority. Foster's analyses of problems arising when art attempts to imitate ethnographic principles of participant–observer, has received extensive attention both in academic and contemporary art contexts since its publication. But the thrust of his argument remains relevant today and is important in relation to this research: that the artist must be self–reflexive in order not to over–identify with the Other in a way that further alienates, exploits and compromises that Other. Foster concludes that reflexivity can potentially assist the artist in confronting this paradox, by challenging the assumptions that govern many artistic representations or critical discourses (Foster 1996, 203). However, Foster also takes note of some of the problems that may arise from reflexivity. He states,

> My second point concerns the reflexivity of contemporary art. I have stressed that reflexivity is needed to protect against an over–identification with the other (through commitment, self–othering, and so on) that may compromise this otherness. Paradoxically, as Benjamin implied long ago, this overidentification may alienate the other further if it does not allow for the othering already at work in representation. In the face of these dangers–of too little or too much distance–I have advocated parallactic work that attempts to frame the framer as he or she frames the other. This is one way to negotiate the contradictory status of otherness as given and constructed, real and fantasmatic. (...) Yet such reframing is not sufficient alone. Again, reflexivity can lead to a hermeticism, even a narcissism, in which the other is obscured, the self pronounced; it can also lead to a refusal of engagement altogether. And what does critical distance guarantee? Has this notion become somewhat mythical, acritical, a form of magical protection, a purity ritual of its own? Is such distance still desirable, let alone possible? (Foster 1996, 203).

A manifest example of what I would propose as a successful reflexive practice can be found in the practice of Trinh T. Minh–ha (1992), who has defined her own work as a form of "speaking nearby" the subject.[25] The intention 'not to speak about, only to speak nearby' became one of Minh–ha's main methodological tools to produce both films and theory since her film "Reassemblage" (1982), and is used as a critical reflection on the production of ethnographic film. To speak nearby "is an attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world," the filmmaker explains years later in an interview with Nancy N. Chen (Minh–ha 1992, 87). Speaking nearby thus serves as a cultural and cinematic reflection to address other subjects in terms of their plurality of meaning. In doing this, 'speaking nearby' proposes a different intention than 'speaking about,' as it is one possible way of approaching truth indirectly.[26]

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak 1988) is the potent question posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who has transformed the analysis of colonialism, affirming the historical and ideological forces that prevent the possibility for those who inhabit the periphery of being heard. It poses the difficult and unavoidable question of what it means to be a political subject, to be able to access the state systems, and to endure the hardship of difference in colonial and postcolonial societies. The question Spivak asks affected most of the work made by artists committed to the documentary form, particularly because it serves both art and anthropology, the point of convergence of the reflexive documentary.

Spivak and Minh–ha, among others, have contributed to the practice of documentary within contemporary art with their postcolonial theory and practice, and hence, it could be argued, to thinking behind Enwezor's curatorial program for Documenta 11.[27] Here we return to the beginning of this chapter, for this alleged paradigm shift is at the core of the curatorial project proposed by Okwui Enwezor[28] for Documenta 11, the first Documenta of the new

[25] Chapter two explores Minh-ha´s work and her strategies of self-reflexivity in depth.

[26] This idea has already been developed in the previous chapter and it returns here repositioned within a historical approach to documentary practice.

[27] Documenta 11 was built together with Enwezor's curatorial team, composed of Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, and Octavio Zaya.

[28] Okwui Enwezor died in 2019, at the age of 55. The legacy of his curatorial work as well as his writing seem to encapsulate what was relevant to the discourses around contemporary art and the documentary form in the 1990s and early 2000s, formalizing a non–Western perspective within these discourses.

millennium, that distinctly announced its commitment to reality through a crossing between decolonization and cultural globalization.

1.1.5. Mapping the documentary form within a postcolonial theoretical constellation

Like Foster, Okwui Enwezor referred to the avant–garde and certain modernist assumptions in order to approach our contemporary present and its relationship to artistic production. As already mentioned, "The Duchamp Effect" and Benjamin's 'mechanical reproduction' are two examples of the breach invoked by the avant–garde; Enwezor (2003) expands on these references by stating:

> Let me invoke another example, within the "contact zone" of cultures, that of the confrontation with African and Oceanic sculptures by European artists. What this confrontation did was to transform the pictorial and plastic language of modern European painting and sculpture, hence deeply affecting its tradition. What is astonishing in this story of encounter is the degree to which the artistic challenges posed by so–called primitive art to twentieth–century European modernism have been assimilated and subordinated to modernist totalization. Therein lies the fault line between imperial and postcolonial discourse, for to admit to the paradigmatic breach produced by the encounter between African sculptures and European artists would also be to address the narrative of modern art history (Enwezor 2003, 61).

With his statement we understand how Enwezor frames the relationship of the modernist avant–garde with the 'cultural other,' and the fundamental role 'other' cultures had within the development of Western/European modernism; moreover, he declares that this role was not based on equally shared interests. According to this claim, the problem is that the interest in 'primitive art' was set in opposition to 'progressive art,' meaning, on the one side, appropriating and drawing on the latter, and, on the other, repressing such an appropriation with the myth of Western originality. Enwezor claims that the Other was systematically left out of artistic discourse when he states, "It was not until the rise of fascism that it became clear that the subject of political art was about to be transformed. It never recognized, however, the importance of otherness and its potent political potential within the visual field" (Enwezor 2009, 76). The entrance of the "cultural other" into modern European art

can thus establish a ground from which to view art and artists' relationship to the institutions as well as to the strategies applied in art today.

Enwezor (2009) urges us to consider that if class formation no longer animates the modes of political art, what follows is a crisis of the political in current artistic practice resulting in a specific kind of anxiety – an anxiety that manifests itself in a battle between the critical comprehension, reception and discussion of contemporary art's conflation of politics and aesthetics (64–66). What comes to replace this anxiety and to produce a shift in the ideals of modern culture and its images is a new interest in human rights. "Human Rights (...) provide the ethical guidance for our interaction with the world and one another" (Enwezor 2009, 67). Some of the features of Documenta 11, as well as a particular attention to "Documentary/Vérité" (2009), written by Enwezor afterwards and in response to the exhibition's reception, can reveal the implication of politics and aesthetics that accentuate the relevance of documentary forms in contemporary art. Enwezor's concern is to address forms of art practice that straddle the realms of art and documentary, and the problems presented to our comprehension of reality as reflected in artworks, media images, and exhibitions of contemporary art.

In advance of the official opening of Documenta 11 in 2002, four transdisciplinary 'platforms' devoted to different themes were presented on four continents: "Democracy Unrealized" (Vienna and Berlin, 2001), "Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation" (New Delhi, 2001), "Créolité and Creolization" (St. Lucia, 2002), and "Under Siege: Four African Cities, Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, and Lagos" (Lagos, 2002). Many of the artworks later shown at the exhibition were essentially documentary in nature and addressed the themes proposed by these platforms and other global issues in different ways. As stated by Enwezor (2009), "Documenta 11 was the culmination of a development in contemporary art in which increasingly the documentary form became the dominant artistic language, particularly in photographic, film, and video work represented in its fifth platform: the exhibition" (Enwezor 2009, 81).[29] With over a hundred artists from around the world participating, it is

[29] See, for example, Documenta X curated by Catherine David (1997), the last Documenta of the twentieth century and the first one curated by a woman. This Documenta already implied a strong critical assessment of the political, social, economic and cultural issues of the contemporary globalized world, and responded to the current debate on postcolonialism and models of urbanism. David was criticized for an excessive use of theory, intellectualism and absence of sensuousness. More information on Documenta X, David's curatorial program, and the exhibition's reception can be found on Documenta's website:

difficult to provide specific examples and background information on each project, However, projects presented at specific venues grouped different approaches to (documentary) production. The documenta–Halle, was devoted primarily to artists' collectives and archive–based projects such as Fareed Armaly and Rashid Masharawi, Huit Facets group, Le Groupe, Raqs Media Collective, and Meschac Gaba. In both the Fridericianum and Binding brewery, works of art were presented on a large scale, with nearly every work occupying its own room. There were video projections by artists such as Steve McQueen and Yang Fudong, art installations by Georges Adéagbo and Chohreh Feyzdjou, and rooms dedicated to Mona Hatoum, Alfredo Jaar, Dieter Roth, Doris Salcedo, Leon Golub, Zarina Bhimji and Tania Bruguera. The list of artists and collectives who appeared at Documenta 11 also included Chantal Akerman, The Atlas Group (Walid Raad), Renée Green, Allan Sekula, and Trinh T. Minh–ha. The platforms set discursive relationships between sites of theoretical practice and those of visual practice interrogating assumptions from different fields of discourse. "It afforded us with the ability to be engaged with those disciplinary formations that arise precisely at the point where visual practice can no longer claim sole legitimacy for the hermeneutic function of art" (Enwezor 2009, 82–83). There is something that we can already infer from Enwezor's curatorial program: he was interested in exploring the critical function of art, and this is perhaps evident not only in the way he thought the platforms should work and supplement each other, but also in the way he conceives artists' approach to the documentary form:

> Each of these artists in documenta 11 employs the tools of the documentary and the function of the archive as procedures for inducing new flows and transactions between images, texts, narratives, documents, statements, events, communities, institutions, audiences. Each confounds the role of the documentary in establishing a hierarchy between images and artistic forms, between ethics and aesthetics, politics and poetics, truth and fiction. In fact, in each of the individual positions and works mentioned (...), what stands out the most is the remarkable consistency of concern with social life that is a mixture of political interest (...). Above all, it is the concern with the other, the fidelity to a truth that the documentary ceaselessly constructs and deconstructs (Enwezor 2009, 101).

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https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_x

Along these lines, Enwezor's mapping of contemporary art enlists artists whose work returns the absent modernist subject – the cultural other, but who do so while being aware of their own position within a (post)colonial constellation. This mapping of contemporary art also acknowledges the dispersal of some of the artistic discourses emerging with postmodernism. According to Enwezor (2009), this dispersal of discourses is indicative of a "condition of unhomeliness" (66), a phenomenon of dispersal that is a consequence of the absence of a central location for artistic practices. The notion of unhomeliness invokes a sense of constant flux, which can be applied to people as well as goods and ideas, and is related to the feeling generated by the experience of exile and to migratory movements due to globalization. Linked to Irit Rogoff´s (2013) notion of "unboundedness," and Edward Said's (1994) "exile standpoint," Enwezor's unhomeliness points to something that cannot be contained within a boundary, the feeling of always being elsewhere in relation to a place of origin, a system of knowledge, a cultural practice, an institution, or a discipline. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory,[30] Enwezor asserts that this dispersal indicates the fact that "there is no singular location of culture or contemporary art" and that "their destination and target extend well beyond those fora into the larger domain of the global sphere" (Enwezor 2003, 67).

The artistic context in the late 1990s and early 2000s can be seen as to be formulated around the dictates of the postcolonial, and as grounded on notions of creolization and hybridization. For Enwezor, it was Édouard Glissant who had made us "aware of the tremor at the roots of the postcolonial order" (Enwezor 2003, 59), and who had interpreted the phenomenon of the creolization of cultures as a collateral effect of global capitalism. Accordingly, with Glissant, we were able to see contemporary culture as cross–cultural, involving all sorts of violence, both historical and contemporary, and including the global processes of movement, resettlement, recalibration, changes and shifts, and modalities of cultural transformation that are informed by Glissant's key concepts of relation, opacity, creolization, and disaffiliation (Glissant 1997). From Enwezor's perspective, he is the key codifier of the concept of relation, which moves beyond the oppositional discourse of the same and the Other, operating instead with a new vision of difference. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant (1992) acknowledges and promotes a relation between individuals and

[30] In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) explains why the postcolonial critique has altered forever the landscape of postmodern discourse. He examines the displacement of the colonizer's legitimizing cultural authority and looks at the cultural and political boundaries which exist in gender, race, class and sexuality.

places as well as visible and invisible entities, animals and humans, among other things. Glissant's philosophy comes down to the notion of "tout–monde," or "worldmentality" as was translated by writer and filmmaker Manthia Diawara (2017). Worldmentality accounts for the fluidity of relation beyond systems of discrimination, segregation, and rejection, and attempts to establish a humane and equal relation with the Other, insisting on the fact that difference is more constructive when viewed as "a side effect of solidarity and conciliation between entities that need each other's energy to exist in beauty and freedom," explains Diawara after his translation of the term (Diawara 2017).

It is often the role of documentary, within the context of contemporary art, to envision a poetics that attempts to grasp the expansive difficulty of such a concept like worldmentality. This type of documentary practice attempts to disclose the extent of its contradictions, explore its possibilities, turns, and impasses, while simultaneously proposing to reorganize its complexity and chaos. If worldmentality proposes a cross–cultural understanding of territorial borders, so do the documentary approaches in question that disapprove or challenge any type of cultural absolutes. Documentary in this context endures a realist current in art that insists in maintaining the contact with political and social reality.

Framed within this context of worldmentality, documentary film within contemporary art should not be perceived as actual 'pieces of reality' (Enwezor 2009, 93). To make this point clear, Enwezor replaces the phrase "documentary mode" with "*vérité* mode," assuming the documentary's mainspring in Russian formalism and French avant–garde. *Vérité*, in the sense that it is used by Enwezor, does not confront the viewer with facts; rather, it opens a space where truth is perceived as a process. In fact, Enwezor (2009) makes a distinction between 'truth' as the state or quality of being real, and *vérité*, which rather articulates the meaning of a sense of truthfulness (86–90). In this new articulation, documentary practices tend to be reflexive, analytical and critical. Thus, the documentary form can be utilized in order to help produce awareness of the link between images and the world, documents and events, institutions and publics. These approaches tend to operate on the level of an aesthetic and methodological deconstruction of the conventional documentary mode, increasing the diversity and complexity of forms that merge video, experimental film, performance, and conceptual art, as well as an array of discursive strategies. Consequently, documentary became a reflexive practice that is at once plural and critical, playing in between facticity and authenticity, and acting under the influence of the interplay between

aesthetics and ethics. Framed by experimentation and responsibility, artistic practice and critical analysis, the documentary form can be understood as 'expanded,'[31] responding to conditions of global modernity.

Enwezor's aspiration for Documenta 11 was to produce an exhibition based on a constellation of domains of influence able to perform at once as art, theoretical thinking, and action. In other words, his aim was to stage a critical project within the realm of public debate in which ideas that do not easily lend themselves to being represented could be articulated. Thus, documentary, or the *vérité* mode, as he preferred, had a significant role to play in this regard. The presence of documentary within contemporary art allowed for the appearance of a structure conducive to debate and, most importantly, to the survey of the conditions of life within the context of global realignments.

More recently, artist and writer Hito Steyerl (2009) stressed the necessity to address documentary as a "transnational language of practice" that circulates beyond national borders. She states, "[i]ts standard narratives are recognized all over the world and its forms are almost independent of national or cultural difference. Precisely because they operate so closely on material reality, they are intelligible wherever this reality is relevant" (Steyerl 2009, 225). Beyond the dispersal of discourses operating within contemporary art as a reflection of a globalized world, there are recognizable features of the documentary form that unify it with a language of its own – one that is able to transcend national borders and enable a public debate across them. There is no specific, reductive way of defining what documentary is; however to see how documentary features within the field of contemporary art is perhaps akin to that intangible, moiré–like pattern formed by the dispersal of discourses that distinguishes our globalized era, as Nichols (1983, 18) would put it.

The legacy of Enwezor's curatorial work still deserves unpacking today. Seen now with some relative historical distance, the documentary within contemporary art provoked all kinds of exciting opportunities for new envisioning and falsification, such as multi–screen video installations, imagined biographies of fictitious persons, collections of found and anonymous photographs and films, film versions of photographic albums and photomontages composed from historical photographs, etc. Today, we should pay particular attention to how, in response to an era of post–truth and fake news, artists are once again

[31] For more on the notion of 'expanded documentary,' see Evgenia Giannouri's (2016) "No Man's Land, Every Man's Home" (2016).

employing the documentary form to instigate "new flows and transactions between images," texts, narratives, documents, statements, events, and communities (Enwezor 2003). Perhaps we should consider how the documentary has informed the notion of post–truth as well as how post–truth has recently contributed to provoking documentary to rethink its relation to speculative realms, into the parafictional, and into utopian landscapes. Conceivably, the effects of post–truth within a globalized digitalized world have already redirected the documentary form.

Part II: Documentary in Contemporary Art: Between "Uncertainty" and a "Reality-Based Community"

On April 3, 2017 *Time News Magazine* published a cover story that asked in bold letters "Is Truth Dead?" (Gibbs 2017) Set on a plain black field and inside a red frame, the headline was a typographic tribute to "Is God Dead?" (Rothman 1966) cover from April 8, 1966. Since *Time's* foundation in 1923 this famous issue was the first to appear without any image, only large bold letters in red on a black background. More recent events have put the concept of truth in the same layer of representation, or perhaps non–representation. By 1966, President Kennedy had been assassinated, the Vietnam War had begun to escalate, crime rates were increasing, and Americans were entering an era of declining trust in their institutions. The cover of *Time* in April that year announced a moment of national reflection. *Time's* most recent announcement of a similar moment of reflection was inspired by Donald Trump's successful campaign for presidency. For the issue "Is Truth Dead?" *Time's* editor Nancy Gibbs writes that, just as many said they believed in God in 1966 – "I suspect that about as many would say they believe in Truth, and yet we find ourselves having an intense debate over its role and power in the face of a President who treats it like a toy." (Gibbs 2017). Furthermore, Gibbs notes that when PolitiFact found that seventy percent of Trump's campaign statements were false, nearly two–thirds of voters polled during the election said that he was untrustworthy, but still won the election, one cannot help but wonder if the threat to truth far exceeds any one man's actions. If this is the case, then the *Time's* rhetorical question is terrifyingly relevant.

Since 2016, the term "post–truth" has been used throughout the West to attempt to describe the politics and use of 'alternative facts' that have occurred since before Trump's election. The post–truth era is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as a culture in which "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (OED). The establishment of the term post–truth followed the global economic crisis of 2008 which was partially triggered by what came to be known as the subprime mortgage crisis: a severe contraction of liquidity in global financial markets which originated in the United States following the collapse of the housing market. A series of

failures of major commercial and investment banks, mortgage lenders, insurance companies, savings and loan associations caused the Great Recession (2007–2009), the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of 1929. The emergence of the term post–truth that followed these series of events is used to state that politics, in particular, has realigned its relationship with truth. Post–truth is one element of a constellation of terms, which appears alongside "alternative facts" and "fake news," suggesting the erosion of long–trusted institutional foundations in different geographical contexts. Once associated with purposiveness, certainty, and determination, 'truth' can now also be seen as not being able to counter inconsistency, uncertainty, and discord. Although now we can look at the American elections in retrospect, President Trump's legacy has inspired and left its mark on the politics of countries such as Brazil, Turkey and Israel, just to name a few.

"Have you heard that reality has collapsed? Post–truth politics, the death of facts, fake news, deep–state conspiracies, paranoia on the rise. Such pronouncements are often feverish objections to a nightmarish condition" (Balsom 2017). This is how Erika Balsom sets the stage for her arguments which renews calls for contemporary documentary to move away from 'fictions' and instead generate reparative effects on our relationship with 'truth.' Balsom sees in these two main global changes – the post–2008 global financial crisis and the rise of populism as we entered into a post–truth era – the beginning of a shift in norms and values of documentary filmmaking within the field of contemporary art, in a way that responds to the current political climate. We can read a different attitude ten years earlier in Hito Steyerl's short but influential text: "Documentary Uncertainty" (2007), where she identifies 'uncertainty' as the principle that governs contemporary documentary image production as well as the principle that governs the contemporary context of globalized media circuits. But before proceeding deeper into analyzing what Steyerl and Balsom have to say in this respect, I would like to take a closer analysis at the meaning of "contemporary art." This term, which has already been discussed in the previous section and will continue to be frequently mentioned throughout the thesis, does not just refer to recent events such as those described above but includes a broader account of what could be considered contemporary. My use of the term *contemporary art* is informed by writings of Russian theorist Boris Groys (2009) and British philosopher Peter Osborne (2013).

1.2.1. The contemporary as a coming together “of times” and “with time”

For both Groys and Osborne, to be “con–temporary” does not necessarily mean to be present, to be here–and–now. For Osborne, “con–temporaneity” is a coming together not simply “in time”, but “of times” (Osborne 2013, 17); for Groys, it suggests being “with time” (Groys 2009). Accordingly, rather than merely “existing in time” with our contemporaries, the contemporary is marked by, on the one hand, a sense of being “with time” and, on the other, the merging of different yet equally “present” temporalities or “times.” These two perspectives do not conflict, but rather complement one another.

Osborne has dedicated most part of his research to understanding and to making understandable what is meant by contemporary art from the standpoint of philosophy. My focus here is on Osborne's ideas about "contemporary art" presented in his book *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013), which offers one of the most comprehensive and current analyses of this concept. For Osborne (2013), not all art produced recently, or described by others as 'contemporary', can be understood to be contemporary. Osborne explains that art's contemporaneity presents an inherently complex notion of the present (2). In the first chapter of his book, “The Fiction of the Contemporary,” Osborne (2013) contends that the construction of a critical concept of contemporary art requires first the construction of a more general concept of the contemporary. He notes that for a long time, the idea of contemporaneity has been referred to as living, existing, or occurring in time, specifically within the periodicity of a human life. Yet, for him, it is important to extend the terms with which contemporaneity is usually associated in order to include its growing complexity of temporal, social and political implications (15). Osborne states,

> (...) what seems distinctive and important about the changing temporal quality of the historical present over the last few decades is best expressed through the distinctive conceptual grammar of con–temporaneity, a coming together not simply 'in' time, but *of* times: we do not just live or exist together 'in time' with our contemporaries – as if time itself is indifferent to this existing together but rather the present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of *different but equally 'present'* temporalities or 'times', a temporal unity in disjunction, or a *disjunctive unity of present times* (Osborne 2013, 17 – original emphasis).

What is being argued is that contemporary does not only include the coming together *in* time but the coming together of *different* 'times.' Contained in Osborne's statement is his finding that there are at least three different periodizations, geographies and sensibilities of contemporary art at stake. All are based on a rupture of a particular historical event, and all privilege a specific geographical area.

According to Osborne (2013), the first periodization of contemporary art marks the moment after the Second World War, when a Western distinction was drawn between contemporary and modern art (18). This periodization results from the acknowledgment that a paradigm of modern art was rapidly becoming outdated – an acknowledgement that did not happen until the 1980s but is still in use today. From a chronological standpoint, this is the broadest periodization of contemporary art Osborne has found. This rough periodization of world history is marked by the postwar break. Hence, he states, "[o]n the broad definition, however, we are still essentially living, art–critically, in an extended postwar" (Osborne 2013, 18–19). Moreover, as a result of the end of a 'world' war, this periodization spans the globe in its geographical terrain. Nevertheless, he reminds us, it is essentially an art world seen and selected from the viewpoint of the USA – one side of the Cold War that was inaugurated by World War II (19). In the second periodization identified here, contemporary art is described as emerging sometime in the 1960s. The "Sixties," writes Osborne (2013), constituted an ontological break from preceding medium–specific neo–avant–garde practices, exemplified by a range of new types of art, among which performance, minimalism and conceptual art appear, retrospectively, to have been most influential. This periodization, despite a focus on the underlying logic of the artwork, is, paradoxically, more geopolitically inclusive than the previous one.[32] The main reason for this inclusiveness is related to the intensification of anti–imperialist struggles for national liberation, which had a profound effect on Western domestic politics (20).

Osborne (2013) argues that it is precisely the dispersed, distributed character of art together with its use of non–traditional means – primarily the mass media – that is a defining characteristic of this periodization, and which indicates a pronounced break with the past. As such, contemporary art after the 1960s breaks with established artistic methods, styles

[32] However, Osborne observes that this periodization "has incorporated 'Second World' (state socialist) art of the 1960s and 1970s from the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China largely only retrospectively (after 1989), as a supplement, rather than as contributing constitutively to art's contemporaneity" (Osborne 2013, 20).

and genres through the use of an unlimited number of means, and operates with a philosophically and institutionally based conception of what constitutes 'art' beyond the previously accepted conventionalities (20). He continues to describe how contemporary art has found a third main periodization in the current art–critical discourse, namely 'art after 1989' symbolically marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall. From a political standpoint, 1989 signifies the end of historical communism, the collapse of left–wing political cultures, and the triumph of neoliberal globalization of capitalism, including the rise of capitalism in China (20). As an artistic development, this period corresponds to three convergent trends: the apparent closure of the avant–garde's historical horizons; a qualitative deepening of autonomous art's integration into the cultural system; and globalization and transnationalization of the biennale format (20–21). Osborne argues that if art is to remain 'contemporary,' it must reflectively integrate these trends into its procedures. Based on this last category, we can see how the three periodizations of contemporary art Osborne puts forward, do not necessarily dispute one another. Instead, they can be considered as different degrees of contemporaneity and overlapping histories. It is possible for each to emerge at times, but they are always mediated by their relationship to the other two.

The difficulty in defining contemporary art, for Osborne (2013) lies not only in identifying periods, geographies, or the sensitivities associated with artistic practice. Rather, the concept of contemporaneity is problematic from an empirical point of view, in the sense that "total conjunction of present times" is beyond possible experience and as such, it can only exist as an idea (22). Osborne states,

> The root idea of the contemporary as a living, existing, or occurring together 'in' time, then, requires further specification as a *differential* historical temporality of the present: a coming together of different but equally 'present' times, a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times. As a historical concept, the contemporary thus involves a projection of unity onto the differential totality of the times of human lives that are in principle, or potentially, present to each other in some way, at some particular time – paradigmatically, now, since it is the living present that provides the model of contemporaneity. That is to say, the concept of the contemporary projects a *single historical time of the present*, as a living present: a common, albeit internally disjunctive, present historical time of human lives. 'The contemporary', then, is another way of referring to the historical present. Such a notion is inherently problematic but increasingly inevitable (Osborne 2013, 22 – original emphasis).

Implicit in this statement is the idea that the contemporary is a projection of unity even if it is a unity that is internally disjunctive. The contemporary resembles a utopian ideal in this regard, insofar as it imaginatively projects nonexistent unity onto the disjunctive relations between contemporaneous times. Moreover, Osborne (2013) contends that the contemporary projects into existence a concept of time that is, in principle, futuristic or anticipatory. Meaning that the concept of the contemporary is intrinsically speculative, essentially because it anticipates the future structurally: "it functions as if the speculative horizon of the unity of human history had been reached" (Osborne 2013, 23). Here is where Osborne's theory is both complex and enticing at the same time. He explains that by rendering present a unity that does not exist, the contemporary creates a fiction, in other words, it creates a narrative that makes the accumulated disjunctive presents coherent (23). Osborne writes,

> Epistemologically, one might say, the contemporary marks that point of indifference between historical and fictional narrative that has been associated (...) with the notion of speculative experience itself. More specifically, the contemporary is an *operative* fiction: it *regulates the division* between the past and the present within the present. And it does so, in part, not simply by recognizing certain contemporaneities, but by projecting contemporaneity – the establishment of connections within the living present – as a task to be achieved (Osborne 2013, 23–24).

According to this argument the practice of contemporary art is, in itself, an 'operative fiction' that regulates the passage between the present and the past. It recognizes certain features of contemporaneity and projects contemporaneity into the future – a "will to contemporaneity," as Osborne puts it (Osborne 2013, 26). The disjunction, as is claimed by Osborne, is not only temporal but also spatial. Hence, "[t]he idea of the contemporary poses the problem of the disjunctive unity of space–time, or the geopolitically historical. (...) That is, the fiction of the contemporary is necessarily a geopolitical fiction" (Osborne 2013, 25). This means that the contemporary as a fiction of unity of times relies heavily on a global fiction – particularly, that of global transnationalism. As Osborne puts it, the putative spatio–spatial form of the current unity of historical experience is transnationality marked by "demographic shifts, diasporas, labor, migrations, the movements of global capital and media, and processes of cultural circulation and hybridization" (Osborne 2013, 26).

Osborne suggests that it is in the "photographic and post–photographic culture of the image that the contemporaneity of the contemporary is most clearly expressed" (Osborne 2013, 24). Here is where Osborne meets Groys: the latter also identifies time–based art, such as photography and cinema – which for the purpose of this thesis can be referred to as documentary film – as a reflection of a contemporary condition that he describes in his short text "Comrades of Time." Groys' (2009) conception of contemporaneity emanates from a sense of "being with time" – or being a "comrade of time," as he also puts it. His concept of the contemporary comes first from the realization that the present is something that obstructs us in our realization of everyday projects and prevents the transition from the past to the future, depriving us of the opportunity to realize our hopes and dreams. The present, or the contemporary, is considered here to be constituted by doubt, uncertainty, hesitation and indecision. Hence, the contemporary, instead of serving as a bridge from the past to the future, is a place where the past and the future have to be simultaneously questioned and re–articulated. Groys writes,

> Today, we are stuck in the present as it reproduces itself without leading to any future. We simply lose our time, without being able to invest it securely, to accumulate it, whether utopically or heterotopically. The loss of the infinite historical perspective generates the phenomenon of unproductive, wasted time. However, one can also interpret this wasted time more positively, as excessive time – as time that attests to our life as pure being–in–time, beyond its use within the framework of modern economic and political projects (Groys 2009).

Art that incorporates an element of time, such as documentary film, thematizes the unproductive, wasted, non–historical, excessive time referred to in the statement above as it also thematizes the uncertainty and the feeling of a collapsed society addressed by Balsom. It captures and demonstrates events that take place in time. In other words, it documents 'time' that is on the verge of being lost as a result of its unproductive character. On the one hand, time is perceived as unproductive, disjunctive, meaningless, uncertain, doubtful. On the other, time–based art documents this very sense of time. As stated by Groys, "[a]rt ceases to be present, to create the effect of presence – but it also ceases to be "in the present," understood as the uniqueness of the here–and–now. Rather, art begins to document a repetitive, indefinite, maybe even infinite present – a present that was always already there, and can be prolonged into the indefinite future" (Grois 2009). Precisely because time–based

art can create the effect of presence, as described above, it can also collaborate "with time," and thus, be contemporary.

1.2.2. Perspectives on contemporary documentary

As has been discussed earlier, documentary inhabits one of the multiple folds of contemporary art. Some of the events that brought documentary and art together coincide, others disagree with the ruptures that conventionally signal the periodization attested under the name of contemporary art. In spite of historical events occurring prior to the end of World War II, which indicate the art/documentary conjunction – such as the early years of Soviet communism that led to avant–garde movements and the Great Depression of the 1930s in the US that motivated social documentary photography – it was not until the rise of the anti–colonial movements as well as the movements of the 1960s and 1970s that fuelled the *nouvelle vague* documentary, the film–essay and other types of documentary film affiliated with feminist movements, that the documentary gains its contemporary momentum. We may identify the inclusion of documentary into contemporary art at the beginning of the era of neoliberal globalization after 1989, which despite their formal differences bear witness to their effort to reflect an increasingly privatized and fragmented global environment. As Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl have noted "[t]he massive transformations within the multiple modes of the documentary are intrinsically connected to the ambivalent transitions of globalization" (Lind and Steyerl 2009, 14). Now, in a post–truth era, how does documentary feature within contemporary art?

Post–truth is a term that we commonly associate with recent events as well as with popular culture and politics, as noted above. Nonetheless, it involves a critique of the idea of *truth* which is not necessarily new. This critique of truth can be traced back (at least) to Frederick Nietzsche's philosophy. Specifically, his text "The Genealogy of Morals" from 1887, where he states: "The will to truth stands in need of critique – here we define our own task the value of truth must be experimentally *called into question*" (Nietzsche 2010, 110–111 – original emphasis). Truth, for Nietzsche, is associated with legal and religious matters, but could be extended to any principle that is posited as sovereign and universal, including art. Art as the counterforce to truth is introduced by Martin Heidegger in "The Raging Discordance between Truth and Art" where he highlights how Nietzsche's argument does

not lead to harmony between truth and art, but rather "[t]he relation between art and truth is a discordance that arouses dread" (Heidegger 1979, 142). This confronts us as to whether the raging discordance without dread is something that we can live with or if it can be used as part of a critical strategy. Art, from these perspectives, should be used as a critical weapon against sedimented truths and abstract theorizing. This is perhaps one of the major contributions of Nietzsche's radical legacy on our perception of truth as well as of art. Nietzsche's suspicion regarding truth can put into perspective how we all have become somehow suspicious to what is currently considered an indistinction between fact and fiction.

Within the prolific realm of documentary theory, the question of post–truth has been recently addressed by Nele Wynants in *When Fact is Fiction: Documentary Art in the Post–Truth Era* (2020). In the introductory text, Wynants states that "the relationship between fact and fiction is complex but inevitable" (Wynants 2020, 11). One of the questions that motivates the various contributions in the book is to ask how fiction may influence us during a time when fake news and alternative facts threaten the integrity of politics and the media. And one of the conclusions that the book offers is that artists "deliberately blur the line between fact and fiction" and they do so to "encourage alternative imaginings of the reality" (Wynants 2020, 14). The question here is how we can live with the line between fact and fiction being blurred.

As I have introduced above and will expand on below, Balsom and Steyerl offer two different perspectives on this question. Steyerl (2007) sees this blurring as a reflection of reality as it appears to us – doubtful, uncertain, hesitant, and indecisive – resulting from our current political climate; while Balsom (2017) criticizes it as instigating further confusion and calls for documentary's ability to document reality not as a reflection but as a reparation of our troubled sense of reality.

1.2.3. Uncertainty and authenticity

In "Documentary Uncertainty," Steyerl (2007) identifies in contemporary documentary video certain properties of abstraction. She gives, as an example, images of the US invasion of Iraq which, in 2003 were widely displayed on television. Due to their low resolution, Steyerl explains, the images were highly pixelated, thus leaving the viewer with an image

partially abstracted by brown and green squares which supposedly documented military action in Iraq. Steyerl observes that the more instantly accessible documentary images become, the less there is to "see". She calls this tendency to abstraction "the uncertainty principle of modern documentarism" (Steyerl 2007). In this text, she describes 'uncertainty' as the principle which governs contemporary documentary image production as well as the principle that governs the contemporary context of globalized media circuits (Steyerl 2007). She proposes that these abstract images are in–fact reliable documents of the uncertainty, which has resulted from global anxiety, aroused by precarious living conditions, media–provoked fear of 'others', and a general belief in groundless truth claims that define contemporary 'risk societies'[33] (Steyerl 2007). In addition, Steyerl applies this principle to the theory that surrounds documentary imagery because many of the traditional concepts associated with documentary, such as truth, reality, objectivity, and so on, are characterized by a lack of clear definitions. She recognizes in this a paradox: "the documentary form, which is supposed to transmit knowledge in a clear and transparent way, has to be investigated using conceptual tools, which are neither clear nor transparent themselves" (Steyel 2007). The pressing question that arises from Steyerl's observations is: if contemporary documentary images have become more abstract, reflecting their function within global cultural industries, and the conceptual tools we have to investigate them are not clear, then, how are we supposed to relate to the presumed authenticity of images? For Steyerl, the solution is in part, and provisionally, dependent on not resisting the uncertainty principle, but rather embracing it as one of the few irrefutable features that govern our current globalized world and the images that are produced within it. Seen from this perspective, acknowledging uncertainty is part of the process of situating the notion of authenticity.

Steyerl (2007) foregrounds three main interconnected and overlapped influences that help explain why the use of documentary forms became so prominently used by contemporary artists. Firstly, she argues, documentaries are synonymous with publicness, state funding, and communicative rationality, which in this sense sometimes functions as an

[33] "Risk Societies" is the term underpinning an analysis of Western contemporary society by Ulrich Beck (1992), focusing on the changing nature of society's relation to production and distribution and associating it with the environmental impact of a globalizing economy based on scientific and technical knowledge, which has become central to social organizations and social conflicts. Also, Anthony Giddens (1999), in his book "Risk and Responsibility," investigates the intimate relationship between risk and responsibility by asking "who takes the responsibility for the risk taken," paying particular attention to activities such as risk reduction, risk assessment, risk management, and risk communication.

alternative media circuit, pointing out the flaws of corporate journalism and globalization at large. Secondly, she takes into account the influence of the practice of so–called 'contextual art,' in which artists critically investigate and reflect on the economic and political conditions of their own activities, in this context we can see how documentaries tend to integrate the principle of uncertainty and, at the same time, to remain critical about it. Lastly, the impact of Cultural Studies on the field of contemporary art, helped to introduce a concern with the politics of representation and a sensitivity to the formation of power relations within all forms of representation.

However, Steyerl also points to the fact that important aspects of the character of documents (which could include archival film material) have been neglected by many artists, for they have failed to recognize that documents in themselves also take part in power relations. In other words, Steyerl proposes that there is a failure to recognize that documents purport their own structure of seeing and knowing that is invariably linked to a particular aesthetic regime. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's (2004) concept of the "aesthetic regime",[34] Steyerl (2007) argues for the necessity to recognize that the political side of any aesthetic project is located in the way that certain aesthetic regimes enable certain visibilities or articulations and disable others. On the one hand, the artist's aim is to deconstruct power relations associated with the production of documents, while on the other hand, the use of documentaries can reinforce juridical, scientific, and political claims within the field of art, which perpetuates an epistemological program that is closely linked with the project of Western colonialism. As an example of this, she reminds us that "the features of

[34] The aesthetic regime of art is part of a larger conceptualization of the regimes of art which also includes the ethical and the representational regimes of art. This argument can be found in different places and articulated in various ways by Jacques Rancière, but it was mentioned for the first time in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics, The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004). Here, he states: "The aesthetic regime of the arts stands in contrast with the representative regime. I call this regime *aesthetic* because the identification of art no longer occurs via a division within ways of doing and making, but it is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products. (...) In the aesthetic regime, artistic phenomenon is identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a thought that has become foreigner to itself" (Rancière 2004, 23). Later, in his book *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, Rancière (2010) recontextualizes the aesthetic regime and further explains that the aesthetic regime transcends the normativity and the correspondence between form and content upon which most representations rest. Art is defined here, in its singularity, as belonging to a distinct sensorium that departs from the usual regime of the sensible. The aesthetic regime, it is argued, arranges a paradoxical form of efficacy: that of dissensus (Rancère 2010, 139). Fundamentally, the aesthetic regime allows us to identify the characteristics of the understanding of modern art and modern society that followed the political, economic, and cultural revolutions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Specifically, it differentiates the modern (aesthetic) from the classic (representative) understanding of art; and, at the same time, it allows to debate some of the most influential approaches to contemporary art.

photographic technology, based as they are on military technology, testify to this historical link" (Steyerl 2007). This produces a constant back and forth between practice and critique (and self–critique) of documentary practices, which punctuates how the uncertainty principle works within this context; it leaves the documentary in a perpetual paradox and state of self–reflexivity. But Steyerl's analysis of the role of documentary images within our contemporary society does not end at this impasse. She extends it to an understanding of politics that tends to shift from being representational to being "beyond representational" (Steyerl 2007). In other words, she speaks of the tendency of politics to become increasingly perceptual or aesthetic as they work through the senses. Similarly, the documentary form also plays within this affective tendency. The already mentioned example of the blurred and abstract images of the Iraq invasion evoke a situation of constant exception, a crisis in permanence, a state of heightened alert and tension. According to Steyerl, they are paradigmatic of how documentary images intensify a general feeling of fear, which characterizes the governmental attitude of our historical moment. Moreover, the abstraction that increasingly takes over documentary images is linked to another type of abstraction that we are increasingly becoming aware of. Steyerl states,

> Very tangible developments make clear that the principle of representative democracy is becoming increasingly problematic. The political representation of the people is undermined in many ways – from the non–representation of migrants to the creation of strange democratic hybrids like the European Union. If people are no longer represented politically, then maybe other forms of symbolic representation are undermined as well. If political representation becomes abstract and blurred, so might documentary representation (Steyerl 2007).

The aesthetic regime of documentary images, as Steyerl sees it, is thus linked to the aesthetic regime of political representation (Rancière 2004). Steyerl concludes that the political importance of documentary is not only dependent on its subject matter but on the ways in which it is organized, i.e. in the specific 'distributions of the sensible' (Rancière 2004, see footnote 24) implemented by documentary articulations. Therefore, for Steyerl, it is precisely the blurred and out of focus images that offer a 'better picture' of our current situation, perhaps much better than any objective report.

"They [contemporary documentaries] are as post–representational as the majority of contemporary politics. But amazingly, we can still speak of truth with regard to them" (Steyerl 2007). With this statement, Steyerl indicates that the uncertainty that governs contemporary documentary image production reflects the contemporary world as such. On the one hand, documentaries reflect the precarious nature of contemporary lives, on the other, they reflect on the ambiguity of any representation. For Steyerl, to find a critical position with respect to images that reflect a state of uncertainty requires more than acknowledging or revealing them. She calls for the replacement of the set of affects that is connected to uncertainty with another one, but she resists defining exactly what these viable alternatives to uncertainty may look like.

1.2.4. Rehabilitating objective documentary

Ten years after Hito Steyerl wrote "Documentary Uncertainty," Erika Balsom wrote another significant text in response to contemporary documentary practice: "The Reality–Based Community," published in 2017 by the e–flux journal. In the text, Balsom asserts that the negative effects of uncertainty, such as the indiscernibility of fact and fiction, post–truth politics, fake news, and deep–state conspiracies, make it necessary for us to find a way to return to some degree of certainty. Balsom asks:

> The interest of documentary lies in its ability to challenge dominant formations, not to conform to or mimic them, and yet uncertainty and doubt remain its contemporary watchwords, especially as it is articulated within the art context. What would it be to instead affirm the facticity of reality with care, and thereby temper the epistemological anxieties of today in lieu of reproducing them? How might a film take up a reparative relation to an embattled real? It might involve assembling rather than dismantling, fortifying belief rather than debunking false consciousness, love rather than skepticism (Balsom 2017).

It is argued that feelings of anxiety, paranoia, and doubt that arise from uncertainty call for quick action so that a general sense of unreality can be lifted. For that reason, Balsom declares her desire to live in a reality–based community,[35] "an imagined community founded

[35] Balsom takes the idea of a "reality–based community" from a *New York Times* article where the journalist Ron Suskind revealed a conversation with a presidential aide—widely speculated to be Karl Rove, deputy

in a practice of care for this most fragile of concepts" (Balsom 2017). For Balsom, the way that a 'reality–based community' can be imagined is through the means of documentary, mostly because it partakes in an indexical bond to the real offering a mediated encounter with reality but, at the same time, it is a site where commitments to reality can be challenged. For example, she notes that since the 1980s a deep suspicion of documentary's relationship to the real spread through almost all practitioners, critics and viewers of documentaries. The main driver for this suspicion was a postmodern association of documentary's observational mode of representation with modes of domination, thus turning the observational film into a "bad object"[36] (Balsom 2017). Yet, Balsom rejects that this is the only association possible and maintains that observational documentaries, as part of a larger canon of cinema *vérité*, have been unfairly characterized. Therefore, she suggests that a better look into the practice of observational documentary – a practice that minimizes the intervention of the filmmaker, consciously avoids commentary, and entrusts the automatism of the filmic camera – might clear the way to restore documentary's relationship with the real and serve as a representational basis for a reality–based community to form. However, she is well aware of the criticism that this (re)turn to observational documentaries might entail: a return to positivism or a naive belief in the transparency of representation. Yet, Balsom maintains that "bad objects do not stay bad objects forever; they make unsurprising returns to favor when the time is right" (Balsom 2017). For her, the time for a return to the observational documentary has arrived, not only in theory but in practice as well. Moreover, observational documentary is, for Balsom, a much better way of producing a positive visibility than the proclaimed blurring of fact and fiction of the "new documentary" (Williams 1993), which

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chief of staff to George W. Bush – who considered that observation and analysis of reality was an outdated activity. Suskind's full statement reads as follows, "The aide said that guys like me were 'in what we call the reality–based community,' which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. 'That's not the way the world really works anymore,' he continued. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.'" (Suskind 2004).

[36] There are other associations that have led us to be suspicious of documentary forms: for example, in the 1990s, digital technology and the potential for manipulation that images could be subjected to, put their authenticity at risk. Postmodernism rearranged the epistemological basis of concepts like historicity, truth, and objectivity. In the 1980s, one of the authors who explored these concepts was Jean Baudrillard who observed a loss of the real, a phenomenon closely linked to the media, primarily due to cinema and television. In "The Murder of the Real," Jean Baudrillard observes: "In our virtual world, the question of the Real, of the referent, of the subject and its object, can no longer even be posed. (...) What could be said about this blind point of reversal, where nothing is either true or false any longer and everything is drifting indifferently between cause and effect, between origin and finality? Is it reversible or irreversible? Can we return to the point where the line of history was broken and we were projected to the other side of the mirror?" (Baudrillard 2000, 62).

proliferated after the 1990s. Balsom believes that the blurring of fact and fiction and the abstraction of the image that arrived with it can now be considered commonplace since the emancipatory potential that initially accompanied the rise of the reflexive documentary has already dissipated.

During the heated political period leading up to, and during, Trump's presidency, Balsom observed that: "We live in an age of 'alternative facts,' in which the intermingling of reality and fiction, so prized in a certain kind of documentary practice since the 1990s, appears odiously all around us." She continues, "In light of current conditions, do we need to reevaluate the denigration of fact inherent in the championing of 'ecstatic truth'?" (Balsom 2017).[37] Balsom's statement above is a direct attack on this idea of truth because it goes against what she is after, which could be described as factual truth.

As has been recognized by several authors, (for instance Lind and Steyerl 2009a; Nichols 1991), different modes of documentary tend to emerge after a polemical contestation of previous modes. The observational mode was mainly criticized for its seemingly positivist belief in the reproduction of reality and a disproof of mediation (see for instance Minh–ha's "Documentary Is/Not a Name" 1990). Because it was caught up in a critique of objectivism, the observational documentary was seen as asserting rather than questioning its relationship to reality, hence it was seen as lacking the reflexivity that the so–called "new documentary" sought. For Balsom, this was an important approach in the 1990s, at the time Linda Williams was writing, but Balsom considered the reflexive mode of documentary reached a limit subsequent to this. The limit of the "new documentary" meets the limits of the critique of objectivism, which Donna Haraway was well aware of already in 1988 when she alerted to the dangers and contradictions of the critique on the notion of objectivity and asserts that "[f]eminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledge" (Haraway 1988, 581).

The return to observational documentary is not only necessary, but has already happened, as Balsom (2007) declares, in particular within a more activist trend of documentary practitioners. It has returned as a counter–response to current politics that have embraced uncertainty to promote the effectiveness of alternative facts, using them as a tool for a political program that works only insofar as it can maintain a state of confusion within

[37] 'Ecstatic truth' is a term introduced by Werner Herzog (2010) to describe how, for him, it is possible to work with the notion of truth in documentary cinema – see chapter 4 for more on Herzog's notion of ecstatic truth.

its population. If, on the one hand, some documentaries depart from objective reality in order to insist that documentary is inherently a fiction mode, this approach may also lead to a dangerous relativism that makes the distinction between truth and falsity ineffective. The way Balsom situates documentary filmmaking is thus a question of whether supporting a practice of indiscernibility of the borders between fact and fiction or working against it by reintroducing the tools of 'observation' to create discernibility.

A possible way forward for documentary practice in order to level up with the challenges of current politics that has created alternative facts to instigate confusion, fear, and uncertainty, is, Balsom concludes, through a "rehabilitation of the viability of observation in vanguard documentary" (Balsom 2017). The rehabilitation of observational documentary, as is being proclaimed by Balsom, forages ethnography through cinema rather than through the written discourse – meaning that it relies on the non–coded faculties of the photographic medium to provide a substantial description of physical reality, including reality's excessiveness and ambiguity; while at the same time, it includes a degree of reflexivity. Balsom calls for other forms of creativity that need not rely on fictionalization, intervention, and proclamations of subjectivity to be expressively reflexive and politically effective. Therefore, she promotes that to be politically attuned with the fictionalization, or the aestheticization of politics today, means to consciously work against, or search for less fictionalized and aestheticized methods of representation.

Balsom's call for a return to observational documentary can be understood in the light of Hal Foster's "The Return of the Real" (1996). Foster's idea of 'return' is seen through the lens of psychoanalysis and is used to realign the meaning of the return of some avant–garde artistic practices in the post–war period. In his view, the return of an event, or a practice, indicates not a simple repetition, but a re–coding of that event that can only be comprehended through deferred action. The observational documentary can thus return, not by repeating the same approach to their subjects as previous observational approaches, but rather by re–coding and integrating a different attitude into an objectivist mode of filmmaking. It might be that the return of observational documentary not only extends the critique of objectivism, as it comprehends it for the first time while acknowledging the limits of this critique and still producing new experiences, cognitive connections and political interventions. Here, the observational documentary returns in a post–truth period with a new focus, the current politics of misinformation, alternative facts and fake news, in order to

gather a community that is determined to claim war on fiction and demand a return of the real.

1.2.5. Problematizing documentary in contemporary art

These two texts by Hito Steyerl and Erika Balsom, draw our attention to different aspects of contemporary documentary which relate, in general terms, to our current political situation. Despite this, their approaches differ significantly: where Steyerl emphasizes a kind of formalist criticism focusing more on the structural purposes of contemporary documentary filmmaking and addressing uncertainty as a principle that works with and through this practice, Balsom identifies with a observational approach to documentary that finds in the registration of reality possibilities of reparation and redemption, to counter politics of fakery. Although different, Steyerl and Balsom provide a similar mapping for the current situation of documentary filmmaking within contemporary art. They agree that we are currently living in a risk society where accountability cannot be taken for granted; that the contemporary context of globalized media tends towards to post–truth in a way that creates confusion, anxiety and paranoias; and that documentary practices in the field of contemporary art offer productive ideas to investigate this context. Moreover, their writings coincide in their observations of the paradoxes of the new documentary: Steyerl by claiming that we tend to forget that documentary also partakes in reinforcing existing power relations, even when it tries to deconstruct them, which makes it necessary to take into account the aesthetic regime where this practice is inserted; and Balsom by declaring the end of the emancipatory effect of documentaries that perform a deconstructive critique of their own means of representation.

The paradoxes of the "new documentary" and the end of its emancipatory effect can be seen as the result of the completion of the epistemological space that constitutes this practice. In other words, the epistemological space of the new documentary terminates when its possibilities have been fully realized through a process of self–reflection. At the very moment of completeness, a gap or void is revealed to be at the core of the reflexive documentary film. This process terminates, as we have seen, with the awareness of a paradox, a fundamental incompleteness that is at the heart of the reflexive documentary. As Foucault would put it, this is also the moment when another documentary episteme is

anticipated or begins to take form. The next stage might thus not entirely point at a return to the observational documentary film, as Balsom argues – even if this "new observational documentary" has been re–coded to respond to more recent political events. What comes next, in my view, is a radical break with and a rearrangement of the rules of the game of documentary.

Steyerl's analysis problematizes this gap, the end of the cycle of the documentary film, through the notion of uncertainty. Her way of problematizing the documentary leaves open the possibilities of what could come to replace the set of affects resulting from a general state of uncertainty that the reflexive documentary itself has also contributed to. In turn, Balsom's politics of care necessarily reduces the possibilities of documentary practice and theory; it is somewhat prescriptive in her attempt to find a solution to the rehabilitation of documentary as a social and artistic practice. It has the drive of an activist. Even when she acknowledges the importance of the "new documentary," she cannot retreat from a disapproval tone in her relationship with it, and calls for what 'must' be done instead:

> This is by no means to call for an invalidation of those strategies associated with the "new documentary"; let one hundred flowers bloom, so long as they avoid the pestilence of postmodern relativism. Rather, it is simply to insist that the aspersions cast for so long on the facticity of recording must cease (Balsom 2017).

The question that follows is this: is it really necessary, or even possible, to abstain from all fictional devices and new aesthetic strategies in order to resist the destructive consequences of post–truth? In a way, I would argue that Steyerl already calculated the size of such a task and, for that reason, she hesitates to declare that the solution to uncertainty is its opposite: a turn to certainty and to denounce fictional formulas in documentary practices as being problematic. Even if her solution is unattainable, there is, in Balsom's account of the contemporary documentary, a strong drive that makes her own reading part of a civil practice, and such a drive demands attention. Balsom's politics of care are in fact directed at a population of viewers who are already saturated by politics of post–truth that circulate in global media and that tend to incapacitate them from distinguishing fact from fiction, particularly in times of crisis and conflict. There are, as Balsom observes, several examples of recent works that resort to strategies of observational documentary, that expand the means of a reflexive practice. Yet, it is also possible to observe that there are, in this field of practice,

works that intend to extend reflexive practices within documentary but do not resort exclusively to observational strategies, rather they also engage with speculative storytelling, parafictional strategies and experimental ethnography. These are works that propose a change in the traditional conception of the narrative space of the documentary while reaching the 'world out there.' What distinguishes this documentary practice is its fundamental impurity, their constant transgression into the realm of fiction and their dynamic relationship between aesthetic practice and the resulting theory this practice stimulates. These characteristics are also what aligns this practice with paraesthetic critical strategies, therefore it makes sense to ask how art can be used to confront the limitations of conventional documentary representations, not in order to resolve these limitations but to keep them open.

A specific approach to documentary within contemporary art, that deals with some of the issues mentioned above could thus be referred to as the paraesthetical documentary. This form of documentary alters the traditional historiographical approach by substituting "objective" discourse (a discourse that aims to express the real) with a discourse that adopts the form of a "fiction." Paraesthetical documentaries utilize fictions in the sense that fiction becomes the form of analysis of the documentary event. Thus, paraesthetical documentaries are not just hybrid documentaries, in which no distinction between documentary fact and fiction exists. Fiction, in this case, is what provides a form, or a method for the analysis that the documentary film proposes. The documentary/fiction conjunction is, in this sense, inherently transgressive not just because they cross boundaries but also because they inhabit these very boundaries. The question that is posed is no longer whether it is fiction or documentary, since fiction is what shapes the investigation into the subject that the documentary wishes to approach. Although I recognize the importance of a more prescriptive approach, such as Balsom's, to contemporary documentary, I do not invalidate documentary practices that engage with speculation and fiction to critically address our current situation. These are approaches to documentary that need a continuous repositioning of their viewers and a restatement of their methodological tools precisely because they are not stagnant, and they keep evolving into uncertain territories. The following chapter focuses on these types of parafictional strategies and will include in depth analysis of the term.

Chapter 2

Paraesthetic Self–Reflexivity in Trinh T. Minh–ha's Documentary Filmmaking and Theory (or) When is Self–Reflexivity?

Certain tendencies in contemporary art and theory emphasize the critical significance of self–reflexivity especially when concerned directly with social reality. Some texts and artworks appear as inherently self–reflexive, in the sense that they 'mirror' the image of themselves and consciously reflect the construction and function of the artwork/text in question. What is less clear is whether mechanisms of self–reflection – implying a process of doubling and regression – have any aesthetic or critical meaning and if so, what might that be? This question is relevant to the subject of this thesis, which examines the correlation between contemporary art and documentary film, as well as the tensions and overlaps that characterize relations between the two. There has been a tendency to assign self–reflexivity to contemporary documentary (Nichols 1991, Steyerl 2003, Minh–ha 1990, Williams 1993) which motivates this thesis. Hence, it seems pertinent to begin by questioning this claim. What does self–reflexivity mean for documentary film within contemporary art? While self–reflexivity is sometimes equated with a personal perspective, and other times with scientific rigor (where it is usually reduced to a question of technique), the very notion can also be understood in a critical sense. Trinh T Minh–ha, for instance, describes it as "processes to prevent meaning from ending with what is said and what is shown and (…) thereby to challenge representation itself" (Minh–ha 1991, 95).

David Carroll's idea of paraesthetics, already introduced in the previous chapter, offers a perspective on self–reflexivity that I find productive to approach in relation to documentary film and thus the question posed above. To better understand the relationship between philosophy and art, Carroll proposes to look into what he considers to be the paraesthetic critical strategies that can be found in the work of Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida. In this chapter, I will introduce and describe Carroll's paraesthetic theory and some of the critical strategies that he has identified in his book. Then I propose to consider

paraesthetics not only as productive for the understanding of the critical potential that exists in the correlation between philosophy and art by drawing on works of philosophy; it can also be productive to expand on this correlation via artworks, including documentary film, that are inherently self–reflexive. To that end, I will introduce Trinh T Minh–ha's body of work that exists in the margins between theory and practice, as an example of a writer/filmmaker whose work can be considered paraesthetical. I will argue that paraesthetics can be applied not only to the relationship Minh–ha establishes between theory and practice, but also to the critical meanings that her films develop through self–reflexive processes.

There are two moments with which paraesthetics can be associated within the frames of Minh–ha's work: one lies in the self–reflexive movements her films trigger in viewers by, for example, applying, or rather, proposing to work with notions such as the 'void' or the 'interval.' The other can be found in the link between Minh–ha's theoretical work and the creation of her films, and vice versa. The observations I will make on Minh–ha's work demonstrate that the notion of paraesthetics resonates with what Minh–ha calls the "boundary event" (Minh–ha 2005, 28), a term she uses to describe the nature of her work. I will argue that Minh–ha's intention is not necessarily eroding or blurring frames of reality and fiction, theory and practice, documentary and art. Rather, her idea of the boundary event implies certain paraesthetic strategies that allow her to move between frames and, at times, "live" precisely in the interval between them. Although her films are not easily defined as documentaries, documentary is certainly one of the frames through which we can enter Minh–ha's work. The notion of paraesthetics allows us to recognize the frames of art and theory as well as the frames of documentary and its boundaries with regards to fiction, for example.[38]

2.1. A 'poetics of absence'

In the preface to *The Order of Things,* Michel Foucault (1989) describes the encounter with a passage within Jorge Luis Borges' essay "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins"

[38] Paraesthetic critical strategies are not restricted to Minh–ha's work; they are found in countless other works that engage within the frames of documentary and explore as well as transgress the boundaries of that frame. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of this thesis will explore the paraesthetical strategies that can be found in some of the films by Salomé Lamas, Jeremy Shaw and Louis Henderson.

(1993) as a landmark in his conception of reflexivity. The opening statement of the book reads:

> This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age–old distinction between the Same and the Other (Foucault 1989, xvi).

In Foucault's rendering, the recognition of the distinction between same and Other occurs when our Western system of thought is confronted with an/Other, and manifests its inherent limits through this encounter. An example of this other system of thought is represented in Borges' short story by a fictitious alternative taxonomy of animals supposedly inspired by an ancient Chinese encyclopedia. According to the taxonomy, all animals are divided into categories such as belonging to the Emperor, embalmed, tamed, sucking pigs, sirens, fabulous, stray dogs, and so on. For Foucault, Borges' taxonomy illustrates the arbitrariness and cultural specificity of any attempt to categorize the world. It is not so much that Borges' categories are "false" or absurd, but that he mixes different categories. What is not thinkable for us is not each category as such, but the ground on which they are placed, the 'order of things.' Foucault states, "The monstrous quality that runs through Borges's enumeration consists, on the contrary, in the fact that the common ground on which such meetings are possible has itself been destroyed" (Foucault 1989, vxiii).

When one is confronted with a different taxonomy of the animal kingdom, what was familiar is made unfamiliar; and in this process – experienced through the failing of familiar structures of thought – the collapse of these 'certainties' compels a radical re–evaluation of one's own understanding. This is the point of departure of what Foucault recognizes as the process of reflexivity or critical thought: it begins with non–recognition that follows the incongruity of established categories. Moreover, Foucault proposes that Borges's "Chinese Encyclopedia" should be thought of as a paradigm for heterotopia. He states,

> Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in

> advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together' (Foucault 1989, xix).

Heterotopias are such 'sites' where the order of things collapses and where meaning refuses to be stabilized. For Foucault (1987), it is also where speech becomes unintelligible, words stop in their tracks, the very essence of grammar is contested (xix). By simultaneously engaging with and opposing the formation of categories under a specific logic, heterotopias challenge the hegemony of an epistemic order, thereby demonstrating how knowledge itself is far from natural, and that it always conceals some element of power and dominance in its organization. Besides challenging our knowledge's grounding and logical organization, heterotopias also challenge our ability to critically evaluate our own position. In his text "Of Other Spaces" (1986), Foucault uses the metaphor of the mirror to explain how heterotopia functions:

> From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there (Foucault 1986, 24).

It is in this double effect of challenging the hegemony of an epistemic order and simultaneously appealing to the recognition of our own position within that epistemic order as described above in the metaphor of the mirror, that a process of self–reflexivity begins to take shape. Returning to Foucault's reading of Borges, he not only recognizes it as a moment of reflexivity, but it represents itself a certain practice of critical thinking that he wishes to put forward: the form and the content of his interpretation meet in the practice of self–reflexivity.

Self–reflexivity has been referred to by David Carroll as one of the main characteristics of Foucault's "poetics of self–reflexivity or absence" (Carroll 1987, 68), which reinforces the performative processes of self–reflexivity in Foucault's text. Carroll's

analysis of Foucault's use of self–reflexivity shows that "a critical approach to the *mise en abyme"* (Carroll 1987, 54) as he puts it, has helped Foucault challenge both traditional notions of history and theory. Foucault often adopts a strategy to open his texts with pieces of self–reflexive literature or art – Borges' text is one example, another would be in the first chapter of *The Order of Things,* "Las Meninas" (1989), beginning with a rich analysis of Diego Velázquez' famous and enigmatic painting from 1656. By focusing on this strategy, Carroll (1987) suggests that it is possible to gain valuable insight into Foucault's critical perspective by paying particular attention to the opening scenes in his work (54). Carroll defends that Foucault's reading of self–reflexive texts does not understand literature as an end in itself, his strategy is to demonstrate how self–reflexivity reveals a lack at the origin of language and forces literature and thought to go outside themselves. Therefore, Carroll underlines the fact that Foucault is careful not to allow self–reflexivity to become a strategy to contain literature of any kind of interiority, but rather argues it is a means of linking up with or "thinking the outside" its own field of practice (Carroll, 1987, 79). Based on examples such as Borges' text and Velázquez's painting, Foucault positions the main problems that he intends to address throughout his analysis (54). He uses them as mirrors to reflect on his own work, revealing both his assumptions as well as his critical strategies. Carroll observes that,

> These perspectives [literature/art] are always situated by Foucault in terms of what he calls the "essential void," but they are not equivalent to the void. (...) In Foucault's work, they emerge out of the void, linked up with it, and return repeatedly to it. In each case, the way to the void is indicated by self–reflexive paintings and literature, and most often by the "mad" philosophers, painters, or poets who dare pursue the self–reflexive language up to and even into the void – the place from which all orders emerge and in which they break apart. It is the place to which Foucault's own critical discourse repeatedly returns, not in order to occupy this place, but in order to (de)position itself in terms of it (Carroll 1987, 67).

Hence, from Carroll's perspective, Foucault's critical force is put into action where different orders break down, where their instability lies. In turn, pointing at where they open up onto alternative possibilities; he provides us with the coordinates to decipher the rules of each epistemological game, and in doing so, directs us to the point where not a specific order, but rather order itself is in question.

Moreover, Carroll (1987) observes how Foucault's analysis of different epistemological spaces always concludes with the *épistémè's* full realization occurring at the end of the cycle, through a process of self–reflection (67). Upon reaching total completion or perfection, a gap or void becomes visible at the base of the epistemological space. This gap is fundamental to the process of self–reflection, or to what Carroll (1987) refers to as Foucault's "poetics of absence." Thus, to Carroll, Foucault not only conceptualizes the "gap" – in which the displacement of the subject that would normally serve its referent takes place – but he also "performs the gap" (Carroll 1987, 67).

2.2. 'Paraesthetics'

According to David Carroll (1987), Foucault's intellectual standpoint indicates the possibility of proposing a transgressive, critical perspective on any established order (Carroll 1987, 53–79). The conception of self–reflexivity as a transgressive and critical practice is central to Carroll's theory of *paraesthetics*, a theory that he develops in order to approach the mutual influence of theory/philosophy and art. It can be said that the theory of paraesthetics is a tool to identify *where* and *how* self–reflexivity works.

Carroll's definition of paraesthetics "indicates something like an aesthetics turned against itself or pushed beyond or beside itself… Paraesthetics describes a critical approach to aesthetics for which art is a question not a given… in which art does not have a determined place or a fix definition" (Carroll 1987, xiv). To understand what this might mean, Carrol addresses the following problem: "Can the aesthetic be used to point to the limitations of the theoretical, the speculative, the moral–religious, without becoming a replacement for them and a transcendent order in itself?" (Carroll 1987, 3). His concept of paraesthetics shows how the writings of Jean–François Lyotard, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida challenge the boundaries between philosophy and literature, art and politics, and between philosophy and the "other" it seeks to grasp. Carroll discusses how their work relates to the question of what constitutes the limits of aesthetics, which subsequently raises a problem of boundaries and borders in two senses. First, there is the boundary between aesthetics as a theoretical activity on the one hand, and the objects constituted by that activity on the other. Carroll argues that there is a "mutual transformation and subversion" or a reciprocal impact between the two (Carroll 1987, 20). Second, there is the problem of establishing the boundaries

between aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, and other theoretical disciplines such as political thought, literary criticism, and so on, to the extent that all such activities function within limits established by cultural and social practices. Carroll states,

> Paraesthetic critical strategies posit no end to art and no end to theory, because their ends are intricately intertwined and thus, constantly in question within and outside each. The task of paraesthetic theory is not to resolve all questions concerning the relations of theory with art and literature, but rather, to rethink these relations and, through the transformation and displacement of art and literature, to recast the philosophical, historical, and political "fields" – "field" with which art and literature are inextricably linked (Carroll 1987, 188).

Much of what Carroll has to say about Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault involves a demonstration of the ways in which these authors develop strategies that seek to maintain this radical, critical power contained in aesthetics. He pursues the idea that, in the work of such authors, the limits of theory – or the point when theory becomes self–reflexive – point to the necessity of art, and vice versa; and it is in the limits between art and theory, in this periphery, that he identifies the benefits of a mutual transformation attributed to both. Fundamentally, what is discussed in Carroll's book is how these authors' work relies on the *critical powers of art* to overcome the restrictions of theory and "to develop strategies for exceeding these limitations and displacing theory in the same process" (Carroll 1987, xvii). In this attempt, it is argued, such authors resort to aesthetics to problematize the limits of theory. The question of the relation between the theory and art becomes crucial for paraesthetics, as Carroll continues,

> … the borders separating art and theory and determining what is specific to art should not be assumed and fixed once and for all. They should be continually questioned, mobilized, and reinscribed if art is to have a critical, transformative effect on theory. There may be no art without borders that distinguish it from non–art. But there is no critical theory of art that does not, in some way, question the determination of these borders, the frames assigned or imposed on art by theory or "freely" projected and taken on by art itself (Carroll 1987, 132).

What is at stake in Carroll's statement is how the borders between art and theory are being questioned, what are the performative aspects at play that may produce any productive

critique without delimiting the site of the "border" itself. We might have an easier understanding of paraesthetics' practical function if we look at another example in the book, for instance, if we examine how Carroll encounters it in Derrida's work.

Carroll asserts that Jacques Derrida's essays on art (1978) have, as their principal goal, the displacement of the established borders of art and theory at the time it was written: "Art is questioned in terms of its borders and the effects on it of forces coming from 'outside' its borders which interfere with its integrity, self–knowledge, and even with its own representation of self" (Carroll 1987, 132). Carroll therefore suggests that an investigation of the specificity of art is an important part of Derrida's critical strategy that takes seriously the problem of the various types of frames that distinguish art from the everyday world (85). What is inside and what is outside of the frame of art? From Carroll's perspective, Derrida's theory of art can only start to become critical if it considers and works with such a frame (101). To "work the frame" is an expression that became epitomized in Derrida's discourse on art, which means to produce openings in each side of the frame and to transform the relationships that they have with one another – while not determining either by their other. This is a strategy – a paraesthetical strategy according to Carroll (1987) – used by Derrida as a way of putting the question of aesthetic specificity to work in order to develop alternative theoretical possibilities (134). Accordingly, for Derrida, it is not about destroying the frame or the border between art and non–art, for without it, the "overflow" could not be measured (143). It is rather in the movement across the borders or frames, the constant passage from one side to the other, that the critical work is made. Carroll puts it this way:

> In such a situation, the focus is on just one side of the frame of art, whether on aesthetic specificity "inside" or the historical–political "outside," would constitute a serious reduction of both art and those extra– or paraesthetic forces pressing against its frame and continually modifying and displacing art, as well as being modified and displaced by it (Carroll 1987, 143).

To reinforce what was already stated: what distinguishes the frame of art from non–art is an issue for contemporary theory very much centered on the question of self–reflexivity. The specificity of art is equated with the self–reflexive procedures by means of which an artwork reflects on how it functions, how it was produced and what makes it art. Hence, again for Carroll, a paraesthetic strategy is not about choosing between art and non–art or between art

and theory, it is rather "a question of accounting for the 'overrun' of one into the other" (Carroll 1987, 151).

Furthermore, in looking at how Derrida analyzes the paradoxical status of the frame in relation to a fundamental co–implication between theoretical and fictional texts, Carroll observes that each frame – the theoretical and the fictional frame – is framed by the other: "It implies that fiction is never a simple antidote for the truth, that it does not exist in and by itself as its own truth simply because it admits or stages its own fictiveness, because it appears to frame itself and all interpretations of it within itself" (Carroll 1987, 152). The overlapping of the two realms, the overrun of fiction and truth, indicates that the frame of fiction is in fact porous. Which does not mean that the frame of fiction should be ignored, or blurred, for this would mean that its effects would be neutralized. To make it clear, it is not about abandoning the frame/border, but about making it porous, flexible and even responsive to what is on the other side of it.

2.3. The paraesthetic documentary

Paraesthetics is a theoretical tool that was developed by Carroll to see how Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard conceive the relation between theory/philosophy and art – two fields of practice that have an uneasy relationship with each other, for one has been traditionally defined by the limits of the other. Their uneasy relationship arises from the fact that these limits are, in fact, not clear or implicit, and that both maintain a specific but different interest in the field of aesthetics.

Similarly to art and theory, art and documentary also share specific but different aesthetic concerns. Typically inscribed within the realm of what has been described as the "discourses of sobriety" (Nichols 1991, 3), akin to those of science, economics, politics, and so on, the documentary has been seen in opposition to art. Within this frame the documentary acquires comparable instrumental power to other discourses of sobriety and, as such, can and should, in principle, lead to action. Yet, at the same time as Bill Nichols discusses this view of documentary, he also leaves this frame open when he states,

> Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, transparent. Through them power exerts itself. Through them, things are made to happen. They are the vehicles of

> domination and conscience, power and knowledge, desire and will. Documentary, despite its kinship, has never been accepted as a full equal (Nichols 1991, 4).

The reason why documentary has never been considered completely equal to other discourses of sobriety is due to its inherent implications in the realm of aesthetics reflected on its uneasy relationship with the "real," which is never 'direct, immediate and transparent,' to make use of Nichols' words above. Therefore, the documentary can be considered as a kind of practice that exists or circulates in the 'boundary' between the frame of the discourses of sobriety and what is on the other side of this frame: the disruptive discourses of art. The level of mobility between these two frames depends on the author's intention or on the viewers' reception. A paraesthetical point of view can prove to be productive to critically address the crossing between the frames of art and theory regarding the practice of documentary filmmaking, to identify the moments in which the frames of art and documentary are traversed, as well as to question what this crossing means, how it becomes visible and what it triggers as spectatorial/critical experience. Therefore, Carroll's notion of paraesthetics can assist in identifying what is in and outside of these frames and in asserting some of the possibilities associated with this field of practice.

Trinh T. Minh–ha is a paradoxical example for this matter, for she is known for simultaneously working on the border between theory and documentary and, at the same time, that between documentary and art.[39] Aside from a career in making and exhibiting her work, she is also recognised for her theoretical reflection on her work and documentary film more broadly. The structure that is behind her work is part of her theoretical writings. As Marina Griznic once wrote in response to Minh–ha's work: "they are film and theory, simultaneously shifted" (Griznic in Minh–ha 2005, 206). For the reason that her work, in general, is a constant interplay between artistic practice and theoretical production, in a paraesthetic sense, I consider it to be one of the key references to help to better understand the frames of documentary practice today. Minh–ha herself acknowledges that one of the most important aspects that has linked documentary to artistic practice is the possibility to

[39] A similar statement could be made about Hito Steyerl, Werner Herzog, Alexander Kluge and others, who have all contributed meaningfully to the practice/theory of documentary. Therefore, these authors will come into play at other times during this dissertation. It is most significant to note that a selection of Steyerl's texts is examined in depth in the first and last chapters.

be self–reflexive. Hence, I will return to the point at issue that initiated this chapter: 'when' is self–reflexivity; how she understands and works with it.

2.4. 'A practice of the void'

In several interviews, Trinh T Minh–ha explains that she was born in Vietnam where she lived until she was seventeen before moving with her family to the U.S. Having studied at the University of Illinois first, she later moved to France where she studied at the Parisian University Sorbonne Paris–IV. This background in education reveals less about her academic record than her experience as an 'outsider' in different contexts. Minh–ha mentions that,"[e]verything that I have done has always been a leap away from what I have learned, and nothing in my work directly reflects the education I have had except through a relation of displacement and rupture" (Minh–ha 1999, 213). Her position as an outsider as well as her experience of displacement has proved to be valuable to her practice as an artist/filmmaker and as a writer. Marina Griznic writes while introducing Minh–ha in a public conversation, that her work "is about being a stranger, about its positioning and about in–between relations and shiftings (...) it's this strangeness, this kind of emptiness and void that is the subject itself in the end" (Griznic in Minh–ha 2005, 199).

Often Minh–ha's work assumes different perspectives and comprehends contrasting systems of knowledge, which resembles in some respects the "Chinese Encyclopedia" in Borges' short story, which Michel Foucault used to illustrate the collision of dissimilar *épistémès*. For example, Minh–ha contrasts the Western education system with Asian or African systems. The latter recognizes the importance of understanding the external world firstly before understanding ourselves, while the Western system tends to emphasize that one should learn to "know the world inwardly," which leads to a wider understanding of society as one goes deeper into oneself (Minh-ha 1999, 209). A change of perspective from 'outside in' to 'inside out' to 'outside in' again, is often productive in the course of Minh–ha's work and encourages her to step outside the tracks of stereotypes normally associated with documentary practice. Moving between frames of knowability is one way of keeping the reflexive movement in motion. It is also by working in the space between frames – in the gaps, as Foucault names it, or – the void, or interval, as Minh–ha puts it – that she intends to prevent meanings associated with the documentary practice from being restricted.

In her chapter "The Plural Void: Barthes and Asia" (1991), Minh–ha enters into a deep analysis of Barthes' book *L'Empire des Signes* (1970) where he develops the notion of void in relationship with his reading of Japanese Culture. There are two meanings of the void that can be subsumed from Minh–ha's (1991) text: "suspension of meaning" (213) and the "empty mirror" (214). In order to grasp these different meanings and how they relate to documentary practice, we should return to how Minh–ha approaches the void in her interviews, since this is where she applies the majority of her theoretical knowledge to her filmmaking. Moreover, when asked about issues related to her work, Minh–ha links the implicit knowledge that is underwritten in the composition of her films to her profound engagement with Western as well as Oriental philosophies. The contrast between Western and non–Western ways of knowing or relating to the world is brought back in Minh–ha's understanding of the void when she states that:

> For some, "void" is apparently only the opposite of "full." As absence to a presence or as lack to a center, it obviously raises a lot of anxieties and frustrations because all that is read into it is a form of negation. But I would make the difference between that negative notion of the void, which is so typical of the kind of dualist thinking pervasively encountered in the West, and the spiritual Void thanks to which possibilities keep on renewing, hence nothing can be simply classified, arrested, and reified.
>
> (...)
>
> A distinction that may be useful here is the one theorists have made between a "radical negativity" and a negation. The negation is what the negative, dualistic reading of the void points to, while a radical negativity entails a constant questioning of arrested representations (Minh–ha 1999, 222, 223).

In other words, the void implies a radical negativity which prevents the bounding of meaning by unceasingly provoking questions to what is said or shown, i.e. representation. But how exactly does this materialize in the production of her work? Minh–ha (1991) explains that her own process of making films comes very close to those of composing music and of writing poetry (216). Her process, as she describes it, is not one that aims to capture an object, to explain a cultural event, or to inform simply out of curiosity or out of necessity. Instead, she refuses to commodify knowledge, which necessarily means to distance herself from the mainstream ideology or stereotypes of communication and its use of "transparent"

and “linear” language. Each time she creates an image, a word, or a sound, these elements are never solely used as instruments for delivering a message. Rather, images, words and sounds have a set of meanings, a function, and a rhythm of their own within the world that each of her films creates anew (216). Essentially, this is the way poets and composers use words and sounds. Minh–ha explains it in this way:

> Here I'll have to make clear that through the notion of "poetic language," I am certainly not referring to the poetic as the site for the constitution of a subjectivity, or as an estheticized practice of language. Rather, I am referring to the fact that language is fundamentally reflexive, and only in poetic language can one deal with meaning in a revolutionary way. For the nature of poetry is to offer meaning in such a way that it can never end with what is said or shown, destabilizing thereby the speaking subject and exposing the fiction of all rationalization. Roland Barthes astutely summed up this situation when he remarked that "the real antonym of the 'poetic' is not the prosaic, but the stereotyped." Such a statement is all the more perceptive as the stereotyped is not a false representation, but rather, an arrested representation of a changing reality. So to avoid merely falling into this pervasive world of the stereotyped and the cliched, filmmaking has all to gain when conceived as a performance that engages as well as questions (its own) language. However, since the ideology of what constitutes "clarity" and "accessibility" continues to be largely taken for granted, poetic practice can be "difficult" to a number of viewers, because our ability in mainstream films and media to play with meanings other than the literal ones that pervade our visual and aural environment is rarely solicited (Minh–ha 1999, 216).

Minh–ha thus positions her filmmaking practice within “a practice of the void” (Barthes in Minh–ha 1991, 214), a practice that relies on a poetic language in the sense that, as is stated above, is fundamentally reflexive and as such, refuses to attach meaning to things or to put them into categories, while at the same time, withdraws from any established category itself.

2.5. Life and work as a ‘boundary event’

Considering Minh–ha’s positioning of her work in relation to the void above, how does she respond when her work is labeled as documentary? As far as Minh–ha is concerned, her work is not easily associated with discourses of sobriety, which as discussed earlier tends to organize subjects to the point that they can be used for political ends. Yet, this is not the primary reason why Minh–ha would hesitate in classifying her films as documentary. In a

number of interviews, she avoids the question of whether her work should be labeled as documentary, fiction, or experimental film. Instead, she turns the question around and asks whether her work should be categorized at all. In a lively conversation with Valentina Vitali, Minh–ha makes it clear that her films should be considered as "boundary events" (Minh–ha 2005, 28):

> We keep encountering these classifications – fiction, documentary, and experimental – everywhere in the film world. I don't feel as if I belong to any of them. Even the terms art and avant–garde raise questions among artists. In making these distinctions, the tendency has often been to reiterate a preconceived hierarchy, and hence to harden a fundamentally exploitative activity into a category of work. There is no real experiment when "experimental" becomes a genre of its own; "avant–" and "arrière–garde" are but the two sides of the same classification. In "documentary," one has to go through fiction to show reality, just as in fictional narratives, one has to go far into endorsing these categories by which the film world largely abides, I produce films that I consider to be first and foremost "boundary events." One can view them as different ways of working with freedom in experiencing the self and the world (Minh–ha 2005, 28).

While positioning her films as boundary events, Minh–ha refuses to classify them as documentaries, but she does not deny that the category exists or claim that she does not use it in her filmmaking. Regarding her film "The Fourth Dimension" (2001) shot in Japan for instance, she mentions that the film "documents its own time, its creation in megahertz, the different path and layers of time–light that are involved in the production of images and meanings" (Minh–ha 2005, 28). This example illuminates the fact that the idea of documenting is present in Minh–ha's films. Thus the question should not be *if* it is documentary but *what* and *how* it documents. Not one of the things Minh–ha is referring to as being documented in her film can be considered factual in the common sense of the term: time–light, meanings… are rather abstract concepts if taken out of context. "Documenting," Minh–ha explains, "is precisely to address the impossibility of packaging information in a linear fashion and to bring out the complexities of these encounters between realities, between cultures or between subjectivities" (Minh–ha 2005, 170).

For a film to be a 'boundary event,' in the sense Minh–ha describes, one has to work between categories – namely documentary and fiction – rather than to ignore that these categories exist. Accordingly, Minh–ha endorses the freedom to move between categories

or frames of filmmaking. This does not mean that her films blur the categories either. In fact, she avoids the word blurring. Instead Minh–ha describes what occurs in her films as "cutting across borders," as "a way of making links, of connecting, of expanding the net" (Minh–ha 2005, 16). So it is never a question of blurring, and even the question of hybridity here should be questioned. It can be argued that it is somehow important that the categories exist. The idea of having a border is not suspended, but what is in question is the freedom to cross the border, or borders, between categories. The attention should thus be drawn to specific boundaries – the boundary between documentary and fiction being just one of many boundaries Minh–ha points to in her work – but also to their mobility. This is what is often forgotten in discourses associated with documentary and art that repeat that artists "blur" the lines between fact and fiction.[40] According to Minh–ha (2005), each of these categories or labels is, at worst, confining, but depending on how such a label is used and the context into which it falls, they can be a constructive tool (160). These categories work as deliberate structuring devices that predetermine the way one says or sees things, which also implies the possibility to challenge them: "The boundary zone then takes on its full function as the zone of transformation. (...) When work is carried out across and in between domains, on that very boundary zone, the latter inevitably undergoes change" (Minh–ha 2005, 16).

What does change mean for Minh–ha? What does she want to change and how does she propose to change? At a certain point in an interview Minh–ha states: "My work, like myself, can be called "boundary events" (Minh–ha 2005, 193) – again this should not be interpreted as blurring the line between author and work but as delimiting that line and encouraging to see what happens when one crosses that line."[B]oundary invites a different kind of presence–ing, of beginning a new space and a new fiction of identity" (Minh–ha 2005, 207). Boundary events invite us to consider a different kind of change than that which is implicit in the idea of "bluring"; they invite us to consider a different kind of freedom, a freedom of 'crossing borders.' A freedom, in the case of Minh–ha, that is thought from the perspective of a woman, a filmmaker, an outsider/insider. If there is any change implicit in Minh–ha's work it is not intended to be prescriptive. "In my writing and filmmaking," Minh–ha states, "it has always been important for me to carry out critical work in such a

[40] This idea is frequently reiterated by theorists who have no contact with the practice of filmmaking, such is the case of Erika Balsom who desperately criticizes artists who "blur" the boundaries of fact and fiction in their work. I will return to this question in the second part of the following chapter.

way that there is room for people to reflect on their own struggle and to use the tools offered so as to further it on their own terms. Such a work is radically incapable of prescription" (Minh–ha 1999, 213). The film as a 'boundary event' thus, as Minh–ha (2005) would put it, is one that can be considered as offering different ways to experience freedom in the world and within ourselves (28). Therefore, in the boundary event, we may encounter a space for the spectator to engage with a form of self–reflexivity. What is set in motion in its praxis are the self–generating links between different pre–existing frames or categories.

2.6. A paraesthetical approach to truth(s)

The question of truth has haunted documentary practice and theory since its early days. While for some theorists this is a question that leads to infinite contradictions, others, like Minh–ha, deal with this question in their filmmaking practice in much more practical terms: truth is considered an impossibility. At the very least, there are multiple truths that can be approached in diverse ways leading to always different outcomes. Minh–ha states,

> Truth can only be approached indirectly if one does not want to lose it and find oneself hanging on to a dead, empty skin. Even when the indirect has to take refuge in the very figures of the direct, it continues to defy the closure of a direct reading. This is a form of indirectness that I have to deal with in *Surname Viet*, but even more so in Shoot. Because here, there is necessarily, among others, a layered play between political discourse and poetical language, or between the direct role of men and the indirect role of women (Minh–ha 1999, 219).

Minh–ha addresses the question of truth with relation to films in the same way as she addresses the question of meaning. Any attempt to encapsulate truth/meaning is an act of violence which blocks one's freedom. Moreover, she urges for this question of truth to be thought in its own terms and not (only) through the terms and concepts of other theoretical fields, be it philosophy or anthropology. Theory, from her perspective, should not be made 'about' films but rather 'with' films. Therefore, any concept of truth that proves to be productive to this field of knowledge is one that rises precisely from crossing the boundaries between theory and practice. Minh–ha elaborates further:

> Truth and meaning: the two are likely to be equated with one another. Yet, what is put forth as truth is often nothing more than a meaning. And what persists between the meaning of something and its truth is the interval, a break without which meaning would be fixed and truth congealed. This is perhaps why it is so difficult to talk about it, the interval. About the cinema. About. The words will not ring true. Not true; for what is one to do with films that set out to determine truth from falsity while the visibility of this truth lies precisely in the fact that it is false? How is one to cope with a "film theory" that can never theorize "about" film, but only with concepts that film raises in relation to concepts of other practices?" (Minh–ha 1990, 76).

By approaching truth through a position of self–doubt of its own means of production, Minh–ha sets in motion a reflexive movement, an "emptying action" (Minh–ha 2005, 205) of any established concept that tends to dominate any field of knowledge. "Rather than catering to it, striving to capture and discover its truth as a concealed or lost object, it is therefore important also to keep asking: how is truth being ruled?" (Minh–ha 1991, 85).

We can consider this approach as a paraesthetic strategy that displaces the limits or frames of theory. Minh–ha states, "When, in a world of reification, truth is widely equated with fact, any explicit use of the magic, poetic, or irrational qualities specific to the film medium itself would have to be excluded a priori as nonfactual" (Minh–ha 1991, 85). Accordingly, truth has nothing to do with a reality effect, and aesthetic features producing a "natural" or realistic appearance, should not be uncritically equated with reality or truth, in Minh–ha's terms. Quite the contrary: such stylistic means should be equated with fiction. Paradoxically, the question of 'documentary truth' turns into that of 'documentary fiction.'

In other terms, Minh–ha would see truths as having their own frame. In order to exercise her own freedom with regards to the frames of truths, she would have to be able to travel beyond these frames, and thus beyond the frames that constitute it or conceal it. What would be on the other side of the boundaries of truths? Fiction, falsity, illusion? She can only come to terms with an idea of "truth(s)" if she has the possibility to freely navigate into these other (complementary) realms. This concern is present in her observation that truth can only be approached indirectly, which is not the same as claiming that there is no truth(s). Essentially, for Minh–ha, there are truths, but they can only be made apparent through a back and forth process of reflection. Boundaries of what determined a certain truth shift through a process of leaving/exiting those boundaries or leaving them open. One always has to return on a different path than the one left, and one always returns with new questions.

This is the reflexive movement Minh–ha adopts in her filming process. A movement that continually searches for truths in the interval of things. “What happens in the interval?” Minh–ha asks. “The question mark is huge here, for every one of us would come up with a different response. It’s a space of infinite possibilities. In other words, the interval is where we can ultimately say: ‘I don't know.’” (Minh–ha 2005, 201).

2.7. Where is the paraesthetic's critical power?

Minh–ha's film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) speaks about Vietnamese women and their condition of exile after the Vietnam War, a war that continued for twenty years from 1955 to 1975. The film is mainly structured around a series of actual and reenacted interviews. The women who ‘act out’ the interviews – that are based on previously published interviews with Vietnamese women speaking about their experience right after the end of the war – are Vietnamese living in the United States. They are the same women we later see in unstaged situations talking about their own lives. This re–inscription of interviews takes the viewer by surprise as they continually cross between the two moments – ‘fake’/’real’, staged/unstaged, interior/exterior, self/other – righting their margins, reassembling them. I'm thinking specifically of a woman at the end of the film who says: "our history is always on the borderline of this north and south, but I speak from somewhere in both places, in between, and I will not accept this division, and I will not think truth divides itself in that way" (quote from the film). *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* engages the politics of the interview and enters Vietnam's history through individual and collective gaps rather than constructing a homogenous point of view, even when based on several perspectives. Reenacted interviews originally carried out in Vietnam slowly reveal itself as a form of mediated documentation without affecting the compelling mode of direct address, nor reducing it to merely retrieving information. What is at stake for Minh–ha is that “[i]n a way, all 'oral testimonies' are fictions because language itself is fictional by nature. An image of a reality or a word used to point to a reality has to address its "fictive" reality as image or word” (Minh–ha 1999, 55).

The film's self–reflexive dimension is gradually brought out through a number of devices that can be considered as paraesthetical critical strategies, which are characterized by Carroll (1987) by their fundamental impurity, in that they establish a dynamic relation

between opposites such as the aesthetical and the theoretical (xvi) or, it can also be said, between the (complementary) opposition Minh–ha sets in her film between the staged and the unstaged, the original and the reenactment. The disruptive, excessive, transgressive role that can be assigned to Minh–ha's (poetic) documentary practices of filmmaking and theory–making, can be used to reveal the inadequacies of traditional political, historical, moral, psychological and aesthetic categories associated with this practice/s. Minh–ha's paraesthetical strategies open a space of analysis or judgment demanding different categories, rules, and means for producing knowledge.

Derrida, as well as Foucault, did not use self–reflexivity as a way of ensuring the integrity of a text, Carroll (1987) reiterates this point. In a similar fashion, Minh–ha emphasizes self–reflexivity as a critical strategy in order to undo the naivest forms of mimesis and the referential theories that support them. However, this is for her a moment in a more complicated, critical process rather than an end in itself. Minh–ha's analysis does not aim to close the text back on itself, but rather to understand how, by referring to itself, it refers to others.

The self–reflexivity of a certain form of literature is not a sign of the success of literature, but an indication of a profound crisis – one by which literature is as much threatened as reassured (Carroll 1987, 102). As Carroll sees it, the critical aspect of self–reflexive writing emerges precisely when the crisis provoked by the text cannot be resolved by the text itself, when the loss of any foundation outside itself entails a rethinking of literature and the concepts and theories that have traditionally been regarded as its foundations. Thus, it is an opening space for a paraesthetical moment. Essentially, paraesthetics is a blockage occurring when theory/practice reaches its limits, thereby forcing the theorist or filmmaker to devise alternate strategies for setting the work in motion again. By being interrupted, it regains its critical intensity. As Carroll (1987) would put it, it is this crisis that indeed creates the need for critical activism and other decisive critical strategies (105).

Minh–ha's paraesthetical critical strategies are one example among a prolific field of practice. We can find paraesthetic strategies even before Minh–ha, in the work of Maya Deren, for example, but also in Alexander Kluge, Werner Herzog and Hito Steyerl's work, just to name those who have consistently contributed to both fields of practice and theory. This thesis also considers the work of documentary filmmakers Salomé Lamas, Jeremy

Shaw and Louis Henderson as evidencing paraesthetic qualities. Although their theoretical contribution is not comparable to the above mentioned, their current filmmaking processes invoke complex and fascinating paraesthetical strategies within a contemporary art context and that will be focused on in the following chapters. They represent more contemporary positions reacting also to new situations and reusing, rearticulating, reassembling some of the paraesthetic strategies that we might recognize in Minh–ha's work, which continues to serve as a paradigmatic example of a practice that has transformed its field in filmmaking and theory.

Chapter 3

The Parafictional Documentary

Part I: The 'Parafictional Character' in *Extinction*

In the winter of 2018, Portuguese artist and filmmaker Salomé Lamas premiered her documentary film Extinction *at the Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival, which was nominated for the DOX Award, the most prestigious prize in the festival. This was the first time I encountered the film. The second time, Extinction was being shown as part of a solo exhibition with the same title at Lisbon's National Museum for Contemporary Art. It is not uncommon for artists to show their films both in festivals and art museums or gallery contexts. However, from these two experiences, I will reflect on how the film registers the possibility of crossing the boundaries between documentary film festivals and contemporary art venues. Arguably, both the film and the spaces where it has been presented endure a kind of in–between space characterized by a contamination of boundaries and an ambiguous position in established paradigms. As Erika Balsom rightly puts it, "[t]his contamination takes place not just between media and between regimes of representation but also between the institutions of cinema and art" (Balsom 2013, 152). The fact that the film was exhibited in these two different sites already contributes to a quality that I will consider as being intrinsic to the film: that it explores the real and imaginary borders.*

A year after Extinction *was made (2017), Lamas exhibited* Fatamorgana *(2018). The two films, being made around the same time, were likely to have been developed simultaneously. As a result of this overlap in development, I will discuss both films in relation to the idea of parafiction that I find present in both. In the first part of this chapter, I will consider the parafictional strategies employed in* Extinction. *In the second, I will focus on how they differ from the strategies used in* Fatamorgana, *and relate these strategies to the specific context of the films' production.*

3.1.1. Working with borders

> I don't have an easy relationship with borders. (...) And yet where, in a borderless world, could we escape to? Where would it be worth going? (Bonnett 2014, 177).

Extinction introduces us to Transnistria, which, like other unrecognized territories such as Somaliland and Kurdistan, has a difficult status as an imaginary country. While Transnistria is officially part of the Moldavian Republic, it claims its independence in combination with an eventual integration into the Russian Federation. However, neither the Kremlin nor international countries have fully recognized this claim. For Portuguese filmmaker Salomé Lamas, who for this project was seeking to focus a film on contemporary conflicts at the edge of Europe's borders, Transnistria presented itself as an understandable choice from which to develop her film (Lamas, 2018). Lamas' aim was to show how "[t]he end of the Cold War did not produce a thaw throughout the continent. A peculiarity of today's Europe is the variety of 'frozen conflicts' it contains" (Lamas 2018). She is referring to a general expectation that in the post–Cold War era, colonialism and socialist totalitarianism would vanish beneath an expectant wave of liberal democracy, but the perception in many parts of Eastern Europe, as well as in Africa, is that many places remain disputed against hegemonic claims of nation–states. *Extinction* focuses on such a border conflict resulting from this context.

Extinction revolves around physical borders, however the relationship to 'border' the film explores can be understood in a much broader sense. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a border refers firstly to: "the line that divides two countries or areas," but it can also refer to "the separation or distance between one thing or person and another." The OED offers the following example: "It is difficult to define the *border* between love and friendship." On the one hand, a border signifies something akin to physical reality and, on the other, something much more ambiguous when associated with more abstract ideas or concepts. At the same time, it is worth noting that many state borders are basically invisible – appearing as lines on maps but in reality there is nothing particular in the landscape to delimitate one state, country or region from the next. People often cross borders without even realizing it. Filmed during the conflict provoked by the annexation of the Crimean peninsula

by Russia (2014/2015), *Extinction* captures the movements between diverse checkpoints in Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania and Ukraine in order to reflect on the meaning of borders, national identity, and imperialism. The main character in *Extinction*, Kolja, holds the Moldovan nationality but claims to be Transnistrian. Kolja's birth in the early 1990s coincides with the fall of the communist regime, and he is torn by a feeling of drifting identities and unwavering love for his native land. Sometimes he claims to wish his country would become a part of Russia again, in other moments, he promotes its independence. His life becomes a sort of metonymical reflection of a historical confrontation between East and West, exposing the weaknesses of the project of the European Community in the face of the imposition of a new wave of nationalism and autocratic regimes. By means of black and white images reminiscent of film noir and suspense tactics evoking an uncertain threat, Lamas creates the impression of a dark atmosphere full of fallen monuments, shifting borders, guarded checkpoints, and unreliable passports.

Parallel to the main character's narrative journey, Lamas' creates a film where, in its structure, the borders between documentary and fiction are interrogated with renewed focus. Here, I question how Lamas produces a film that problematizes the notion of the border in multiple senses, by simultaneously focusing on a specific geographical context and exploring the notion of the border within the structure of the film, including that between documentary and fiction. In addition to a conversation about 'frozen conflicts' peripheral to EU borders, Lamas dedicates the film "To all unrecognized and unnoticed territories that lie on the margins of legitimacy; lacking diplomatic recognition or UN membership, inhabiting a world of shifting borders, visionary leaders and forgotten peoples" (mentioned in the film's credits). Thus, a 'world of shifting borders' and its remediation in the language of documentary within Lamas' film, provides an opportunity to reflect on the dynamics of the relationship between boundaries, media and regimes of representation.

3.1.2. The deterritorializing effect of the close–up

> The affection–image is the close–up, and the close–up is the face…
> (Deleuze 1986, 2018, 97)

During the first four minutes of *Extinction,* we are presented with a close–up of the face of a man over a white background towards which its facial contour dissolves, accentuating the

eyes as he stares directly and intensely at the viewer (annexes: image 1). The film is slowed down so that every micro–movement of the face becomes visible. Yet, even after such an enlargement of the face and focus on all expressions it might offer, it is still not clear what this man might be thinking or feeling. Against a white background, we encounter a blank, vaporous, cloudy face enveloped by a more or less dense white veil. The soundtrack consists mainly of a dialogue between Kolja and another man, 'frames' the gigantic face that we see occupying the whole space of the screen. It begins with a rather formal presentation in form of an interview:

- What is your name?
- Nikolai (Kolja).
- How old are you?
- Twenty–four.
- Are you married?
- Yes.
- Do you have Russian or Moldavian citizenship?
- I have a Transnistrian passport and a Russian one.
- We are in Transnistria.
- What?
- This is not Moldova. You were born in Transnistria, weren't you?
- I was born on the 24th of February 1990; Ribnit, a district of Lenin village, Soviet Union.
- But now... *what are you?*
  (...)
  (Quote from the film; 00:00 – 00:46 min.)

The close–up and the juxtaposition of the interview's indirect sound raise the first moment of curiosity, perhaps even suspicion in the viewer. Who is Kolja, and why is he being interrogated? Who is asking the questions? We are confronted by Kolja's "reflection–face" (Deleuze 2018, 100) looking for answers, but the relationship of the face with what the person might be thinking seems arbitrary, leading to no clear conclusions.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (2018) noted that the close–up in cinema is not merely one type of image among others, for it generates an affective reading of the film (97). The close–up, and in particular the close–up of a face, is the "reflecting and reflected" organ of expression. The face carries both the reflecting surface and the micromovements that constitute the "affection–image," defined by Deleuze as "a motor tendency on a sensitive nerve" (Deleuze 2018, 97–98). In other words, the face contains all kinds of micro–

movements that the rest of the body usually keeps hidden. The viewer is compelled to wonder, what is this man thinking about? What is he sensing or feeling? Perhaps it is possible to read some kind of impassiveness suggesting an impenetrable or malicious thought; but generally, Kloja's face reveals what seems to be a curious and somewhat charismatic face, animated by subtle movements that are dissolved and neutralized by the white background and slow–motion.

Observing how D. W. Griffith, an American film director considered to be one of the most influential figures in the early history of the motion picture, makes use of the close–up in his films, Deleuze states,

> The reflecting faces of Griffith can express white, but it is also the white of a snow flake caught on an eye–lash, the spiritual white of an internal innocence, the dissolved white of a moral degradation, the hostile and searing white of the iceberg where the heroine will wander (*Orphans of the Storm*) (Deleuze 2018, 101).

The 'expression of white,' in the way suggested by Deleuze, condenses such contradictions as "internal innocence" and "moral degradation." This extreme condensation of opposite forms of expression is the sign of the "bipolar composition" of the close–up (Deleuze 2018, 108). Meaning that the close–up can express something of a "pure Quality, that is to say 'something' common to several objects of different kinds" (Deleuze 2018, 101). Accordingly, if we think of fiction and documentary as genre designations for objects of different kinds, the close–up expresses something that is common to both. What is essential to fiction and documentary could potentially be epitomized in the close–up of a face.

Deleuze considers all cinematic imagery as deterritorialized. In their work, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduce the term deterritorialization as a concept that registers the process of removing a territory's current organization, context, or identity. It has been used to describe the mutation of social, cultural, economic and political practices including cinema, as well as of people, objects, languages, traditions and beliefs in relation to their respective origins. But additionally, Deleuze understands a special kind of deterritorialization to be specific for the close–up of the face: "the close–up retains the same power to tear the image away from spatio–temporal co–ordinates in order to call forth the pure affect as the expressed" (Deleuze 2018, 107). Meaning the close–up can deterritorialize the face, and even the context of its background

loses its coordinates, becoming something indeterminate, or, as Deleuze calls it, "any space" (Deleuze 2018, 107). In other words, it takes the face out of its context to focus only on what is essential to it. We learn from this that the specific use of the close–up of Kolja's face in the opening of *Extinction* registers the subject's own deterritorialization. As a process of removing a territory's current organization, context, or identity, deterritorialization is essential to all cinematic imagery, just as it is essential to any citizen's relationship to the State. Kolja does not simply represent a Transnistrian or a subject that is unrecognized by its own State. Instead, he represents any subject who is in a state of unrecognition, in a borderless state – he becomes the 'pure Quality' through which we might comprehend the quality of 'unrecognition.'

As stated above, there is a play of opposites in the close–up. We may observe this in the way the face ascends and descends from all the degrees of shadow which were originally in color but have been reduced to the black and white texture of the film. Light becomes transparent, translucent even, granting the face with a volume which, framed within the screen, gains aquarium atmospheres or rather what is called in oceanography a 'shallow depth', which translates in cinematography as a 'shallow depth of field', meaning that the character's eyes are in focus while other more distant parts of the face – the ears for example – are out of focus. Deleuze states,

> Such a space (the transparent or translucent white space) retains the power to *reflect* light, but it also gains another power which is that of *refracting*, by diverting the rays which cross it. The face which remains in this space thus *reflects* part of the light, but *refracts* another part of it (Deleuze 2018, 105 – emphasis added).

These qualities of reflection and refraction in the close–up are that which more accurately defines the role of Kolja in *Extinction*. At the end of the film, during the credits, there is an explanation that the film's text is a free adaptation of Ryszard Kapuściński's autobiographical novel *Imperium* (1993), in which the author narrates his journey crossing the borders of several regions within the Soviet Union in the years between 1989 and 1991. Kapuściński (1932–2007) was a Polish journalist, writer, photographer and poet whose personal journals, published in book form, attracted both controversy and admiration for combining the conventions of reportage with allegory and magic realism. Kapuściński is known for having been the only correspondent in Africa of the Communist–era Polish Press

Agency during decolonization, as well as for his works in South America and Asia. *Imperium* (English: "Empire") is a book about his travels to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and more broadly about his personal relationship with that region. In the book – both a personal travelogue and a memoir – the author often compares his experiences in Africa during decolonization with the fall of the Soviet Union and the following shifting borders. As we come to know more about Kolja, we understand that he vacillates between 'playing himself' as a citizen of Transnistria, and 'playing' Ryszard Kapuściński crossing the borders of the Empire described in *Imperium* back in the 1990s. This reflection and refraction of the main character is imminently present from the beginning of the film, beginning with this very close–up of his face.

There are other meanings associated with the close–up suggested by Deleuze that are useful to consider in undertaking a close reading of this initial scene of *Extinction*. For example, the face in a close–up is charged with both the qualities of a phantom and of a mirror. "It [the close–up] absorbs two beings, and absorbs them in the void. And in the void it is itself the photogramme which burns, with Fear as its only affect. The facial close–up is both the face and its effacement" (Deleuze 2018, 111). The effacement of the face in the close–up, as is being argued by Deleuze, renders Kolja into a phantom that haunts us as viewers, and the affect associated with the phantom is fear. A phantom is faceless: the face has been effaced, thus becoming unrecognizable. Alternatively, it is the phantom that we fear no longer being able to see, even when it is right in front of us, looking directly at us.

The close–up as a mirror, or as "reflexive–reflective doubling," refers back to our own situation as viewers. As film critic and historian Thomas Elsaesser (2015) demonstrates, the characterization of the close–up as mirror and its metaphoric connotations could be broken down into three paradigms: firstly, the mirror is a founding element of classical cinema, as it is understood to reveal a surplus of self that only the mirror is able to reveal. Secondly, mirror metaphors can suggest a doubling or reflection of what is being seen not in order to reveal any deeper meaning but to obscure it. Lastly, we see mirrors in cinema as the reflection of the Other (71–72).[41] The close–up in *Extinction's* opening scene reminds us of cinema's fascination with mirrors and stories of doubles (*Doppelgänger*). The close–up

[41] Film critic and historian Thomas Elsaesser in his book *Film Theory, an introduction through the senses* (2015), offers a full heuristic characterization of the mirror and its motivations in film studies. See chapter three "Cinema as Mirror – Face and Close up" (Elsaesser 2015, 63–93).

obliterates the limit with the familiar, it also reminds us how altered identities have proven to be crucial for the problematization of identity and self–estrangement, as well as for the reinforcement of the viewer's own uneasy or "uncanny" (*unheimliche*) awareness of the characters as double.[42]

The close–up of Kolja's face offers both a doubling effect and a reflecting and refracting property. It is therefore particularly useful as a lens through which to begin to explore the problematic area in–between fiction and documentary. By virtue of the close–up, the cinematic image creates a passage between the limits of the real and the imaginary, which allows the protagonist to transcend conventional representational structures. This reading of the close–up in the opening moments of *Extinction* will be useful for defining Kolja's character as a parafictional figure and in considering how Kolja's 'real' story intersects with the film's fictional elements.

3.1.3. A dialogue between the real and the imaginary

Apart from the initial close–up, three paradigmatic scenes from the *Extinction* capture a central premise to the film's structure. Through them, I would like to introduce the main proponents of my reading of the parafictional character. The first begins with another close–up shot of Kolja, but this time the camera follows him from behind as he walks into an unknown field and crosses a small wooden bridge – presumably a landmark of a border. We hear a female voiceover reading an excerpt from Alastair Bonnett's book, *Unruly Places: Lost Spaces, Secret Cities, and Other Inscrutable Geographies* (2014), in Russian:

> I don't have an easy relationship with borders. They frighten and unnerve me. Searched, prodded, delayed; again and again, for the temerity of crossing a few feet of land, they are bureaucratic fault lines, imperious and unfriendly. It's not surprising that so many look forward to a world without borders. Their existence is routinely critiqued by academic geographers who cast them as hostile acts of exclusion. And yet where, in a borderless world, could we escape to? Where would it be worth going? (Bonnett 2014, 177; quoted in the film at 07:57 min).

[42] See for instance Hélène Cixous' (1976) "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The "Uncanny")" where the author offers an extensive and accurate reading of Sigmund Freud's well–known concept of the *"Unheimlich"* ("The Uncanny" Freud 1919).

Soon after this scene, we see Kolja in the back seat of a car being driven at night, he exits the car and walks through the massive concrete sculptures that give form to the Bulgarian State Monument, a well–preserved ruin of the era of the Soviet Union. Suddenly, in a mist of fog and light, the figure of a mysterious man becomes visible, Kolja approaches him in silence (annexes: image 2). Without introduction or even any sign of recognition between each other, the man offers his insight on Stalin's legacy as a former Soviet political leader:

> (...)What is Stalin's chessboard? He so resettled nations, so mixed them up and displaced them, that now one cannot move anyone without also moving someone else, without doing him injury. There are currently thirty–six border conflicts, and perhaps even more. And there's Stalin's chessboard for you, our greatest misfortune (quote from the film, around 12 min).

Kolja listens to this statement, which is, in fact, a quote from Kapuściński's book, a direct transcript of a conversation between Kapuściński and Professor Ayudin Mirsalinoglu Mamedov, described in the book as a scholar on Turkish language and culture (Kapuściński 1993, 140–141).

Halfway into the film, Kolja and Lamas' film crew are crossing a checkpoint between Kuchurgan, PMR (Transnistria, officially the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic) and Pervomaisk, Ukraine. At the checkpoint, they are handed over to a KGB[43] inquiry in order to pass through. The film only reveals sound while the corresponding image has been cut out and replaced by a dark blue screen. In voice–over, we hear a KGB officer asking several questions about their motivations to cross the border and the nature of the film they are supposed to be shooting:

- Who is financing this expedition? Is she the director?
- Yes, the director.
- Who ordered it to be about Transnistria?
- She did.
- She decided? Is there any particular objective? Interesting, no? What are you shooting in Transnistria? That's true. On television? There's nothing to see. Everything is adulterated. Especially in Western Television. Everything is

[43] The KGB (Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, English for "Committee for State Security") still exists in Transnistria nowadays. In conversation with Lamas she tells about how her declaration was registered in a typewriter at the border. In addition, she explains that such institutions persist after the end of the cold war and shows how the presence of the KGB sheds light on why the conflict is called a "frozen conflict."

clear with you now. I certainly want to see the film. But isn't there a script explaining what the film is about?

- Yes.
- Is it about the lives of ordinary people or other things? Is it a worthwhile project about Transnistria? Or are there any other interests? There must be something else.
  (...)
- Is Kolja the protagonist?
- Yes.
- Kolja, what do you do in Rîbnita?
- I work. In the Russian Regiment, as a civilian.
- Surveillance?
- Yes.
  (Quote from the film, around 37 min.)

These three different scenes reveal the structure of the film: it unfolds like a kind of road movie[44], with several seemingly spontaneous events unraveling during the course of a trip. These events correspond to three distinct types of situations that appear throughout the film: Kolja's encounters with fictional characters occur repeatedly; they are intertwined with imageless scenes constituted only by voiceover commentary over a blank screen and audio recordings revealing some constraints Kolja encountered at the checkpoints as he crossed several borders from Russia to Europe.

There is a logical relation between these situations: in order to meet with the fictional characters, Kolja needed to cross real borders. Thus, the editing of the film suggests that there is in fact a continuation between fictional and real situations. In other words, it is the documentary reality (or different realities) that provides an access to fiction. While situations framed by the voiceover offering a commentary (sometimes personal, other times historical) related to the notion of borders, further complicates the gap between the other two.

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[44] In the first chapter of his book *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie,* David Laderman (2002) explains that road movie is a film genre in which the main characters leave home on a road trip, typically altering the perspective from their everyday lives. Road movies often depict travel in the hinterlands, with the films exploring the theme of alienation and examining the tensions and issues of the cultural identity of a nation or historical period; this is all often enmeshed in a mood of actual or potential menace, lawlessness, and violence, a "distinctly existential air" and is populated by restless, "frustrated, often desperate characters". The setting includes not just the close confines of the car as it moves on highways and roads, but also booths in diners and rooms in roadside motels, all of which helps to create intimacy and tension between the characters. Road movies tend to focus on the theme of masculinity (with the man often going through some type of crisis), some type of rebellion, car culture, and self–discovery, yet this is not the focus of this research.

The film is not only structured around a plot as generally associated with fiction, but also around an argument and a commentary, two narrative means that are rather associated with documentary films. Filmmaker and scholar Michael Chanan explains,

> In the documentary mode, the visual and geographical leap is bridged by a logic of implication, where the organizing principle does not rely on plot and story but rhetoric, argument, or poetry. This is a very important insight: narrative does not provide the only possible form of representational space on the screen (Chanan 2000).

The sequence of scenes in *Extinction* echoes what Chanan is referring to here, almost every new scene brings a new space linked by poetic connotation, discursive content of the dialogues and the voiceover commentary. Then again, this is not opposed to a sense of visual continuity which introduces a narrative logic more common to fiction than to documentary films.[45] A sense of continuation in *Extinction* is constructed through editing, but it is mainly evoked by the fact that Kolja plays in both situations, as an actor and as a real 'social actor' in the historical arena. Bill Nichols develops a theory of the social actor in *Representing Reality* (1991). He states:

> I use "social actor" to stress the degree to which individuals represent themselves to others; this can be construed as a performance. The term is also meant to remind us that social actors, people, retain the capacity to act within the historical arena where they perform. The sense of aesthetic remove between an imaginary world in which actors perform and the historical world in which people live no longer obtains. The performance of social actors, though, is similar to the performance of fictional characters in many respects. Individuals present a more or less complex psychology, and we direct our attention toward their development or destiny. We identify and follow the codes of actions and enigmas that advance the narrative. We attend to those semic or behaviorally descriptive moments that fold back over characters and give further density to their behavior. We give considerable attention to the referential codes imported or "documented" by the text as the operational

[45] In his search to what distinguishes the documentary film as a genre, Michael Chanan writes, "Fictional screen space, as we know, is built on the grammar of continuity. It produces a series of unified spaces, which are conventionally called scenes. In its most rule–governed form in the Fordist studio system of Hollywood, the result is the realism effect of classical narrative, but it needn't be. In other words, no matter what generic conventions are used, to write a screenplay means to construct a plot, that is, to articulate sequences of scenes in which actions and events take place. Hence the conceptual significance of the French term *metteur–en–scène*, which indicates the job of the fiction director. This description does not as much apply to the documentary director, more likely to be called a *réalisateur*. Here, professional language acknowledges that documentary works differently and is not so much scripted as written with images" (Chanan 2000, 56–61).

> codes of the culture that the social actors adhere to or contest in discernible ways (Nichols 1991, 42).

Nichols stresses that the social actor maintains the ability to perform in the historical arena in a way similar to the performance of fictional characters. While acting as both himself and the character he is portraying, Kolja redoubles the sense of continuity between an imaginary world in which actors act and the historical world in which they live. Therefore, the redoubling of this character destabilizes the sense of aesthetic separation between the two worlds. As Nichols notes, our attention goes toward the social actors' development or destiny, however, we are never sure if these developments are the effects of the historical world in the imagination or of imagination in the historical world. The presence of Kolja in these two types of situations within the film – one which refers to an imaginary world in which actors perform and one referring to the historical world in which people live – would be enough to credit him with a parafictional status.

Author and literary critic Norman Lavers has defined parafiction with regards to literature as those "non–fictional works which, either in their treatment or their subject matter, resemble fiction, and so form a sort of poorly surveyed border area" (Lavers 1978, 44). In addition, as the term parafiction becomes actualized in the field of cinema and contemporary art, and in particular in the film *Extinction*, parafictions can be seen as more than forming a "poorly surveyed border area" between fact and fiction. Instead, parafictions can serve as a means to problematize both sides of the border between historical world and the imaginary, registering how the limits have recently shifted, and questioning the importance of this shift within the larger scope of a globalized society.

3.1.4. The film's dialogical structure

Within *Extinction's* narrative structure, reality and fiction do not necessarily overlap; each scene pertains to the conventions of what it intends to represent. However, there is an impression of continuity that is effectively produced by the dialogical structure – as Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) would have it[46] – created in the editing of the film, where

[46] This term, which I borrowed from *The Dialogic Imagination* by Russian philosopher Michael Bakthin (1981), is useful to understand how scenes from different ontological bases can coexist without overlapping and instead point to their limitations in relation to each other, while remaining in the same frame of reference.

scenes from different categorial spheres are internally interwoven, as well as how the film "dialogues" with other works of literature. As we can see from the examples above, internal and external dialogues serve, rhetorically and narratively, to explore the meaning of the border. We see this in the two examples where Lamas incorporates a dialogue with literary works by Bonnett and Kapuściński, where she includes excerpts of their texts into the text of the film. This idea is particularly evident in the last example where the actor quotes Kapuściński's text while speaking to Kolja.

Kolja plays an ambiguous character, as mentioned above: at times, his actual–self merges with Kapuściński's. The dialogue between Kolja and the mysterious man does not merely respond to Kapuściński work but is informed by his work on several levels at once. The film's structure produces a double effect: both the previous work of literature and the present film are altered by the film's various dialogues. *Extinction* recontextualizes Kapuściński's text and by doing so actualizes it by reflecting it. However, this reflection is not completely resolved, all the dialogues, statements, and testimonies that appear in the film seem to somehow arrive out of context. They are like fragments of a larger conversation that come together within the frame of the film without ever reaching a conclusion.

The narrative fragments featured in *Extinction* not only come from literary or authored works; the film also refers to anonymous voices of recorded conversations with individuals who have been affected by borders. It is as if every fragment of a conversation is a thought in itself in conflict with someone else's thought or consciousness. This is how Lamas creates a dialogue within the film, even when the fragments are sparse in time and space, spanning from Kapuściński's words to the anonymous person collecting herbs at the border, to the KGB officer's inquiries.

If we are expecting to find only hostile relationships with borders within the film, the voiceover quoting Bonnett's text leads us in another direction: "And yet where, in a borderless world, could we escape to? Where would it be worth going?" (Bonnett 2014, 177). It is part of a dialogic work that every experience, every fragment of a conversation is internally dialogic, meaning that it is "adorned with polemic, filled with struggle, or is, on the contrary, open to inspiration from outside itself," as Bakhtin puts it (1984, 32). This is not to say that *Extinction's* structure is concentrated simply on itself, quite the contrary: it is imminently relational. As Bakhtin observes, "it is accompanied by a continual sideways

glance at another person" (Bakhtin 1984, 32). Separate elements in the development of *Extinction's* plot seem to contradict one another, statements can be decoded in different ways, and even the psychology of the protagonist is self–contradictory – as Kolja, he wishes that Transnistria was recognized by Russia, but in the role of Kapuściński, he is an observer of Russia's failure to keep its borders intact and prevent conflict. This illustrates the fact that the film neither produces a theory about borders nor relies on a single coherent concept of the border, rather it offers itself as a dialogical approach to the notion of the border. At the same time, it is also critical of a second understanding of borders, namely the conventional understanding of the limits between fiction and reality.

3.1.5. Creative constraints

In the third situation mentioned above, the guards working at the checkpoint are suspicious of Kolja's Transnistrian citizenship. But it is not only Kolja's citizenship that raises suspicion but also the whole European film crew traveling with him, including Lamas and her translator, who is directly answering the KGB officer's questions. What reinforces this climate of suspicion is the fact that Lamas' crew is never clearly identified on screen, nor does Lamas herself ever appear. What we know about the project can only be extracted from the inquiries at the checkpoints and the recorded conversations in which Lamas' translator asks Kolja questions. In this border situation, suspicion is consciously produced by means of what Thomas Elsaesser has referred to as "creative constraints" (Elsaesser 2018, 284–285).

Kolja's character is formed by playing within a 'bipolar composition', in other words, within 'opposite poles of expression.' He is asked to perform in a film while what is at play is his real self and the frictions it may cause when certain situations are set up for him. Thus, on one hand, defining Kolja as a character in *Extinction* becomes a matter of controlling some of the constraints he faces while navigating the world. On the other hand, it becomes a matter of creatively opening up the possibility of encountering certain situations he would not otherwise be able to experience outside the fictional frame. These encounters within the same frame of representation deserves further attention, for it is more than a simple blur of borders between fiction and non–fiction. Instead, Kolja is a character playing "alongside of," or "beyond" fiction.

In the scene at the checkpoint, the film crew is submitted to a KGB officer's inquiry, as already mentioned. They are obliged to respond to questions about the motives, subject, finance, characters and motivation of their film., In fact, this inquiry at the border is central to Lamas' entire project:. it is clearly not a staged situation, but it cannot be considered as entirely unstaged. The situation is prompted in reality with a level of predictability. Elsaesser states that, "[c]ontrol from an external source, whether individual or institutional, is usually experienced as a constraint – constraint on one's freedom: of expression, of action, of movement" (Elsaesser 2018, 284). Control from an external source – in this case, the inquiry performed by official guards at the checkpoint – was predictable. It created a constraint for the film crew as they attempted to cross the border. It was also predictable to encounter obstructions or suspicion about the director's motivation when making a film about Transnistria. The constraint at the checkpoint was predictable because the conflict at the Transnistrian borders has not yet been settled. Instead, each side's position for its recognition has been suspended – thus the term frozen conflict that determines the current situation in this region. Despite not being a war zone, a climate of suspicion persists, and conflicts often still occur. In such a situation, it is not hard to imagine Lamas' crew being considered suspicious. The purpose of imposing on the film crew such a constraint was to master a situation by provoking a conflict. Traveling with Kolja would eventually aggravate the situation of having to pass through such checkpoints, for it would, expectably, turn against Lamas who, in turn, would need to internalize (aesthetically) the inquiry in the film's plot as a way of regaining some form of agency and control. Working with a certain level of predictability, Lamas turns an 'external constraint'[47] into a creative constraint, a constraint consciously chosen for the sake of a certain expected outcome.

In his book, *Imperium*, Kapuściński writes,

> Yet everyone knows that the question posed by a police interrogator is not an academic, disinterested question, posed to plumb the dark mysteries of our being. No, each one of a police interrogator's questions conceals a lethal charge; the question is asked in order to destroy you, to smash you into the ground, to annihilate you. It is no accident that the expression "cross–fire

[47] Elsaesser states, "I draw a distinction between *external constraints* and *creative constraints*, with the external constraints the one named by Lessig as enabling humans to engage with their lived environment and to effect change, and creative constraints the ones that renegotiate a different kind of autonomy and freedom" (Elsaesser 2018, 288).

> questioning" is borrowed from the vocabulary of battle, the front, war, death (Kapuściński 1993, 146).

The essence of the encounter between the KGB officer and Lamas' crew at the border is not far from this description, it already presupposes that 'there must be something else', a suspicion important enough to impose a constraint on the director's freedom of expression, of action, of movement. Yet, this constraint also serves as a creative one, as it becomes integrated within the film to show something that is key to how a border functions: borders are conflict zones. In another passage of his book, Kapuściński reflects on this particular aspect of borders:

> How many victims, how much blood and suffering are connected with this business of borders! There is no end to the cemeteries of those who have been killed the world over in the defense of borders. Equally boundless are the cemeteries of the audacious who attempted to expand their borders. It is safe to assume that half of those who have ever walked upon our planet and lost their lives in the field of glory gave up the ghost in battles begun over a question of borders (Kapuściński 1993, 20).

The external constraint to go through the checkpoint between what is not officially recognized as Transnistria becomes an inner aesthetic resource for the filmmaker, leading to a kind of *mise–en–scène*, of staging, where suspicion is induced. At the same time, similarly to what is offered by Kapuściński in this excerpt, the scene is presented as a critical reflection of the question of borders. By evoking the conflict concerning imaginary territories/not recognized territories, it can be argued that *Extinction* also points to the fact that such claims constitute a danger for recognized borders. To a certain extent, the imaginary borders overlap with the "real" ones, they contest and question their legitimacy. How is this relevant with regards to fiction and documentary – until when and perhaps where is a documentary film a legitimate representative of reality and how does the use of parafiction offer the possibility to problematize this? These are questions at the heart of Lamas' project.

3.1.6. The parafictional character

We have observed how the close–up in Salomé Lamas' *Extinction* encompasses a doubling effect, a superimposition of opposites, and a reflecting and refracting quality on the protagonist. In addition, we have observed how the protagonist played a central role in the unfolding of events that the film records at several borders, and how Lamas turned some of these 'external constraints' into creative constraints during border crossings. We have observed the function of different styles and sources of dialogue, being either identified as fictional or documentary, that intercept the protagonist by adding a dialogical dimension to the film's structure. Now, I wish to focus on how all these elements make up a parafictional character and, in turn, how parafictional characters, such as Kolja, depict the idea of the border in an insightful way.

Returning to Kolja, in particular his role in the three situations depicted above, is it fair to say that reality and fiction become blurred or is it more insightful to register the limits of these concepts? What is the difference between blurring or registering the limits of these concepts? What defines the parafictional? The definition of parafiction can be read against the OED's definition of the term "para", which identifies several disruptive effects, which are vital to an understanding of the term:

> Origin: From Greek, "para" indicates "beside"; in combinations often meaning "amiss, irregular" and denoting "alteration" or "modification." From the Italian imperative singular of parare 'defend, shield' (originally meaning 'prepare', from Latin parare). As a preposition "para" had the sense "by the side of, adjacent to," also "beyond or distinct from, but analogous to." As an adverb it implies "to one side, aside, faulty, irregular, disordered, improper, wrong": also expressing subsidiary relation, alteration, perversion, simulation, etc.

Accordingly, a parafiction would be one in which fiction has been pushed beyond or alongside its reference – reality for example – rather than remaining within the limits of the category of fiction. Carrie Lambert-Beatty (2009), at the time of her writing, proposes the term 'Parafiction Art' to describe an emerging genre of artwork in which the artist tries to express narratives, people, or events that are perceived by spectators to be true. Parafictional works, Lambert–Beatty explains, play with the overlapping of fact and fiction in a unique manner:

> Like a paramedic as opposed to a medical doctor, a parafiction is related to but not quite a member of the category of fiction as established in literature and drama. It remains a bit outside. It does not perform its procedures in the hygienic clinics of literature, but has one foot in the field of the real (Lambert-Beatty 2009, 54).

Despite the lack of clarity about what she means by 'the hygienic clinics of literature,' this definition of parafiction is useful. Parafictions cross the line between fiction and what lies on the other side of this boundary, the 'real' world. So, one manifestation of parafiction would be, as Lambert-Beatty demonstrates, a situation where "real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as is being lived" (Lambert-Beatty 2009, 54). Parafiction in *Extinction* works through the introduction of a self–imposed constraint or, in other words, creative constraints woven into a citizen's daily life. Then it exploits all possible political outcomes to this constraint while bringing forward a predictable adjacent reality. Kolja, in this sense, is a transgressive, self–reflexive parafictional figure, who's character acts as a catalyst, bridging the gap between fiction and non–fiction to expose and expand their limits.

There is a performative effect of this figure: the creative constraint that Kolja is put into, reinforces the parafiction in that it tricks our perception of the event and leaves us, as viewer's, in doubt of its veracity. According to Michael Young, this is an effect that is "triggered by an estrangement in realism via an aesthetics of doubt" (Young 2017, 38). There is a political side to this performative effect. Young states,

> Parafictional art is political. But unlike traditional examples of political art, it does not operate initially through either ethos or epistemology. It acts first through aesthetics. Aesthetics, in this case, is understood according to Jacques Rancière's definition as the matter in which sensuous qualities are distributed. Parafictions question our assumptions about the way reality looks and feels. It demands that the viewer pay closer attention, which can incite in the viewer a desire for knowledge or a desire to be just; a conceptual art initiated by an aesthetic provocation (Young 2017, 38).

Young's observation of the parallel between Rancière's (2004) notion of "politics of aesthetics" and parafictional art allows him to argue that parafiction takes the conventions by which something is accepted as real in order to deconstruct and distort them to a point at

which doubt is raised about the validity of the convention, and at the same time, it offers space for alternative possibilities of how the world may be constructed. Young explains that the parafiction begins by intensifying, exaggerating, and speculating on how the world is made sensible in order to openly and rigorously trigger moments that reveal its fabrication (40). We can apply this analysis to *Extinction*, for the film does not aim at dismantling all appearances with the expectation of fostering critical awareness. Rather, it redistributes sensible information, evoking a sense of doubt by presenting us with a parafictional character. No claim is made about "reality" from an ethical or epistemological standpoint; the parafictional character neither pretends to possess new knowledge about reality nor to have access to it transcendentally. Contrary to that, the parafictional character in *Extinction* claims an access to the world through an aesthetic form. Not only does it echo, but it also performs Rancière's model of fiction as “material rearrangements of signs and images, relations between what is and what can be done” (Rancière 2009, 66).

Part II: Real Enough: Parafictions in *Fatamorgana*[48]

> (...) the real, conceived in its contingent absoluteness, is never real enough not to be suspected of semblance (Badiou 2007, 52).

In response to my interest in her work, Salomé Lamas invited me to watch Fatamorgana (2019) *in her studio where she was finishing editing the film.* Fatamorgana *is set in Beirut, Lebanon, and it mixes local cultural and political references with global political allusions. Lamas had the idea for the film while attending an artist residency in Beirut where she discovered a general interest in wax museums – institutions that produce, preserve and exhibit replicas of world–famous political and cultural figures. Taking this theatrical space as a point of departure, Lamas wrote a script for a film together with Isabel Ramos, a Portuguese journalist who mainly reports on political events in the Middle East back to Portugal.*

Lamas invited me to watch the film prior to its public exhibition with the intention of testing how her use of 'footnotes' would affect the viewer. More specifically, she wanted to know if the footnotes she adopted in the structure of the film were 'real enough,' if they were consistent with what is commonly accepted in academic writing. The idea of a film with footnotes struck me from the beginning, as far as I could remember, I had not seen a film incorporating footnotes before. Footnotes are a structuring device common to academic texts but not to films. Essentially, footnotes are useful to provide additional information about a specific topic in the main text and direct readers to external sources, to cite an idea or to suggest additional readings. They often include quotations, parenthetical information, copyright permissions and background information. So, what could we expect from footnotes in a film by Lamas? As I learned later, this was only one of several parafictional strategies Lamas employed in the film.

The film was commissioned by Culturgest, a cultural institution sponsored by the Portuguese national bank Caixa Geral de Depósitos. Hence, Fatamorgana *was first publicly*

[48] This part of the chapter is a rearticulation of some ideas previously published in Salomé Lamas' book, *Fatamorgana* (Magno in Lamas 2020). This book is part of the multidisciplinary project of *Fatamorgana* which also included a theater performance as well as a sound installation. For the purpose of this thesis the focus is on the film part of this project.

exhibited in Culturgest's gallery in Oporto in 2019. A floating screen was mounted above the main atrium of the gallery to project the film. Presented in such a way, it was possible to circle around it and see both sides of the screen, each side displaying the subtitles in different languages: English and Portuguese. The possibility of moving around the film produced a completely distinct experience from that of watching it on the computer's screen. In the gallery, it didn't feel like I had such a fixed position, I could see multiple angles of it and explore another dimension of time since the film was running on a loop. Other aspects of the film appeared more relevant after seeing it exhibited. For example, the wax museum gained more of a physical presence when eschewed to fit on the screen hanging in the atrium of the bank's gallery. It appeared to me as a kind of mise en abyme, some sort of an institution inside an institution, reflecting on what is most valuable for each: (institutional/political) power. The film intentionally produces tensions between different layers of reality, one of which being the museum–structure itself and introduces uncanny subversive elements into the very core of the institution through the combination of fictional and factual elements.

3.2.1. Working with the frame

Fatamorgana sets up a curious proposition: *what if* a woman could assemble in one room some of the most important political, religious and cultural leaders of the world, both dead and alive, speak to them directly, moderate their conversation, and, perhaps more importantly, compel them to listen to her story? This possibility is intelligently scripted by weaving the personal story of Hanan – a semi–fictional character, who has suffered the trauma of war and of losing her son – with international historical and contemporary events, celebrated in political speeches and media reports that had – and still have – an impact on, or are intertwined with, Lebanese context and politics.

Fiction has a special place in Lebanon, a country with no official or unanimous history. The discussion about fiction/facts and their overlap emerged in the 1990s in part because of Lebanese artists like Walid Raad, who, for example, created archives documenting "what might have happened" since there was no official history that could be accessed. Consequently, in the context of *Fatamorgana*, Lamas adopts a particular method of tackling history and politics that is characteristic of artistic practice. In much of Lamas'

work, the act of interviewing is a strategy that reoccurs and reveals a reliance on incorporating individual stories or testimonials of individual experiences, a strategy which also leads her films to be frequently discussed within the context of documentary film rather than fiction.[49] Yet as we have already discussed in relation to *Extinction*, the act of interviewing can be seen as one strategy among others that is used to reflect on individual experiences of a specific place and time avoiding or replacing the lack of official or grand narratives.

Fatamorgana is divided into two parts: in the first part, five actresses are interviewed as part of an audition process for the film. While being interviewed, they are also asked to react to the script which was previously provided to them by Lamas. The script, in this first part of the film, is informed by memories of the actresses' experience of the war in Lebanon, a civil war that occured between 1975 and 1990. The film opens with one of the actresses, Christine Choueiry, saying, "In fact, this is the story of my life…" (quote from the film; annexes: image 3). The testimonies, the voices of the actresses, confer the script a particular characteristic: it tells a story that is not necessarily 'true', but that is not completely 'untrue' either. An important aspect of the interviews in the first part of *Fatamorgana* is that the actresses auditioned for the role in the film (that we have not yet seen) are asked to respond to the script, which results in them telling their own experiences of the war. There are two outcomes of this method of interviewing: one is that the gesture of including all responses by the interviewed actresses reveals the need of including multiple voices to tell the story of Lebanon in face of a lack of reliable official history. The other is that traces of parafiction – the extension of the limits between reality and fiction, as we discussed in relation to *Extinction* – become already apparent in this initial part of the film. As we will see, Lamas will again adopt a form of parafiction to address the history and politics that is characteristic of Lebanon throughout the film.

During the second part of the film, we follow Hanan, interpreted by Caroline Hatem who has been selected by Lamas to perform the film's main character. Hanan wanders after

[49] Themes of war and colonial exploitation are recurrent in Lamas ´ work: from interviewing perpetrators from the Portuguese colonial wars (*No Man's Land*, 2012); or mine workers from La Rinconada, in Peru – a village with an altitude of 5000 meters (*El Dorado XXI*, 2016); to the current *Fatamorgana*, where the filmmaker speaks with women who have lived through the experience of war in Lebanon. However, colonial exploitation, in the case of Lebanon, is very different from the others here mentioned. Lebanon was under French mandate, but has always been very much under the influence of very different powers such as Iran, USA, France etc.

closing time through the Hall of Fame – a wax museum in Beirut where realistic replicas of world–famous figures coexist (annexes: image 4). This is precisely the time when she should be at home serving dinner to her husband who, as she ironically says, "doesn't like to be served after seven" (quote from the film). In fact, it is not without irony that a conversation begins between Hanan and the Iraqi Minister of Information during the second Gulf War, Mohammed Saeed al–Sahaf, with her asking, "[d]o you mind speaking a bit lower?" (quote from the film) With this provocation, she sets the tone of the conversation by showing 'who is in charge'. A tone she has to reassert throughout the film. "I will not allow you to engage in conversation, gentlemen. I'm the one asking questions here," asserts Hanan later while mediating a dispute between G. W. Bush and Saddam Hussein who have entered into a personal attack before Hussein's capture by the Americans. As it is possible to observe from these introductory examples, the wax museum itself provides the space where Hanan struggles to deliver her personal story to an array of international political figures. Hanan's emancipation in a world of (mostly male) political leaders could be the outcome of this story for it is her, an "ordinary" citizen, who assumes the power to speak to those in power. This appropriation of power by an ordinary citizen has a specific meaning especially in the context of Lebanon, where, as the actual situation shows, power is divided, since the civil war, between political clans, while citizens have very limited opportunity to express their voices.

This second part of *Fatamorgana* is composed mostly of black and white still images. The stillness of the wax figures and the liveness of Hanan blend into each image – Hanan's movements become as still as the wax figures while the wax figures seem to be interacting with the actress in a lively way. Within the still images, Hanan and the wax figures share the temporal dimension of a photograph – at the same time a recall of the past and a projection into the future. Roland Barthes beautifully expresses this feature of the photographic frame when he writes, "[b]y giving me the absolute past of the pose (...), the photograph tells me death in the future" (Barthes 1981, 96).

In the wax museum, Hanan recalls fragmented memories of her personal post–war experience that surface throughout the dialogue. Occasionally, the black and white still images are interrupted by sequences of color photographs of Beirut seemingly relating her experience of war and to specific places where she experienced it. Speaking to the wax figures, Hanan articulates something that is the constitutive principle of a certain temporality of trauma:

> Hanan: I waited for my son. He could arrive at any moment. I didn't risk leaving the house. What if he arrived and I wasn't there? To pass the time I began to knit him a sweater, a green wool sweater.
> [*Hanan heckles Yasser Arafat*] Do you know how to knit, sir? It seems difficult, but truth be told, it is very simple. You have to take two knitting needles and begin intertwining the yarn. Hold it. Release it. Cross it. Uncross it. Like this. [*There is an image of Hanan demonstrating with her hands*.] (Quote from the film).

This account from Hanan recalls Homer's Odyssey, more precisely Penelope, the wife of Odysseus known for deceiving time with knitting as she waits for her husband's return. Hanan's story relates to the same longing for a disappeared relative – in this case a son who went missing after the war. While referring to the practice of knitting – generally associated with women's labor – Hanan refers to the crossing of political discourse and poetic language. After this statement, our attention is drawn to the discrepancy between the universality of a globalized political discourse embodied in the wax figures and the personal statement figuring the consequences of global politics for the individual who is powerless to affect the decisions of political leaders.

While the first part of the film appears to utilize more conventional documentary aesthetics – such as the camera pointing at the actresses who give their unscripted testimony – the second part of the film follows a more fictional approach. It is relevant to note this separation between documentary and fiction or between fiction and non–fiction as two different modes of addressing the subject of the film in the first and second parts of the film. The separation is clearly intended, and we shall see why.

As Mieke Bal notes, "[t]he negative qualifier "non–fictional" is, as all negatives are, vague, and the listed purposes suggest the requirement of objectivity that is always attached to the genre" (Bal 2021, 1). At the core of the separation between fiction and non–fiction in *Fatamorgana* is what Jacques Derrida (1980) termed the "law of genre." Accordingly, genres draw limits, establish norms and interdictions. Non–fiction as a genre, for example, would determine fiction as a limit not to be crossed. To cross the limit of a genre is to cross the demarcation of an established norm. This would mean to risk falling into "impurity, anomaly or monstrosity" (Derrida 1980, 57). In contrast, Derrida sets a different hypothesis when he states, "the whole enigma of genre springs perhaps most clearly from within this limit between the two genres of genre which, neither separable nor inseparable, form an odd

couple of one without the other in which each evenly serves the other a citation to appear in the figure of the other (...)" (Derrida 1980, 56). The hypothesis here is, *what if* "it were impossible not to mix genres"? *What if* there was an "essential disruption" (57) within genres? *What if* to every 'law of genre' there was a counter–law that reasons its edges? Derrida responds to these questions with the statement that in every genre there is a "principle of contamination, a law of impurity" (Derrida 1980, 59). In addition to Bal's statement which suggests that the negative qualifier of non–fiction is vague, we could argue that it is not only vague, it is also contaminated. Derrida asks yet another question,

> (...) can one identify a work of art, of whatever sort, but especially a work of discursive art, if it does not bear the mark of a genre, if it does not signal or mention it or make it remarkable in a way? (...) The remark of belonging need not pass through the consciousness of the author or the viewer (...) It can also refute this consciousness or render the explicit 'mention' mendacious, false, inadequate or ironic according to all sorts of overdetermined figures" (Derrida 1980, 64).

In *Fatamorgana* we might consider this to be the case. Including two genres under the frame of one film already calls for the need of the two in order to make a statement. *Fatamorgana* contrasts the frames of the conventional genres of fiction and non–fiction with the sense of conformity they conjure, without losing sight of the deep antagonisms and tensions inherent in them. The mark of belonging to a genre, either fiction or non–fiction, is neither a theme nor a thematic component of the work, although this instance of belonging to more than one genre can be read as a statement of "belong without belonging," as Derrida puts it.

> Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic, and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the *trait* of participation itself, because of the effect of the code and of the generic mark. Making genre its mark, a text demarcates itself. If remarks of belonging belong without belonging, participate without belonging, then genre–designations cannot be simply part of the corpus. (Derrida 1980, 65).

Working within aesthetic frames, or as Derrida puts it, with the 'effect of the code' of fiction and non–fiction, allows the possibility of navigating between frames. The crossing between the two frames is made in a dialogical conversation between the scripted and unscripted: the

unscripted part of the film is also a commentary on the scripted part. In other words, the "real" experiences of the actresses are reflected through the script, and that which appears as fictional is indeed also grounded in the real. One could ask where the script comes from – is it not based, somehow or another, on real stories?

The crossing between the frames of fiction and non–fiction is made possible by Caroline Hatem, playing *Fatamorgana's* parafictional character,[50] who is first 'real' and later becomes 'fictional.' But we can never completely dissociate one from the other. Hatem, by crossing the two frames never leaves them intact. When the film is exhibited in the gallery, this becomes even more relevant due to the film being played on a loop where we always eventually return to the film's non–fictional beginning. Every time the film loops, it is as if Hatem crosses from one frame to the other again, contaminating one by the other, while offering the possibility to see new relations between the film's two parts. In this way, the film creates an infinite loop of relations, which is only possible if the frames of both fiction and non–fiction are maintained but transgressed. This reflexive movement between frames is what prevents *Fatamorgana* from establishing any fixed meaning for its subject. Instead, by keeping these frames present, *Fatamorgana* emphasizes the performative character of paraesthetical self–reflexivity[51] in a similar way to what we encountered in *Extinction*. The paraesthetic moment is when a genre is transcended, or as Derrida puts it, "at the very moment that a genre or a literature is broached, at that very moment, degenerescence has begun, the end begins" (Derrida 1980, 66).

Lamas 'works with the frame' because the frame is what permits her the movement from one side to the other, exposing and expanding the limits of each. To blur the two frames would reduce the possibility of that movement. The blur or the gap seems to be much less productive than to continuously promote the passage between the two frames. The freedom to cross frames, or borders, is what produces the reflexive process within *Fatamorgana* and towards the viewer, who is also invited to enter the web of relations between politics and personal experience contained in the film.

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[50] This chapter begins with a description of parafictional characters.

[51] The meaning of paraesthetical self–reflexivity was already mentioned in the second chapter of this thesis in relation to Trinh T. Minh–ha's work and David Carroll's paraesthetic theory.

3.2.2. The footnote as an aesthetic experience

There are other moments in *Fatamorgana* which manifest the crossing between frames. Inside the museum, Hanan speaks to the life–like figures *as if* they were real and the figures speak back to her, but with words that only partially reflect what their correspondent 'real' identities have actually said. Throughout the film, Hanan deals directly with Mohammed Saeed al–Sahaf, Yasser Arafat, Saddam Hussein, George W. Bush (Jr.), G. W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, Hosni Mubarak, Bashar al–Assad, King Abdullah, Muammar Al–Kadhafi, Bill Clinton, Hassan Nasrallah (the recent leader of Hezbollah), Recep Erdoğan, John Kerry, and other rather abstract entities who also appear in the script such as the 'fastest man in the world' and the 'shortest man in the world.' The conversations progress slowly in a tone of a parody. During the first moments of the conversation, Hanan proposes to clean the sand out of the eyes of Hosni Mubarak, Saudi King Abdullah and Yasser Arafat, helping them by using the tip of her scarf. With this gesture, Hanan pragmatically tries to alleviate their 'blindness', or perhaps distortion in their vision towards her reality.

Weaved within the dialogue between Hanan and the wax figures is another layer of text: the footnotes that appear juxtaposed with the image. The footnotes function as a sort of in–between text, mostly adding factual information to verify what was 'said' by the wax figures. For example, at one point, the wax figure of President Donald Trump excitedly states:

> Donald Trump: Shiites, Sunnis, what's that? Arabs, Kurds, aren't they all the same? I'll grab them all by the pussy, oh yeah!
>
> (...)Footnote: During the election campaign, Donald Trump demonstrated that he didn't exactly know the difference between Sunnis and Shiites, Arabs and Kurds. (Quote from the film; annexes: image 5).

We may recognize Donald Trump's statement, but we may also detect the satire in it. There is a reference to two moments that tainted Trump's reputation, although one could argue that for some of his supporters they also contributed to his popularization and reputation for his 'unconventional' style. The two statements both demonstrate Trump's lack of knowledge of

Middle Eastern culture, as the footnote emphatically explains, and the expression "I'll grab them all by the pussy" that has become famous after Trump's comments recorded off–camera in 2005 during an NBC television production. In this excerpt, we see how Lamas has brought together the two moments in one statement and further explained in the footnote, which intends to capture Lamas' critique of the nature of Trump's political campaign.

In *Fatamorgana*, Lamas undertook extensive research in order to narrate several moments in recent political scandals that appear almost as parodies of themselves, leading Lamas to further incorporate irony in order to question the justice that seemed to be missing from these situations. The following is a brief example of how Lamas negotiated these scandals within the film:

> Hanan: Sheik Tamim bin Hamad al–Thani said it wouldn't be wise to act with hostility towards Iran. That Iran is a great player for the stability of the region. And that Hamas is the official representative of the Palestinian people. Mohammed Bin Salman asked President Trump for permission to invade Qatar in order to cease international terrorism. Can we, can we, Mr. President?
> (…)
> Footnote: It is fake news, allegedly planted by the Russians which, in June 2017, led Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and the United States to cut off relations with Qatar, under the pretext that this country finances international terrorism (Excerpt from the film).

Most of what is uttered by the political figures in the film is shocking, because of the close correlation of the scripted dialogue with the facts that are referenced mainly throughout the footnotes. The term 'fake news,' as stated in the example above, was instrumentalized for political purposes without clear negative repercussions. For that reason, in the film, a feeling of impunity is added to what was actually said and to its consequences. By weaving satire with factual information, *Fatamorgana* offers commentary and criticism about the world we currently live in.

Throughout the film, there is a discrepancy between what is said and the concomitant footnotes which appear as text on the screen. Both are scripted in order to suggest what was actually said by the 'real' politician – now concealed in form of a wax figure in the museum – and what the wax avatar is scripted to say in the film. Within footnotes, we usually expect to find factual information to verify a reference or quote. Footnotes are recognized within Westernized cultures as a prospect for obtaining factual truth. But the footnotes in

Fatamorgana merely pretend to carry out the same function as they do in a book, namely providing context or facts. A close look at the use of footnotes in this context is especially important, not only because of their consistent use throughout the film, but also because they convey the idea that factual truth is being offered from a particular perspective. They do more than merely provide factual information: they mimic the form through which such information is mediated and play with our expectation of finding accurate data. In other words, the footnotes are there to create an impression of trust, the feeling of being offered a factual basis to the film's narrative. But this sense of trust is further disrupted as it is impossible to read all the content of the footnotes in the film and still pay attention to what is being said by the wax characters. Watching, listening and reading, we soon become overloaded with information. This is the effect the footnotes intend to provoke in the viewer, the feeling that it is impossible to catch up with information; that the speed of it has become humanly impossible to pursue. Sometimes, the spoken text and the footnotes are so entangled that it is impossible to actually distinguish what is factual and what is not, adding to the feeling of doubt and uncertainty.

These two effects – the feeling that it is impossible to follow the speed of information and to distinguish true from false statements – can be read in combination, as a critique of the political manipulation of facts and the subsequent spread of fake news following President Trump's election. Moreover, as an aesthetic form, the footnotes are one of the main triggers in the film to bridge the specificity of the Lebanese political context with a Western conception of the production and distribution of factual information. Reproducing formally the elaborate discourses of research structures, the film subverts Western perspectives on the social–political reality in the Middle East. Employing a format associated with scientific validity confers a sense of legitimacy and seriousness to the film. At the same time, they frustrate the expectations to provide factual information. As a result, the scientific validity of the footnote is overwhelmed but its aesthetic validity still remains. As such, Lamas' use of footnotes in *Fatamorgana* is an effective and sophisticated parafictional strategy.

There is undoubtedly a performative effect that makes the viewer presented with the footnotes become utterly disoriented, as if the usual referencing system is temporarily unavailable. Unexpected and uncertain correlations are suggested to the viewer through the film's footnotes without ever coming together in a specific order. In place of clarifying what is at stake positively, the footnotes themselves represent a negative criticism. The viewer is

left uncertain of her own perspective. The apparently purely formal adoption of the footnotes encompasses a vast array of possible signs and meanings. The performative aspect of *Fatamorgana* can be observed on this point: rather than providing relevant information about reality, the footnotes disrupt the viewer and produce a feeling of uncertainty as noted above, where the information they 'verify' can be interpreted in many possible ways, making the spectator herself suspicious.

This parafictional strategy has many similarities to the ones used by well–known Lebanese artist Walid Raad from *The Atlas Group*. In his work, Raad also adopts conventional means of producing and circulating historical or scientific truth, such as the archive, which he mines and combines with fictional elements in order to question and comment upon Western and non–Western forms of affirmation of historical truth. As Stefanie Baumann writes in relation to Raad's use of the archive, it is more like a "fictional aesthetic construction than the presentation of a "real" research structure" (Baumann 2019, 1). The same could be said about Lamas' footnotes. As Baumann (2019) puts it, the archive in Raad's work – and we could add the footnotes in Lamas' film – obscure a familiar form that becomes questionable as such through subtle estrangements, revealing that, far from serving as neutral platforms, they are structurally embedded within specific discourses to convey meaning (4). Baumann states,

> [T]he legitimation of the archive's claim for neutrality, is suspended [...] by intermingling fictional and factual elements, and by including the potential perceptions its structure and contents generate into the aesthetic construction itself [...] blurs the frontiers between subjective experience and objective data [...] performs a critique of its hegemonic aspirations by multiplying the vectors of meaning [...] by both appealing to and frustrating the regular operation of forms, concepts and signs, The Atlas Group takes on a critical function [...] the dissensual encounter between different geopolitical and cultural spaces [...] undermine both hegemonic objectivist claims and the instrumentalization of data for political means (Baumann 2019, 3).

A similar dissensual activity claimed by Baumann to be present in the work of *The Atlas Group* can be observed in *Fatamorgana*. As already stated above, the film adopts footnotes in the film's text with the intent to undermine hegemonic objectivist forms to convey information. The work of Walid Raad has become iconic in the transnational context of contemporary art precisely because it entails a strong dissensual activity, while it also

articulates and critically reflects the transnational space of contemporary art. Fictionalization is a distinctive aspect related to the construction of a subject position of the contemporary (Osborne 2013, 28). Throughout his work, Walid Raad presents contemporary Beirut and, more broadly, the recent history of Lebanon, from the dual perspective of a fictional character and documentation of 'what could have happened.' *Fatamorgana*, it can be argued, follows the steps already taken by Raad to subvert objectivist norms as stated above. But, as opposed to Raad, Lamas explores this position from the perspective of an outsider. Moreover, it comments on the process of fictionalization already adopted by Raad to convey something that is part of Lebanon's contemporary cultural and political tissue. In this sense, the footnotes can be regarded as an implicit citation of one artist by another. Citation here is intended to perpetuate the distribution of the sensible already taking place by insisting on working with a complex relationship between 'documentation' and fiction, where fiction is central to the artistic process as a way of articulating a reality in which the very idea of a unified history is undermined by individualized or conflicting perspectives.

3.2.3. *Fatamorgana* as thought experiment

Fatamorgana presents the recreation of an impossible scenario: a situation in which historical political leaders meet at the same time in the same place, and Hanan, a woman and common Lebanese citizen has the power to speak to them. Black and white photographs are assembled in each segment of the film to imagine this impossible situation. Each photograph replaces the temporal distance between the figures as well as between Hanan and the figures, with an apparently unified contemporary moment. Hanan's liveness and the wax figures' stillness blend in the still images as if to create the impression that they share the same "reality."

The film recreates a speculative scenario inside the wax museum through the composition of still images, in a similar formal approach as Chris Marker does in his famous film *La Jetée* (1962). Marker's film tells the story of a nameless man who travels in time to a childhood memory, which later in the film we understand to be a memory of his own death. In *La Jetée,* Marker masters the use of still images to produce a cinematic narrative, in which each frame is the equivalent of a fragment of time, and time itself is the object of the experiment occurring in the film to which the subject of the film is submitted while time–

traveling. *La Jetée* is concerned with the paradox of memory as a constant negotiation of past, present and future time scales. The film envisions time–travel to evoke a hypothesis that can only be realized in an experimental situation. What *La Jetée* and *Fatamorgana* have in common, besides their formal use of still images to compose their narratives, is their engagement with hypothetical situations, or what we could refer to as *what–if* scenarios to realize their narratives. If *Fatamorgana's* narrative structure – especially the second half of the film – could be described as a series of questions, the questions might be: *what if* Hanan could speak directly to the main players in contemporary global politics? *What if* it was possible to combine different historical moments to densify the discourses of global leaders in an effort to counteract the opaque nature of their speeches? By bringing in the limits, contradictions, and paradoxes to a given situation, the film tests a hypothesis that can only be enacted in fiction. A common source of inspiration for these speculative scenarios are thought experiments.

In a thought experiment, one imagines what might happen if certain unrealistic conditions are realized. According to Catherine Z. Elgin (2014) in her essay "Fiction as Thought Experiment," thought experiments do not respect logic, evidence, natural laws, or common sense. Rather, they are often adopted when observation is not possible or the subject is vulnerable to the potentially harmful consequences of an actual experiment (17). Thought experiments are more common to philosophy, physics and literary fiction (Elgin 2014) but, according to film critic Thomas Elsaesser (2018), they can also be found in films. Elsaesser has dedicated his last research project completed in his book *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy. Film as Thought Experiment,* to characterize "film as thought experiment" as a European expression of contemporary cinema.

Elsaesser states that, "[c]inema as thought experiment, identifies films that can be referenced to the same philosophical principles and political values of European democracy, testing the appeal or traction that ideals such as liberty, fraternity and equality still have in today's Europe" (Elsaesser 2018, 3). The purpose of Elsaesser's research is to approach European cinema through three main premises: first, philosophy and political thought's influence on cinema, and vice versa; second, that the shift towards a global, less eurocentric film industry, allows contemporary European cinema to paradoxically gain more autonomy; and third, for cinema to gain more autonomy, it must have the status and function of a thought experiment (3). He suggests a relationship between film and thought experiments based on

a European philosophical framework. Elsaesser (2008) begins by no longer thinking of the screen as a "window to the world."[52] As an alternative, Elsaesser proposes a regeneration, or rather a resurrection, of European values of 'liberty, fraternity and equality' (Elsaesser) through cinema by turning equality into abjection, fraternity into antagonistic mutuality, and freedom into the freedom to choose one's own limits and contradictions (5). In the context of globalization, capitalism, and the crisis of democracy, he asserts that a certain kind of freedom arose from an irrelevance of national cinemas and the decline of author cinema. This supposed irrelevance is what he considers to be a "power and a strength" resulting in a new kind of autonomy; and that it is this freedom that opens the possibility to certain European films as thought experiments (7).

Following Elsaesser's (2018) argument, the notion of the film as thought experiment is based on specific rules, a set of conditions that simulate a real–world situation, that the director imposes on herself (59). In *Fatamorgana*, it is possible to outline a set of self–imposed limits, or creative constraints, that clearly articulate this: these limits are brought to our attention through the film's strategies of simulation, supposition, and counterfactual accounts of history. *Fatamorgana* explicitly simulates a conversation between Hanan and "an ensemble of avatars of historical figures and contemporary celebrities" (quote from the introductory note to the film). The dialogue is "paraphrased, verbatim or inspired by historical facts," (idem) so that the fiction in the dialogue might be experienced as fact. The voices of the hyper–realistic wax figures inside the museum tactically resemble their real correspondents, yet even if what we hear sounds very much like the original, it is a distortion of what was said in reality. The resemblance with the original – not only *what* it is said but also *how* it is said – intends to lead the viewer to a certain confusion about the truth claims made by the film. Thought experiments, at this level, have much in common with parafictions and it is to their similarities that I wish to draw attention. Maintaining a credible relationship to reality is just as important for a filmic thought experiment as it is for parafiction. Parafictions, like thought experiments, form a sort of hypothesis rather than evidence of truth, where a level of accuracy with reality is maintained in order to provide enough reasons for a hypothesis to be seen as plausible.

[52] This idea refers to the theories of André Bazin (1971) and Siegfried Kracauer (1963), who conceptualized cinema through the idea of transparency associated with realism; or to Lacanian readings of the screen as a "mirror to the self".

3.2.4. Parafictions in a post–truth era

It is significant to note that the degree of resemblance with reality in *Fatamorgana* could be described as 'real enough' compared to certain parafictional works, such as Raad's for instance, in which it is virtually impossible not to be convinced by the plausibility of the institution of *The Atlas Group*. Rebecca Smith's "Parafictions and Contemporary Art Media 2008–2018)" (2019) argues that just like in a thought experiment, parafictions nowadays function as *what–ifs*, i.e. as propositions of 'what could be' (32).[53] However, she also demonstrates that parafictions have become less plausible over time (34). She argues that this shift reflects the current political climate, which since the global financial crisis in 2008 has led to more than ten years of austerity in Europe and the United States. This period of instability could be seen as culminating in 2016 with Donald Trump's political campaign and the declaration of 'post–truth' as the Oxford English Dictionary's 'word of the year'. This context, from Smith's perspective, explains why artists working with parafictions "have become unconcerned with replicating truth" (Smith 2019, 34). Accordingly, the lack of plausibility that we see in *Fatamorgana*[54] when compared to other parafictional works, may represent a reflection of the social and political climate we are currently living, thereby contributing to a series of works that "exploits, rejects, and replicates the so–called era of post–truth and fake news" (Smith 2019, 34).

"Analysts claim that we are living in a post–truth era in which facts, the truth, and reality are increasingly undermined, while fiction is given a status upgrade," writes Nele Wynants in her introductory text to *When Fact is Fiction: Documentary Art in the Post–truth Era* (Wynants 2020, 10). Here she explains that the relationship between fact and fiction, truth and lie, has become an increasingly tense one. Documentary practices, Wynants (2020)

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[53] Parafiction as forms of *what–ifs* and *as–ifs* scenarios were already tackled by David Garcia in "Dark Jesters Hiding in Plain Sight" (2017). For Garcia (2017), *what–if* scenarios result in satirical acts that expose power structures, whereas *as–ifs* promote utopian activism by acting "as if" change has already been achieved (82–83). Following this idea, Rebecca Smith (2019) applies these terms, but deviates from Garcia's argument while proposing a diachronic reading of parafictive strategies. She believes that parafictions that take the form of *as–ifs* pertain to the late 1990s and early 2000s and used the space of the internet's infrastructure as a platform for activism; parafictions that take the form of *what–ifs* become predominant after the 2008 global financial crisis "as a strategy that eradicates the value placed on truth as seen politically in the practices employed by Donald Trump" (Smith 2019, 32).

[54] As well as in other artists works Smith is concerned with in her text, such as Ian Cheng's *Emissaries* (2015–2017), Rachel Maclean's *Spite Your Face* (2017) and Suzanne Treister's *HFT the Gardener* (2014–2015) and *Survivor (F)* (2016–).

argues, are those that have exploited this tension the most because they propose to problematize reality. The aim of documentary art in the post–truth era, Wynants maintains, is not to reveal the truth, but to cause "ontological doubt" by deliberately pushing the limits between reality and fiction (10). How parafictions work through an aesthetics of doubt was discussed previously in the analysis of Lamas' *Extinction*. To conclude this chapter I will ask how a problematization of the notion of post–truth could be drawn from the parafictions in both *Extinction* and *Fatamorgana*.

In both *Extinction* and *Fatamorgana*, Lamas resorts to documentary strategies to explore the limits of fiction, and vice–versa. Thus, we see how rather than fiction being used to 'blur' the border with documentary, each seeks to expand the other's limits. This argument indirectly responds to Erika Balsom's (2017) claims for a "reality–based community," described in the second chapter, and to her critique of films that she sees as confusing documentary with fiction. In Balsom's opinion, this only contributes to maintaining a state of confusion and doubt in the viewer, without questioning the consensus of current political reality. In both of Lamas' films discussed here, this line is not blurred but rather, transcended. Parafictions in *Extinction* and *Fatamorgana* do not merely blur fiction and reality and leave the viewer in a state of endless confusion, which is the purpose of fake news. In fact, as Young (2017) observers, parafiction could *almost* be equated with fake news – which is somehow implicit in Balsom's critique – but he adds that the two concepts are fundamentally different (39). Young states,

> Fake news stories begin with fictive content, often with an intended direction of influence, but also with the desire to destabilize dominant conditions or opinions. Once the content has been decided, the work ahead is to make it look like an accepted version of reality. Fake news begins with a political ideology and works through aesthetics to alter the representation of this content with the goal of distorting knowledge and shifting beliefs in favor of that political ideology. This process is what Walter Benjamin describes in his essay "The work of Art (...)" as the "aesthetization of politics," which Benjamin finds in fascism (Young 2017, 39).

Contrary to the aestheticization of politics inherent in fake news, described above, Young claims that parafictions perform the reciprocal operation: the politicization of aesthetics –

this claim was already mentioned with regards to *Extinction,* and it is equally valid for *Fatamorgana*.

Parafiction in Lamas' films reflect a lack of believability and simultaneous increase in suspicion that reflects the nature of our political reality during a time of 'post–truth' and 'fake news'; in a way that exploits, rejects, and replicates this phenomenon (Smith 2019, 34). As a result of parafictional strategies, we learn how to identify certain types of post–truth tactics. The possibility that parafictions may, in fact, help to guide us through the world of misinformation is reinforced by Carrie Lambert–Beatty, who states: "(p)arafictions train us in skepticism and doubt, but also, oddly, in belief" (Lambert–Beatty 2009, 78). The doubt that parafictional works elicit can be linked to post–truth politics' epistemological shock. Its base is, however, the ability to distinguish between various levels of reliability of the sources as well as the willingness to question the accuracy of information. Thus, the critical potential of parafictions lies in the ways in which they expand distinctions between historical and fictional, social and individual narratives. The parafictional devices we see in both of Lamas' films, propose to extend the limits of actuality, and by extending those limits, problematize the way we perceive certain aspects of reality. The parafictions thus establish a tension between referentiality and representation, a commitment to reality and its fictionalization.

Chapter 4

Documentary's Future–Tense: the *Quantification Trilogy*

Part I: *Quickeners*

I watched Jeremy Shaw's Quickeners *(2014) for the first time in 2015 at an exhibition of the Biennale of Moving Images at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, Australia. The Biennale is organized by the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève to present and circulate the work of leading, mostly European artists who work with video and film. What distinguishes MONA from other museums is its architecture – conceived to direct its visitors into a descendent journey several floors underground. Through the brutal straight cut into the sandstone cliff that houses the museum, a degraded timeline reveals the stratigraphy of the rocks through time. While the elevator transports the visitor down into a sort of ancient cave, it exerts a kind of "natural" (vertical) panning as our eyes have to move gradually along this surface in constant contact with the walls. Inside the light is dimmed and the rooms are divided by walls onto which moving images are being projected. In this exhibition, it was possible to see several projections at the same time, while some works were isolated in separate rooms. At first, the experience of entering the museum triggered associations of Alice in Wonderland, disappearing down the rabbit hole. However magical the descendent journey and the different directions that the projected windows into the world "out–there" were taking me, what struck me most was that this descending journey did not lead to images of the past. Instead, it led to images of a distant future.*

4.1.1. ‘Documenting’ events that are still yet to come

> The linkage between documentary and the historical world is the most distinctive feature of this tradition… The status of documentary film as evidence from the world legitimates its usage as a source of knowledge… Documentaries show us situations and events that are recognizably part of a realm of shared experience: the historical world as we know and encounter it, or as we believe others to encounter it (Nichols 1991, ix–x).

If the documentary film is linked with events that we recognize from the historical world, as Bill Nichols observes above, how does a documentary about a future event, such as *Quickeners*, approach this claim? Should we acknowledge or dismiss its status as a documentary? What are the benefits of resisting a dismissal and instead engaging in a reading of the film as a documentary? This would necessitate us to look simultaneously at how a documentary about the future problematizes the traditional mandate of documentaries to “represent the historical world rather than imaginary ones” (Nichols 1991, 14), as well as to analyze how it problematizes the historical world itself. Nichols notes, “[e]ven if the images forfeit their claims of congruence, even if the documentary constructs what occurs in front of the camera as a representation of what occurs in the world, […] we still persist, as long as we assume it is a documentary that we are watching, in inferring an argument about the historical world” (Nichols 1991, 25–26). For the purposes of beginning this chapter’s discussion, let us assume that a documentary about a future event may still be a documentary. Our task now swings between the recognition of a historical reality and the recognition of an argument about it, as Nichols would put it (28).

Quickeners (2014) is a thirty–seven–minute film by Jeremy Shaw, a Canadian artist based in Berlin, and is the first of a three-part film project titled the *Quantification Trilogy* (2014–18). The term “Quantification,” stands for Shaw’s imagining of a future event when scientists discover that all human spiritual experiences result from the same neural firings in the brain, thereby rendering all human experience obsolete. Shaw’s trilogy depicts this as the event that will lead to the extinction of the human species. Different forms of extinction have been imagined for humanity. In Shaw's trilogy, it is imagined as the result of human inability to have faith and the subsequent introduction of machine DNA into the human genetic system

as a sort of replacement for the classic spiritual journey.Consequently, humanity enters into its new stage of development, which Shaw speculates will be called the "Quantum Human."

The trilogy alternates between utopian and dystopian scenarios. In the face of the trauma of human extinction, a death drive and a certain hope are simultaneously present in each of the three films of the *Quantification Trilogy*. As we move forward in the trilogy, we move closer to our present time: *Quickeners* (2014), the first film, portrays an event set somewhere around five hundred years into the future; the last film, *I Can See Forever* (2018), is about an event which occured in 2023 and follows the resulting effects twenty–five years later; and *Liminals* (2017) is set at a non-specific date somewhere in between the other two. There is something very troubling about projections into the future that approximate our present – a sense of urgency and anxiety becomes more tangible as the trilogy progresses. To the oscillation between utopian and dystopian narratives and the anxiety this oscillation provokes as it becomes closer to our present, E. Ann Kaplan (2015) assigns the meaning of "trauma future–tense," a concept to which the title of this chapter refers, and that will be addressed more directly in the third part of this chapter.

All three of Shaw's films are based on the idea of a crisis of faith resulting from the lack of "humanity" or human's bodily consciousness. Amid the anticipation of human extinction and the tangibility of a post–human existence that is seen as the result of human's inability to have faith, each film tackles, in different ways, the issue of faith. The films concentrate on particular fictional turning points or epistemological shifts that directly relate biological changes to modes of knowledge production. Structurally, the films have two main layers of narration: that of the narrator describing the event (approached in a classical anthropological way, through a seemingly neutral/objective voice–over) and the event itself (that appears as already outdated despite being set in the future). Moreover, all three films resort to different modes of documentary aesthetics in a way that compel us to believe that they are part of a series of documentaries, something independent of Shaw's own creation. All films follow a progression, starting with scientific observation which develops into a more experimental aesthetic approach. Despite an evident break with conventional documentary filmmaking, the trilogy establishes its own convention with this approach, which I will discuss in more detail below.

In *Quickeners*, the epistemological shift is portrayed through a *sci–fi* anecdote: imagining

Quantum Humans as disembodied beings existing only as information within a system that produces and controls all that is known. At the same time, this system is being challenged by another form of knowledge that can only be accessed through a revival of religious experience, or 'quickening,' that implies a return to some sort of Human capacity for having faith. By recurring to a documentary frame of representation, the film engages in a metacommentary about a hypothetical spiritual crisis and, at the same time, it triggers a reflection on the problematics of documentary representation. It can be said that in *Quickeners* Shaw establishes a 'play within the play'[55] (Gorfain 1986), or in other words, that there are two parallel arguments that can be extracted from the film: one is a (future) spiritual crisis, and another is a (current) representational crisis, which unceasingly influence one another.

The film is predominantly composed by Shaw's re-editing of a film by filmmaker and artist Peter Adair, originally titled *Holy Ghost People* (1967) – an American *cinema vérité* documentary of a Pentecostal Christian community gathering in Western Virginia. Shaw appropriates this pre–existing material to construct another narrative that radically re–contextualizes the original film and its ascribed meaning. The footage shows images captured inside and around a communal church where people partake in unorthodox Christian rituals including convulsive dancing, singing, testimonial giving, speaking in tongues and snake handling. Similarly to its original, the images are accompanied by a male voice–over who narrates the events unfolding in the film. Incorporating a voice–over provides the viewer with an intertextual motivation: it invites her to relate this to previous experiences of watching other documentary films that follow the expository mode, such as the original film made by Adair. The expository mode of representation, Nichols explains, "addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that advance an argument about the historical world" (Nichols 1991, 34). In Shaw's re–working of the original film, the voice–over offers detailed objective information in a direct, scientific manner. Except that this voice leads us to believe that the subjects in the film are Quantum Humans living in the future five hundred years from now.

The voice–over informs us that the Quantum Humans have been successful in

[55] In *Play and the Problem of Knowing in Hamlet: An Excursion into Interpretive Anthropology*, Phyllis Gorfain (1986) writes about the play within the play in Hamlet, and about the various mechanisms of reflexivity when the play comments on itself.

combining machine DNA with human DNA after the "Intelligence Explosion" – a non–explicit event happening somewhere between now and the time of the film. This highly speculative claim allows us to deduce, through vague suggestions, that the event must have been a form of a technological revolution that allowed this new kind of Human to emerge. The voice also tells us that religion was abandoned at the wake of Quantum Humanity, and with it all forms of belief. The voice–over continues to explain that a considerable number of the population of Quantum Humans – including those portrayed in the film – has been afflicted by a condition known as Human Atavism Syndrome (H.A.S.), an affliction that reanimates certain evolutionary characteristics of distant ancestors. H.A.S. manifests itself via a phenomenon referred to in the film as 'quickening'. It is this phenomenon that provides the title of the film and is described as "a moment of pure cathartic transcendence achieved via a strictly organic biological means disconnecting completely some of the Quantum Humans from their direct neuro–link to The Hive and from any other external technology" (quote from the film). The Hive is described as "a unitive consciousness and the simultaneous perception of all things" (quote from the film), it is thus a kind of entity that, although not entirely explained in the film, seems to be an unlimited web interconnecting and exerting power over everything that exists.[56] However, the phenomenon of H.A.S. is considered to violate all logic within this system, and the purpose of this film is to document this (future) intriguing phenomenon. What remains unclear is for whom and for what purposes the documentary has allegedly been produced (which might even lead to the question if it is The Hive, the established governing system, that is producing it itself).

4.1.2. *Détournement*

Quickeners repurposes the 'bodies' captured in the original film by Peter Adair during a revival of eccentric religious rituals. The images of the source film are thus reframed to give 'body' to the Quantum Humans in Shaw's film. This reframing technique is akin to the technique of *détournement* used by the Situationists – an international organization of social

[56] "The Hive" is an abstract entity that in the context of the film evokes political regimes such as Absolutism, the political doctrine and practice of unlimited centralized authority and absolute sovereignty, as vested especially in a monarch or dictator. The essence of an absolutist system, or "The Hive" in the case presented here, is that the ruling power is not subject to regularized challenge or check by any other agency, be it judicial, legislative, religious, economic, or electoral.

revolutionaries made up of avant–garde artists, intellectuals, and political theorists, prominent in Europe from its formation in 1957 to its dissolution in 1972. *Détournement* consists in the "reversal of established relationships between concepts and by the detournement of all the achievements of earlier critical efforts" (Debord 2014, 109). An example is René Vienet's 1973 situationist film "Can Dialectics Break Bricks?", which explores the development of class conflict by using revolutionary assertions to counter the original narrative centered around Kung–Fu. However, while the situationists were explicitly politically motivated, here the motivation seems to be different. In the case of *Quickeners*, the original film was not a capitalist object, produced by the entertainment industry ready to be deconstructed, or at least not in the same way as Kung–fu films were to Viénet. What is challenged in Adair's film is a form of documentary, namely *cinema* vérité or observational cinema, more precisely the "reality effect" that anchors the film in the historical world. Formerly used as a tool to document the life of others and capture particularly dramatic moments, such as a Pentecostal church ritual, the documentary footage serves here as a basis for speculation about a distant future.

In Shaw's film, this *détournement* technique provokes a displacement of the original film's basic reference points. The images of the original film are *détournées* in order to fulfill the argument of the present film. In the process, they contribute to a fundamental realistic motivation, since these images have indeed an origin in the historical world. The fact that the *mise–en–scène* of the film is not fabricated but encountered in the arena of historical reality encourages the belief in the truth value of the image. The original footage serves to remind us of the "civil contract" that we have long ago signed with photographic images (Azoulay, 2008), according to which indexical images, such as photographs and films, have become a means of knowing the world. There is a general consent regarding the truth value of indexical imagery that can shed light on the social attitude towards these images. But, as Ariella Azoulay observes, there is also the possible counter effect: "[e]ven when it seems possible to name correctly in the form of a statement what it [the photographic image] shows – 'This is X' – it will always turn out that something else can be read in it, some other event can be reconstructed from it, some other player's presence can be discerned through it, constructing the social relations that allowed its production" (Azoulay 2008, 12). *Détournement* is a strategy that engages with this 'something else' that can be read in images. It destabilizes the viewers' relationship with the images they are watching, affecting the

terms and conditions of viewing (realistic images) that are normally taken for granted. Consequently, the people portrayed in Peter Adair's original documentary, inevitably will not be able to be assimilated to the documentary film conventions in line with the original footage. The authoritative voice–over commentary in Shaw's film tells us what it is that the images "say". However, the voice–over referring in the present tense to an event that is yet to happen overwhelms the presence of the subjects in the original footage; it changes their course of action dramatically. Referring to a future event, the voice–over traverses the frame of the documentary film as we know it, and extends it to the utopian (or dystopian) realms of (science) fiction.

Rancière observed that in Chris Marker's *The Last Bolshevik* (1992), "Marker makes with the real documents he has amassed and treated with an eye to the truth a work whose fictional or poetic tenor is – beyond every value judgment – incomparably superior to that of the most spectacular action movie" (Rancière 2006, 159). Marker's film is dedicated to the memory of Alexandr Medvedkin who, at the time the film was made, was a little-known Soviet filmmaker. In order to (re)create Medvedkin's memory, Rancière (2006) notes that Marker interlaces a series of heterogeneous images such as contemporary images of Russia, accounts of the people he interviews, the latest news, film clips from different periods and by various directors, including propaganda films, as well as Medvedkin's own films and animated imagery, all combined into the argument of his own film (159). Although Shaw's *Quickeners* does not follow the same complexity of the montage that Marker's film required, it does follow a similar logic: that of appropriating any possible material to retrieve something lost, absent, or even impossible to achieve.

As Rancière (2006) explains, documentary films follow a specific kind of poetics which is not to say classic poetics, associated with Aristoteles, in which action is based on a narrative arc, on a logic of progression and the creation of a plot in which the truth value is determined by affinities and verisimilitude, thereby objectifying the fictional space. Instead, documentaries follow a romantic approach to poetics, a poetics of signs, drawing on signs' variable symbolic power (160). Rancière states,

> Romantic poetics abandoned this poetics of action, character, and discourse in favour of a poetics of signs. Here, the backbone of the story is not the causal continuity of the action "according to necessity and verisimilitude" theorized by Aristotle, but the variable signifying

> power of signs and assemblies of signs that forms the tissue of the work. This power is, first of all, the power of expression whereby a sentence, an episode, or an impression can, even in isolation, represent the sense, or nonsense, of the whole; secondly, it is the power of correspondence that puts signs from different regimes in resonant or dissonant relationships; thirdly, it is the power of metamorphoses by which a combination of signs solidifies into an opaque object deploy itself in a signifying, living form; and, finally, it is the power of reflection that gives a particular combination the power to interpret another combination, or, alternatively, let itself be interpreted by it (Rancière 2006, 160).

Accordingly, it is possible to view Shaw's films as part of a poetic practice constituted by multiple forces: the power of expression, the power of correspondence, the power of metamorphoses, and the power of reflection. Thereby, it reinforces the "power of speech" by multiplying levels of meaning, and in doing so, it problematizes the regime of truth, undermines the objectivity of fiction, as in classic poetics, and produces an open–ended space, in which reality is simultaneously made up of things that speak for themselves and the opposite, where things offer infinite relations between themselves (160–161). Hence, for Rancière the documentary is constituted by a two–fold process: the combination of the mute impressions of things and montage that determines their truth–value. Rancière concludes that "[t]his gives the documentary much greater leverage to play around with the consonance and dissonance between narrative voices, or with the series of period images with different provenances and signifying power" (Rancère 2006, 161). This is clearly evident in Shaw's *Quickeners*, which combines historical images with a (future) narrative voice that propels the "original" meaning of these images into a different direction. The image of the future event the film is achieved by producing a dissonance in the time frame of the original images and interlacing uneven temporalities and heterogeneous regimes of images.

4.1.3. Disfiguring the interview

Jeremy Shaw's *Quickeners* features one–on–one interviews with various members of the community – which in the original film is a Pentecostal Christian community and now appears as a community afflicted by the H.A.S. syndrome. The interviewees in Shaw's reworking of the original material share contradictory feelings about their relationship to The Hive and to what they expect from the experience of 'Quickening.' Shaw creates this

impression by reworking the audio of the original interviews so it appears the subjects are speaking a new language that reveals traces of English. Their language is then translated by subtitles (in English) which allow the viewer to decipher meaning from their nonsensical verbal sounds. Reading these subtitles, we understand that the first interviewee confesses that he felt "the need to believe… to believe in something that is not The Hive." The second, adds that The Hive is "ultimately a mundane plateau and that kind of fluid cyber–transcendence can become tiring." The third justifies that the Quickening is "a transcendent state that is emptied of technological content, but full of everything that only exists as information on The Hive," and adds: "something that was once experienced by human beings" like belief, faith, spirits, and so on, "is possible to access again through Quickening." Yet, contrary to the previous testimonies, the latter mostly hopes that The Hive will soon "quantify the syndrome" and everything will be back to "normal" (quotes from the film; annexes: image 6).

Shaw's new narrative intervention containing confessions of this community's anxieties and hopes still, somehow, resembles spoken English, although it is as if he recreated a completely new dialect that has its roots in the past but is projected into the future. As a result, the ventriloquism we see in these images allows for a relaxation of the link between the person speaking and what is said, enabling imagination to circulate through the work in a freeform and time–fluid fashion. It also evokes a type of opacity in the sense attributed by Édouard Glissant (1997, 111–120). Accordingly, opacity points to the necessary insufficiency of any representation to present a complete picture of an event. The "right to opacity," Glissant argues, is the key to an ethical relation to alterity (154). The obligation to not turn away from the other's pain is perpetually competing with the equally important obligation not to objectify the other. Here, Shaw disturbs the audiovisual "archive," assembling a set of multiple temporalities and meanings to the original film. He makes use of opacity, and in doing so, he points at the difficult ethical relation to the display of images of Others coincident with the ethical regime of the original images.

The voice–over explains that the "early symptom of H.A.S. can be detected in the speech patterns of those afflicted" because it "obscures The Hive's reception in the brain's temporal lobes, the area responsible for language and communication." And continues that "[t]his softening of language updating capabilities insights the reversion to an early evolutionary stage of the Quantum Human unspoken for hundreds of years" (quotes from

the film). The voice–over complicates any easy understanding as to whether the speaker is addressing someone in the future or us in the present. It attempts to assert an explanation for this speech alteration, but it seems to go beyond Shaw's intention while making the film.

In spite of the work being based on documentary interviews, Shaw uses fictional strategies to create an imaginary space of possibility. The speech sound effect is obtained in post–production: created through a process of editing the recorded speech, chopping up the words, and rearranging the syllables in a different order, while maintaining some level of familiarity within each spoken phrase, it obscures the possibility of fully comprehending a single sentence. This effect defamiliarizes the experience of the testimony and calls for the abandonment of prevailing realist codes to challenge viewers' expectations and assumptions.[57] With this technique, Shaw questions the structure and function of language as an epistemological problem particular to this marginal community. But simultaneously, he is producing another dissonance within the film, a dissonance between what is said and what we hear, and their mediation through the subtitles. In other words, Shaw "insists on the testimonial value of the image while also engaging in strategies that 'unrealize' the image and assert a distance from the referent," as Erika Balsom puts it in another context (Balsom 2013, 169).[58] Shaw challenges any notion of objectivity or transparency that the interview approach might suggest. Rather than being presented as unmediated testimony, it becomes apparent that fictionalization is inherent to the presentation of subjective experience. Also, Hito Steyerl has pointed out that documentary testimony can be "unreliable and uncertain," it may tell the truth but it can also lie. It is not necessarily a transparent means to transmit information, but nonetheless it "can express the unimaginable, that which has been silenced, the unknown, the saving, and even what is monstrous – and thus create the possibility of change" (Steyerl 2008). The dramatic reconstructions of the documentary interviews in Shaw's *Quickeners* elicit a complex set of affects evoked by the contamination of the testimony with fiction. It endorses a conception of the interview that disavows any association to objective truth. Instead, it approaches the interview as a malleable discourse that can be combined and recombined at will, insisting on the "power of montage" (Rancière 2006) to invest any statement with meaning.

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[57] This language effect repeats in all the films of the trilogy.

[58] Erika Balsom (2013, 169) is referring to *The Torn First Pages* (2004–2008) by Indian filmmaker Amar Kanwar, but her words reflect this situation perfectly in Shaw's film.

4.1.4. The documentary's paradox

Later in the film, a person who appears to be the leader of the group delivers a speech in the same modified sound as the interviews addressed above. He confesses that "The Hive" became a strange place for him and ascribes the feeling to the H.A.S. syndrome (annexes: image 7). Yet, he admits, after receiving his first 'quickening' he understood that H.A.S. was not a malfunction, like a glitch or a virus. He advances that when Quantum Humans were "created," human belief and faith was left behind, but it did not disappear. He explains, "it has just been lying dormant in our super–intelligent brains… covered by the connection to The Hive that filled us up full of quantum proof." Hence, he considers that "even if Quantum Human proof can explain what's happening in our brains when we quicken it does not mean that quickening doesn't exist, this is simply the coexistence of parallel realities based on different systems of belief, because even their [The Hive´s] constitution of proof has belief at its core." The desire to step out of "The Hive," as is described here and in the interviews, comes with the possibility of receiving a different kind of knowledge. What seems to differentiate the knowledge that is obtained by 'quickening' and that of The Hive is empirical knowledge – the kind that is only possible to experience with the 'body.' This is something supposedly not possible in "The Hive," where "knowledge is only information." For this reason, the body needs to exert ancient rituals learned by The Hive's complete database of human history to achieve this form of (empirical) knowledge.

In this speculative narrative, Shaw attempts to conjure a story that evokes a dystopian future predicated on a crisis of belief. This crisis of belief can be taken by its most literal sense, the inability to have faith; a theme that is infused with religious significance, given that the film's setting is in a Pentecostal church. However, since nothing in the film seems to be in line with a direct system of correspondences, this initial impression may be overlooked. The statement implicates both a dystopian future in which humans are extinct and Quantum Humans, who came to replace them, live under an oppressive totalitarian system; as well as a nostalgic feeling to return to some kind of archaic human form. The end of humanity as we know it is a topic that concerns most theories on climate change, which is one of the main concerns leading to the subsequent theorization of the posthuman. A crisis of belief in this context would lead us to the current division that exists between believing scientific facts about climate change or not. This is perhaps the most imminent question

regarding the future of humanity today. Bruno Latour's groundbreaking text "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" (2004), offers a profound insight into this problem. Known to be one of the founders of Science Studies, Latour, in this text, questions the validity of his own critical methods to "show 'the lack of scientific certainty' inherent in the construction of facts" (Latour 2004, 227). He states,

> While we spent years trying to detect the real prejudices hidden behind the appearance of objective statements, do we now have to reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the illusion of prejudices? And yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard–won evidence that could save our lives. Was I wrong to participate in the invention of this field known as science studies? Is it enough to say that we did not really mean what we said? Why does it burn my tongue to say that global warming is a fact whether you like it or not? Why can't I simply say that the argument is closed for good? (Latour 2004, 227)

It is argued that critical studies have been focused on revealing the appearance of objective statements, yet it becomes clear to Latour that doubting objectivist claims, or in his own words, "matters of fact," will ultimately mean that any kind of scientific proof is impossible. This impossibility has led to a crisis. Not only in academia and between intellectuals where a critical inquiry is in motion against closed arguments but, as Latour points out above, the argument of social construction that claims that truth cannot be accessed directly, unbiasedly, has been a strategy adopted also by "dangerous extremists" to undermine any scientific proof. A 'crisis of belief,' as it could be considered, is thus embedded at the heart of critical thinking as well as at the core of political action, captured here in Latour's self–reflexive text. Doubting the methods for critical thinking he adopted until the moment of writing this text and the willingness to change them, is one of Latour's greatest contributions to his field of studies, followed by his proposition to move away from *matters of fact* and towards *matters of concern* (Latour 2004). Latour believes that through the discussion of shared "matters of concern", even if facts remain disputable, there is a possibility of providing the public with scientific proof.

Although Latour articulates a plan for overcoming the crisis of belief in scientific facts, a crisis which his own field of research has helped to create, it still persists and is perhaps more latent than ever. The persistence of this problem is a "matter of concern" for German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans who has visually reflected this question through his *Truth Study Center*, an ongoing artistic research project which is presented as an installation, was first shown in 2005 at the Maureen Paley Gallery in London. The title of this installation is a satire of the paradox between our desire to find absolute truth and its impossibility. One of the motivations for this project, as stated by the artist, was "the realization that many of the problems of our age result from claims of absolute truth" (Tillmans 2018, 8). Since the inception of *Truth Study Center* until 2018, Tillmans saw an aggravation of the problematics associated with the notions of factuality and truth in political spheres epitomized in events such as Brexit in the UK, the presidential election of Donald Trump in the US, Tayyip Erdogan's presidential referendum in Turkey, and the rise of right–wing populism in Germany guided by the Alternative für Deutschland party. Tillman states,

> We have known for some time that there are people who feel drawn to esoteric conspiracy theories. What is new, however, is the finding that facts are no longer believed by wide segments of the population. During the past two years I have come to realize that if 30 percent of the electorate are resistant to fact–based arguments, we are on a slippery slope.
> (…)
> My suspicion is that the populist revolts of 2016–17 were less a movement started by globalization's losers and more a result of the instrumentalization of those groups for reactionary and capitalist purposes. One of the goals appears to be achieving even more deregulation of the economy, while embedding an authoritarian, patriarchal, and nationalist image of society in the process (Tillmans 2018, 8– 9).

When Tillmans was given the opportunity to guest–edit an issue of *Jahresring* – an annual publication series, one of the longest–running in Germany for contemporary art and literature – he reframed his research to study the "backfire effect," a phenomenon associated with the populist revolts mentioned above. The backfire effect refers to a psychological reaction that causes people who encounter evidence that challenges their beliefs to reject that evidence

and to strengthen their support of their original stance.[59] Essentially, the "backfire effect" means that showing people evidence that proves them wrong is often ineffective. In order to unveil the mechanisms of this phenomenon, Tillmans speculated on "what interests are behind fake news, right–wing populism, and resentment, and ... how we might face them ... so that we can find real solutions and ensure improved living conditions for everyone..." (Tillmans 2018: 10). With a focus on the rise of right–wing populism and the spread of fake news, Tillmans focuses on what has changed and why societal consensus and institutions are under attack instead of merely examining how things stand. Therefore, he asks, *What is Different?* (2018), a question that gives title to this edition of the *Jahresring*.

Returning to Shaw's film, the impasse of our current times can thus be reflected in the conflictual tensions that result from our interpretations of factual and fictional constructs. How to build a bridge between the discourses of sobriety – those of science, economics, politics, and so on – and the discourses of imagination, those where we encounter the irrational, the fictional and the unconscious desires of humanity (Nichols 1991, 3–4). It is precisely in this in–between sobriety and imagination that Nichols, but also Rancière (2006), locate the documentary. The use of documentary material in Shaw's film is thus not unintentional, instead, it reminds us of this in–between space. By combining a traditional documentary style and a fictional story portraying humanity's dystopian future, Shaw's *Quickeners* creates a passage that oscillates between factual and fictional constructs, and simultaneously between the past, historical world, and the future in order to tell us something about the present. It does not resolve the paradox, nor even does it stand on one side or the other of the current impasse. But it offers an insight, a perspective to look into the paradox itself – herein lies one of the aspects of the paraesthetic self–reflexivity of this film.

4.1.5. 'Ecstatic truth'

Towards the end of *Quickeners*, the characters in the film embark on a trance experience, described as 'quickening,' which involves wild dancing, speaking in tongues and handling snakes with their hands. In a similar fashion to ethnographic filmmaking, the voice–over

[59] The "backfire effect" was first described and analyzed in 2006 by the American political scientists Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler. For more information on the "backfire effect" see, for instance, https://daily.jstor.org/the–backfire–effect/.

continues enumerating a long list of meanings associated with the serpent: "a symbol of good and evil; a medium between mortal and immortal; a placebo deity; a simulacrum of death; rebirth…" At this point, the film begins to subvert the original filmed images of the 'performance' by blending the sound of the voice–over with another layer of sound. This sound could be described as a kind of digital progressive ambient sound that gradually increases in volume. As the sound in the background increases and finally replaces the voice–over, the viewer is immersed in the experience of 'quickening,' compelled simultaneously by the sound and the movement of the bodies in a trance–like performance that lasts for the remaining ten minutes of the film. The abstract ambient drone–like sound announces the break from the instructive narrative aiming to "rationally" explain something that happens in the world towards an interior world where comprehension cannot be provided through the same means. It is as if the documentary makes a "progression," which, in all films of the trilogy, it begins from scientific observation towards an abstract experience.

During this final moment, Shaw intervenes directly into the original black and white, 16 mm film: the individuals who apparently fall into a trance–like state, develop a purple aura (annexes: image 8). The effect of glowing is added digitally to the original film to convey their experience of 'quickening.' The sequence has a very specific function: that of triggering the viewers' perception that what they are seeing pertains to the unconscious world, or to a state of transcendence. In the vast landscape of cinema, particularly in experimental filmmaking, it is possible to find objects that aim to cypher manifestations of the mind, and/or to manifest themselves in the minds of their receivers. The dream world or the unconscious world is a common altered state of consciousness represented in such films, which has a long tradition within the 1970s avant–garde and surrealist cinema emphasizing film spectatorship as an oneiric condition. The final sequence in Shaw's *Quickeners* suggests a break with linear time, a kind of linear time which experimental filmmakers historically worked hard at undermining.[60] The speed of the film also changes pace to run in slow motion; time is experienced akin to that of a dream, as multiple spiral movements, or as continuous temporal breaks.

In the last scenes of the film, Shaw remains committed to creating a dissonance with the regime of representation of the original, where a 'real' experience of catharsis captured

[60] We may identify this undermining of linear time, for instance, in the work of Maya Deren, Werner Herzog or Chris Marker.

by following the tenets of *cinéma verité*, has been transformed through Shaw's modifying of sound, color and use of slow–motion. Such effects are not only used to embellish images but also to convey a sense of the experience, something paranormal beyond the scope of a conventional camera, something expressed beyond the limitations of the documentary frame. In an attempt to describe the domain of the documentary film, Nichols states, "[f]iction harbors echoes of dreams and daydreams, sharing structures of fantasy with them, whereas documentary mimics the canons of expository argument, the making of a case, and the call to public rather than private response" (Nichols 1991, 4). By complicating the two desires expressed here – the impression of objectivity, or factuality, which has its own normative power, on the one hand, and the oniric, subconscious world, on the other – *Quickeners* affects the regime of truth that the original pertains to. Nichols (1991) explains that documentary knowledge is often "epistemic knowledge," based on Foucault's conception of the term, in which forms of certainty conform to the conceptual and categorical notions of the time and place in which it is produced (35). If there is an allusion to any ideal of truth in Shaw's film, it should not be understood in this sense. Rather, it should be understood in the sense of what German filmmaker Werner Herzog (2010) calls "ecstatic truth."

Herzog uses the term "ecstatic truth" reflecting on Roman philosopher Dionysios Longinus idea that: "the concept of ekstasis, a person's stepping out of himself into an elevated state—where we can raise ourselves over our own nature—which the sublime reveals 'at once, like a thunder bolt'" (Herzog 2010). Ecstatic truth is "a kind of truth that is the enemy of the merely factual," as Herzog (2010) puts it. Certain images are more apt to "create an illumination inside of us, and we instantly know that this is not a factual truth, but an ecstatic one" (Herzog 2010). If not the whole film, then at least the last sequence of Shaw's *Quickeners* seems to pertain to this regime of truth.

Those subconscious liminal states that the images refer to belong to a realm of images that cannot be accessed by any promise of indexical imagery. But we still recognize in them a part of us that we are intimately aware of. Looking at liminality from the perspective of anthropologist Victor W. Turner, it is possible to relate the state of 'quickening' to a liminal state. Turner understands liminality as a concept that highlights a moment within ritual processes that correspond to a passage or, in Turner's words, to "a very long threshold, a corridor almost, or a tunnel which may become a pilgrim's road or passing from dynamics to statics, may cease to be a mere transition and become a set way of life, a state" (Turner

1977, 37). *Quickeners* concludes with the evocation of this liminal state, which will be further explored in the next film of the trilogy, *Liminals* (2017).

Part II: *Liminals*

It was through entering an antechamber that I encountered Jeremy Shaw's second film in his trilogy: Liminals. *The film was being shown as part of the Dark Mofo festival in Hobart, Tasmania in 2018, the festival is organized by the Museum of Old and New Art, the same museum where I first saw Quickeners. Dark Mofo is a winter festival that transforms Hobart into a solstice celebration of the multiplicity of art and cultural expressions. One of the sites where this all–encompassing event was unfolding was an old chapel that has been transformed into a contemporary art gallery named* Detached. Liminals *was exhibited in this once sacred and now secularized space – deprived of any religious decor, the gallery maintained in its architecture the antechamber that defines the entry of a sacred space. Much like a liminal state, the antechamber allows one to simultaneously be inside and outside, it marks the threshold between physical and psychological spaces. Shaw's second film in the trilogy depicts the liminal state of a ritual, a dimension of reality not immediately visible from the standpoint of "normal" sight. It is through imaging, animation, framing, and editing, that liminality is made tangible in the film, an attempt at creating a shift in perception which I will reflect on in continuation of the discussion of* Quickeners..

4.2.1. The conflation of times and nostalgia of the future

Liminals is presented to us as viewers as if it was part of a series of documentaries exploring the topic of "Peripheral Altruist Cultures." The focus of this so-called "episode", as we are told by the voice of the commentator, is to depict the most radical and compelling group within these marginal cultures: The Liminals. We are led to understand they are a group of individuals akin to many esoteric sects which existed in the 1970s and some still exist today. The mission of this group is to gather together in order to experiment on how to prevent, or at least postpone, human extinction, searching for alternatives that will allow them to avoid this fate. The Liminals' radical approach is guided by their speculation on the (traditional) concept of *paraspace*, "an alternative zone that exists parallel to normal spaces of reality" (quote from the film). The voice–over in the film explains that the Liminals believe this

space can be invoked and accessed by combining contemporary technology with antiquated human tradition. They hope that by enhancing their brains with machine DNA and re–engaging long–lost cathartic spiritual rituals they could provoke a paradoxical alchemical reaction. This reaction, they believe, will create a shift in their reality, enabling them to transcend it and access the "Liminal", which they believe to be a realm between the physical and the virtual where humanity would temporarily exist in the gestation of a new stage of evolution. If successfully accessed, the voice–over concludes, physicality and egoistic cognition will dissolve to be replaced by a conflation of time, space, and energy, and a new stage of human evolution would be achieved. In other words, the state of liminality they envision would result in an ontological transformation. *Liminals* is a film that captures, in the image of an observational documentary, the group members as they perform a ritual towards achieving a state of liminality. Anthropologist Victor W Turner, who has theorized liminal experiences in different cultures, sees liminality as a period of transition between states where "change is bound up with biological and meteorological rhythms and recurrences rather than with technological innovations" (Turner 1999, 234). In Shaw's second film, however, the imagining of a transition between states is strongly related to a specific technological innovation: artificial DNA.

The chronology of the film is somehow disturbing, as we are told the event happens three generations in the future. As viewers, however, we do not know if these three–generations count from today or from the 1970s, the epoch evoked by the films' aesthetics, specifically nostalgic, black and white 16 mm film. If the latter applies, then the film is actually depicting what would be a current event. In fact, it bears an uncanny resemblance to current events. Research into genetic systems started precisely in the 1970s but its more general use, such as in transgenic animal and vegetable production, has increasingly grown in the past ten years. The ambiguity of the timing of this event leads the viewer to sense "the collapse of history into one flat endless present," a kind of postmodern pastiche, as E. Ann Kaplan (2015, 376) would put it. In Shaw's own words,

> I'm not using the nostalgia of the media to make films feel warm and fuzzy. It's used to disarm – to create a somewhat vulnerable space from which to propose. The works comment largely on the present, told through images seemingly from the past, presented as the future.

> There is a perpetual cognitive dissonance attached to the use of media and its position in time. But there is always a shift from the outmoded to a contemporary format or embellishment. When this occurs, I'm pushing into visual effects territory, trying to represent something on the edge of trauma – something even more heightened and extreme (Shaw 2020, 24).

The film deliberately uses outdated media and observational documentary aesthetics to create the illusion of a futuristic world. To convey this world, the film again refers to the formal aesthetics of *cinema verité* to stage a fabricated event. The use of 16mm film and a BBC–like explanatory voice–over are two formal aesthetic distinctions of *cinema verité* that allow the viewer to experience some kind of aesthetic coherence and sense of continuity between *Quickeners* and *Liminals* – reinforcing the viewers' perception that they are, in fact, watching a documentary. Even though there is a sense of continuity within the trilogy, there is also, at another level, a sense of chronological disjunction.

While adopting the codes of documentary to recreate a future event, *Liminals* describes a strange belief–system from the standpoint of a fully rationalized future . The use of outdated media to document a future event emphasizes the temporal distinction characteristic of the time we are currently living, a conflation of times into the "contemporary." As conceived by Peter Osborne (2013), the contemporary is a conflation of different times (Osborne 2013, 17).[61] The cognitive dissonance of seeing past and future together 'in' time can then take on a reflexive meaning pointing at our present.

We tend to perceive outdated media as verifiable records of reality because images are directly "etched" into celluloid film, in contrast to digital images which often conceal their potential manipulation. Within *Liminals,* the use of outdated media and historical documentary aesthetics to fabricate an event in the future can be seen as a nostalgic gesture, but it can also serve to disarm the viewer from preconceived ideas about a sense of linear time this kind of media might produce.

Nostalgia is often understood as the opposite of utopia – utopia is a vision of a better future, whereas nostalgia is a yearning for something that has already passed or that was lost. Paolo Magagnoli, however, begins his book *Documents of Utopia, The Politics of Experimental Documentary*, by asserting that "[n]ostalgic memories are histories of the

[61] More on Osborne's concept of contemporary can be found in the first chapter of this thesis.

future" (Magagnoli 2015, 1) – a statement that resonates strongly with Shaw's use of old media to portray a speculative future event. This apparently contradictory statement is made clear when Magagnoli explains that the two impulses are closely related: "[l]ike utopia, nostalgia conjures up the image of a society in which the problems that beset our current condition are transcended or resolved; and like utopia, nostalgia may have a critical dimension, as it originates from a feeling of discontent towards the society one lives in" (Magagnoli 2015, 1). In his book, Magagnoli (2015) traces the pathological and critical significance of nostalgia throughout art history and theory (1–14). It is argued that even if nostalgia is often portrayed as an inherently regressive sentiment, it is necessary to disentangle nostalgia from "powerful and apocalyptic narratives of amnesia" in order to understand its true meaning (Magagnoli 2015, 8). Hence, Magagnoli urges us to differentiate between cultural practices that draw on the past to justify or maintain current political, social, and economic conventions, and those that evoke the past to challenge them. Essentially, he encourages us to "admit the possibility of a critical nostalgia" (Magagnoli 2015, 8). Magagnoli states,

> The question here is not whether the nostalgic impulse in contemporary art is necessarily a regrettable or a progressive historical development. Rather, the question is whether the very characterisation of nostalgia as escapist and pathological ignores and then discourages the possibility that this affective attachment to the past could lead, in some instances, to critical knowledge about the present and the desire to transform it (Magagnoli 2015, 10).

If we accept that there is a critical potential in nostalgic representations, the task then is to identify to what extent nostalgia is critical or ideological in a specific artwork. In Shaw's work, it is clear that nostalgia is an expression for imagining possible (albeit highly speculative) alternatives to our present world. The fact that Shaw's future is more dystopic than utopic might complicate Magagnoli's argument until this point. Or, perhaps, it might even reinforce nostalgia's critical force.

4.2.2. 'Assisted vérité'

In *Liminals,* we see a group of eight people (both women and men, who appear to be performers in rehearsal based on their casual exercise clothing) gather inside an austere open

space that looks like a storage place or a dance studio. The group comes together and performs a warm–up, which gradually builds in intensity until they eventually enact extreme corporeal gestures in an attempt to enter into a trance state and transcend into a 'liminal space'. In the film, ritualistic movements aspire to the reawakening of a dormant faith (annexes: image 9). For that purpose, the group acts out techniques such as controlled breathing, repetitive movements, shouting, and gestures of hyperactivity and restlessness. We may recognise these actions from other practices that also aspire to achieve liminal states, such as Yoga, Sufi dance, and some unorthodox religious rituals as the one depicted in the previous film. As part of their appropriations, the Liminals also make use of props, in the form of catharsis–seeking technologies that became popular in the 1970s and which are associated with hedonistic and esoteric cultures. These include the mirrorball, the stroboscope and the dream machine – devices designed to stimulate brain waves and induce alternate states of consciousness. The film documents the performers' interactions with these props as well as them going into the depths of each gesture, being taken over by the synthesis of the ritualistic practice. This situation evolves within the format of a workshop. Shaw explains his filmmaking process as follows:

> I set up the initial parameters, probably about 40% of what I want the story to involve, then workshop the movement styles and forms with the actors/dancers, and then we shot. The visual framework is controlled by location, wardrobe, casting and camera–work, but within that, the delivery of the narrative is left largely at the mercy of what evolves during shooting. From there, the writing process and editing process connects the original concept with what transpired in that raw material. This ends up producing a lot of reverse–engineering. But what the viewer witnesses in the 'documentary' footage has a large element of realism to it – the performers really go to these depths, they're just doing so while aware of a certain fictional set–up. It's not necessarily 'chance', more a kind of assisted vérité (Shaw, 2020: 23).

This assisted vérité, as Shaw defines it, involves the setting of certain creative constraints (cf. chapter 3) in order to take limited control of the environment depicted by the camera - limited in the sense that there is a part that he gives up trying to control the situation, only to take back control again in the post–production of the film. Assisted vérité alludes to a certain truth, or to a reality that is not found "'out there' for us 'in here'" (Minh–ha 1990, 83).

Rather, it is a truth that is, to a certain extent, produced.

"Vérité has been identified with truth," explains Okwui Enwezor, "[b]ut it also refers to lifelikeness, a trueness to life" (Enwezor 2009, 96). It also means "to be true to life in art" and it "involves also the kind of documentary practice… which blurs the line between reality and simulated reality" (Enwezor 2009, 96). Shaw's use of the term vérité can be understood in this sense: as something that is true to life by means of aesthetic fruition. Bill Nichols (1991) pertains cinema verité to the realm of observational cinema, a mode of filmmaking in which the fundamental principle is the non–intervention of the filmmaker, which is normally hidden from the viewer's perception (38). In assisted vérité, Shaw assumes a direct intervention not only into the image production – which goes from directing the movements of the performers to choosing their wardrobe – but also the image post–production, described by Shaw as a sort of reverse–engineering. Reverse–engineering is defined by the Oxford dictionary as "the copying of another company's product after examining it carefully to find out how it is made." Accordingly, the reverse–engineering process can be used to understand how a part of a larger system was designed in order to recreate it. Hence, it is the process of working backwards to the original design, which, in the case of Shaw's film, means that the intervention of the artist is reversed in post–production so as to look as if there was no intervention. In the end, the images look very much like those of cinema vérité.

In the following section, a connection between the setting of the workshop in *Liminals* and Victor W. Turner's[62] observations on liminal experiences will be discussed. Turner's observations are useful to reflect on here as one of the first influential studies on trance states and liminality from the 1970s. The cultural context from which Turner writes – that of 1970's self-enlightenment and resistance to conservative norms – also very much connects to the 'aesthetic time' of the film. Therefore his research presents a productive tool to explore the performance of liminality happening in the film.

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[62] According to Doris Bachmann–Medick in her book *Cultural Turns* (2016), the work of Victor W. Turner, and in particular his take on liminality, is a groundbreaking contribution to the critical analysis of cultural processes as well as to the performative turn (73–95). Bachmann–Medick points to the fact that Turner has reinforced the critique of structures by looking at cultural expressions as processes, which sets it apart from the structuralist method of forcing symbolic systems into binary oppositions, which marks a significant shift in the study of culture. In other words, Turner has contributed to the performative turn by initiating a paradigm shift: from text–oriented to action–oriented observations (74). This shift entails sensitizing cultural studies to an understanding of culture not only as text to be read but also as performance to be interpreted. The anthropological analysis of ritual was indeed one of the driving forces that constituted this shift (78–80).

4.2.3. The workshop towards liminality

Turner explains that what people do in rituals can be understood as practical work but the ritual work that he is referring to also includes the notion of play. "Liminality is particularly conductive to play," he states (Turner 1977, 40). Play, in this sense, extends to the development of new forms of symbolic action and experimental behavior. By experimental, Turner designates "any action or process undertaken to discover something not yet known, *not* scientific experimentation nor what is based on experience rather than theory or authority" (40). In liminality, new ways of acting and new combinations of symbols are tried out. It orchestrates different genres and styles ranging from formal stereotyped action to free play, passing through all sensory codes – visual, auditory, olfactory, kinetic, and so on. "Ritual's multiplicity of elements allows for great flexibility and gives it an immense capacity to portray, interpret, and master radical novelty. This same complex flexibility makes it adaptable to change" (Turner 1977, 40).[63] To orchestrate a workshop in which several individuals would combine a multiplicity of ritual practices that are known to be conducive to liminal states is basically to ask these individuals to go into the depths of themselves, to break with their own behavior patterns and to attempt to achieve an experience of some sort of ecstatic purity.

In its traditional sense, rituals are conceived as entries into the sacred realm. Turner's (1977) approach to rituals, by contrast, conceptually extends the notion of ritual beyond its link to a sacred sphere and beyond its use in pre–industrial societies. In general, he asserts the point that rituals are transformative, not only for individuals, but they also have the potential to transform entire societies. Rituals regulate challenges associated with societal transitions and changes of individual status, as well as with potential challenges to social order. According to Turner – drawing on the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep's (1909) previous observations – rituals involve three types of processes: rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of aggregation (Turner 1977, 36). Since he is more interested in "the nature and characteristics of transition in relatively stable societies," Turner focuses his attention on the intermediate stage of rituals, "the highly symbolic borderline and transitional phase

[63] Liminality has not only evolved into a performative concept, it has also played a central role in the further reorientation of the study of culture, particularly in the postcolonial and the spatial turns (on "liminality" as a central concept for contemporary societies, the humanities and the social sciences, see Thomassen 2014).

of "liminality," as Doris Bachmann–Medick (2016, 81–82) puts it.

In his text, "Variations on a Theme of Liminality" (1977),[64] Turner discusses some of the properties of liminality. One is that the "*liminaries*" – those going through the liminal state – "are betwixt and between established states of politico–jural structure" (37). They transgress categorical boundaries, in other words, they are beyond any conventional cognitive classification, because they are seemingly "dead to the world." They are in a state of "structural invisibility" that is due to their seclusion from society, the abandonment of their names, clothes and any symbol of social statuses. Most of the time, they are not allowed to speak, and when they do, they have to learn a specific language. In Turner's words, "normal word order may be reversed or even randomly scrambled" (Turner 1977, 37) – this recalls the effect in spoken English and that is transversal to all films of the trilogy. It seems almost as if what happens in Shaw's films was a direct enactment of Turner's observations here. The liminal state is also a stripping down process followed by a rebuilding operation (37). One of the functions of going through a liminal state is that of "thinking hard about the elements and basic building blocks of symbolic complexes they had hitherto taken for granted as 'natural' units" (Turner 1977, 38), which can be understood as a reflexive action. Given this general description of the process *liminaries* go through, it is possible to relate it with the situation depicted in the film. Here, we also see a group of people in isolation, stripped of any social status, their names are not revealed and they speak - in Shaw's modified language – only in a preliminary phase before the "ritual" begins.

Turner observes that in a liminal state, individuals are "not living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another" (Turner 1999, 236) It is not a structural contradiction that we witnessing because, as is explained by Turner, in a liminal state we are dealing with the essentially unstructured experience which is at once de–structured and pre–structured (236). The coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unit of the liminal: that which is "neither this nor that, and yet both" (Turner 1999, 237). There are two ways of looking at this from the point of view of the film: one is how this both unstructured, de–structured and pre–structured event

[64] Turner has written more accurate descriptions of liminality in other places (see for instance, "The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti–Structure" 1969), where liminality is contextualized and particularized according to specific examples. For the purpose of the topic discussed here I prefer to stick to his general descriptions of liminality and not enter into particular cases, since it is the particular case of the situation depicted in the film that is most relevant at the moment.

unfolds within the *content* of the film, and the other is in how it constitutes the *form* of the film.

4.2.4. Datamoshing: bridging the gap

Similarly to the other films in the trilogy, *Liminals* reaches a point of rupture that symbolizes the peak of the liminal state, the moment of transformation from one state of consciousness, or 'humanness', into another. This rupture is visually produced by Shaw creating three main effects to the film's structure (annexes: image 10). Initially, the music guides the rhythm and immerses the viewer into the experience of the ritual/performance. Then, the movement of the bodies is processed in slow–motion adding a strange sense of timelessness and spacelessness. In the end, the 16mm black and white film is rendered into a colorful digital glitch. This effect is processed by a phenomenon in the realm of digital image production known as datamoshing – an error where a particular frame information is deleted, or fails to be processed by the computer, thereby creating a gap between one frame of the video and the following, which produces a moment of distortion within the video sequence. This gap is somehow bridged by the machine, but it is not clear how it is processed since the effect is not pre–programed – which is why it is considered as a digital phenomenon almost impossible to control.[65] We see frequently in television, in particular in digital television, a kind of a pixelated effect, an amalgam between two or more frames of digital images, when results from a faulty decoding of the information of a frame which blends with the information of the following frames. In *Liminals*, Shaw incorporates datamoshing to produce a psychedelic image,[66] in the sense that it is an unruly image that breaks with any aesthetic pattern in the film until that moment. The nostalgic 16 mm images in black and white give way to an intense digital distortion. It is this distortion that announces the internal and subjective experience of the group as they are going through the liminal stage.

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[65] Although there are already pre–programmed effects that simulate this glitch, initially it was not programmed.

[66] The psychedelic aesthetics that follow this transition, albeit not digitally created, were very common in the art of the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, psychedelic aesthetics are recurrent in Shaw's work as representations of topics he is interested in such as altered states and the cultural and scientific practices investigating transcendental experience. It is also recurrent in his practice to find themes around belief–systems, drugs effects, neuroscience as well as subcultural expressions through dance and performance. (For more on Shaw's work see *Jeremy Shaw* (2020), edited by Christine Macel and Simon Castets. Paris: Centre Pompidou.)

According to Turner, distortion is a recurrent feature of transitional beings. The point of this distortion is, in Turner's interpretation, to achieve a primordial mode of abstraction: "the outstandingly exaggerated feature is made into an object of reflection" (Turner 1999, 239). Distortions are used to teach individuals how to go through a stage of liminality and to distinguish between different factors of reality. Through distortions of reality, individuals are forced and encouraged to think about their society and their surroundings. "[L]iminality may be partially described as a stage of reflection" (Turner 1999, 240). In other words, individuals learn to think abstractly about their cultural background and symbolic environment in a state of liminality, and they renew their frames of reference during this experience. The last scenes of the film, as we will see, are a very direct interpretation or enactment of Turner's liminality.

By means of datamoshing effects, the images of the bodies that we once recognised as individuals rapidly blend into each other, into a sort of horrific hybrid being. Their spectrum of colors extends into fractals of electric hyper-tones. They lose gravity and appear suspended, sometimes inverted, surfacing between the movements of bodies, to then disintegrate and disappear into the background. The limits of the bodies become fractured vectors of transference, transcending the impression that there was a limit at all. Subsequently, we lose track of the human form, its image disintegrates to the point of becoming a cloud of fluorescent smoke, a complete distortion of the bodies represented before. This passage is described by one of the Liminals in the film as follows: "It feels like we're almost getting somewhere that is essentially almost itself womb–like, made of light" (quote from the film).

In terms of the film's content, the achievement of a liminal state is crucial to justify the transition of humans into another stage of humanity – possibly quantum humans, considering the narrative proposition established by *Quickeners*. In line with the narrative logic of *Liminals*, while facing extinction, humans needed to restructure not only their societal structure but also their own biological structure. This process of re–structuring inevitably involves a moment of un–structuring, which implicates, on the one hand, de–structuring old (biological/cultural) patterns through a ritual that implies the accomplishment of certain goals – in this case, to avoid or at least postpone extinction. On the other hand, it implies pre–structuring, organizing around certain techniques that supposedly have the ability to shift human consciousness into transcendence.

In terms of the film's form, liminality is closely related to a paraesthetic self–reflexive strategy as it appears to play in the in–betweenness of conventions of documentary and fiction. Liminality appeals to that zone of transformation in which the limits of different genres once taken for granted are tested and put into question. It appeals to the transgression of categorical boundaries, of conventional classification, to the crossing of delimited zones. It entails to work through the frames of reference within the film in order to discover something unexpected; not through scientific experimentation, but through aesthetic experimentation. It calls for the collapse of any established hierarchy between the categories of documentary and fiction., which leaves the structure of the film temporarily invisible or disorganized. Liminality thus subverts the categories of documentary and fiction while combining established features available to documentary conventions and utopian/dystopian visions of fiction. Beyond this transgression, there is a performative impact of the film on the viewer who – being drawn into the experience of the momentary suspension of a recognizable structure and experiencing a feeling of ungroundedness – is tempted towards a tangible experience of liminality herself.

Part III: *I Can See Forever*

The opportunity to see the final film in Jeremy Shaw's trilogy titled, I Can See Forever, *occurred when it was being presented for the first time at the König Galerie, in Berlin, on the 24th of November 2018. The architecture of König is monumental; before being a contemporary art gallery it was a church (St. Agnes) built in the 1960s in the Brutalist style. The film was being shown in one of the two exhibition spaces: the nave, a large open space with an impressive high ceiling. The size of the projection screen resembled one in a contemporary cinema room and the surrounding sound system was also suitable for a cinematic experience. However in contrast to a typical cinema experience, here viewers would walk in and out as they wished, choosing to stand still, or sitting on the floor while leaning against the walls of the former church. The screening event was thus not necessarily conducive to a typical start–to–finish viewing experience which we expect from a cinema viewing. Considering the displacement of the mass cultural medium of cinema into the gallery space that we have witnessed in past years, this is not surprising. What was surprising was how the unfolding of the film reflected and expanded an archetypal sense of eternity that was already present in the room where it was being projected. I Can* See Forever *is about "seeing" beyond time and space, it is the ultimate expression of documentary future–tense. It proposes a complete transmogrification of the frames of the documentary film.*

4.3.1. Humans and machines

I Can See Forever introduces us to the story of Roderick Dale, who is described as being born with 8,7% of machine DNA following a clandestine government operation undertaken to create a synthesis between humans and machines. Roderick Dale's story is presented as one episode of a documentary television series referred to as "The Revelatory Series." This episode comes under the title "The Singularity Project: 25 years later" and is listed as being the sixth within the series, leaving the impression that other parts are missing for full understanding. As the title suggests, the purpose of the documentary series is to reveal the

"truth" about certain events; in this case about "The Singularity Project," a government experiment held in 2023 for which several subjects volunteered to submit to test the potential of synthetic DNA.

We are told by the narrator's voice–over that since the outcome of the experiment was considered a failure, the government – here portrayed as a kind of "new" post–sovereign biopower equivalent to what many cultures are facing globally today – sought to cover the experiment and its disastrous consequences. Only twenty–five years later, the experiment became officially recognised and its consequences revealed. One consequence of "The Singularity Project" – or "Singularity Disaster", as it is also labeled in the film – was the underestimation of human reproduction within the subjects and the consequent transmission of synthetic DNA into a new subject. This is how we arrive at the story of Roderick Dale, who appears as a queer, young black man born with residues of this machine DNA.

The failure of the Singularity Project, led to the ban of experimentation with synthetic DNA in human subjects and the subsequent increase in governmental funding for the development of "The Unit" – a "virtual transcendence replicator," as the narrator explains, which recreates the spiritual experience artificially. The mass distribution of The Unit and the unmeasured "consumption" of this experience is what seems to ultimately cause a disturbance in the ability to "have faith". Although human extinction is not announced as an inevitability, it is eminently present in this film, creating a relationship of cause and effect within the narrative of the trilogy, even if this relationship appears in the gaps of what is said rather than through specific indications in the text of the film.

Through the lens of an outdated Hi8 camera (which produces a grainy, high contrast image reminiscent of television from the 1980's and early 1990's), Roderick Dale is portrayed in his domestic environment, an anonymous suburban area that appears to be set sometime in the early 1990s. While *Quickeners* and *Liminals* took inspiration from the 1970s and 1960s, *I Can See Forever* aesthetics brings us closer to the present. The film progresses through several interviews with Roderick Dale and his aunt, with whom, we learn, he has lived since he was born, as both of his parents were allegedly victims of the experiment. We are also presented with an 'interview' with an eccentric and passionate scientist who encourages the reintroduction of machine DNA into scientific studies. This interview is followed by images of brain scans, scientific charts and different types of documents that are employed to visually support his statements. The information displayed, however, is abstract

to those who are not familiar with reading such images or diagrams, and who are unable to make sense of the information without the voice–over commentary. The scientist shares his idealistic and utopian perspective on Roderick Dale's digital make–up. He notices increased intellectual capacities, faster cellular generation and improved physiological activity. He promotes that the use of machine DNA in humans holds great advantages for the future, which is why it should not be feared. Within the film, the scientist undertakes a series of "underground" experiments with Roderick Dale in order to understand what he is experiencing when he says he "can see forever."

In one of the interviews with Roderick Dale, he explains that through dance, he was able to trigger a link between his "internal technology and his external virtuosity." It is the combination between virtuosity and technology that gives him the means to transcend and to achieve the liminal state that he describes as "seeing forever." A part of Roderick Dale's character development is depicted through television: several sequences show him observing other people dancing, as part of his autodidactic method of learning.

Later in the film, a sequence shows Roderick Dale dancing in an empty studio not dissimilar to that depicted in *Liminals* (annexes: image 11). In this scene, Dale takes off most of his clothes and turns on a sound system. In the beginning, the camera is positioned in a corner of the room, almost like a surveillance mode. As the performance evolves, the camera angle changes: the camera stops documenting from a fixed position, and starts to physically circulate, approximating and distancing itself from the performing body. After a certain point, when it seems that the peak of the performance has been reached, Roderick's image on the screen appears to melt, a digital glow surrounds his body and the digital effects of datamoshing that we already encountered in *Liminals*, returns. Also the quality of the image shifts: the 1990s' Hi8 documentary film aesthetics merges with computer–generated images distorting the image of his body to the point of unrecognition. The transition to the digital indicates his altered state of consciousness. The plasticity of his body reaches a point of complete abstraction. The resulting sequence leads to a pattern of fluorescent squares arranged in a loop, thereby transforming the screen into a tunnel of light, immersing the viewer and leading her to sense an altered state of awareness (annexes: image 12). This last image continues until the end of the film, which comes back precisely to where it started: the image of a sunset seen from Roderick Dale's cathode–ray television set. As a kind of archaic kitsch symbol, it evokes associations of transcendence, rebirth and new beginnings..

I Can See Forever continues to elaborate on the universe and aesthetic approaches already established by *Quickeners* and *Liminals*. This film shows a dystopian future, just as the other films did. However, in this more proximate future, people are not yet completely without faith but on the verge of losing it due to government flawed policies and unsuccessful experiments. Even if unsatisfied with their current living conditions, Roderick Dale and his aunt still have utopic hopes for a better future. Here too, the plot is shaped by technological developments that have a direct effect on a marginalized group. As a whole, the trilogy conveys an idea that (social/technological) crises have a cyclic temporarily; and that alternatives to crises emerged at the margins of established systems.

Furthermore, *I Can See Forever* continues to make use of outdated media to portray a future event. It adopts the paradigmatic structure of the documentary's expository mode of representation, which involves the establishment of a case study, the display of (fictional) scientific proof that serves as a background and a presentation by a narrator's voice–over – again male – examining the event's current implications. Once again, we see interviews that give the impression of a personal account of the event narrated. Roderick Dale's speaking pattern is altered in the same way as in the other films of the trilogy, but the other characters in the film speak in regular English, as they are not affected by altered DNA. This alteration affecting only Roderick Dale's speaking pattern suggests that by virtue of his digital makeup and his practice in dance, he has passed through a liminal state and has evolved from human to posthuman. Like its counterparts, *I Can See Forever* progresses from documentary to abstract aesthetic, precisely at the moment when the subject enters into an altered state of consciousness through an intense physical performance. This transition is orchestrated through a rupture or shift in the image. In the last sequence, Shaw's control of the datamoshing is far more sophisticated and complex than in *Liminals*, but his approach remains similar. In line with *Liminals*, we see Shaw's application of his "assisted vérité" method (Shaw 2020, 23). Again, we have a staged situation performed by actors and/or a dancer in which the artist has actively intervened, even if he reproduces an aesthetics akin to standard television documentary. However, despite these similarities, *I Can See Forever* has a specific impact which is perhaps due to its chronological closeness to our present which approximates the oscillation between dystopic and utopic impulses. This account of an almost tangible future produces an effect on the viewer that has been discussed by E Ann

Kaplan (2012) through her theory of “trauma future–tense”. Another powerful aspect of the film is the identity Shaw chose for the character of Roderick Dale. While in the first two films, the characters’ identities were muted within the frame of a community in a faraway future, this last film intentionally voices out loud a statement about a new kind of subject that deserves attention. It is significant that he appears as black–queer–posthuman subject. Subjectivity of this kind is addressed by Kaplan in relation to "trauma future–tense," as well as it is problematized by black and indigenous studies by scholars such as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson (2013, 2020), Tiffany Lethabo King (2017) and Kristen Lillvis (2017), and it will be addressed below.

4.3.2. ‘Trauma future–tense’

“If Freud was interested in how individual subjects and human cultures are haunted by past trauma, I now want to look at how people today are haunted by powerful imagining of *future* traumas, *future* catastrophes in which death reigns” (Kaplan 2012, 368). Drawing on Freud’s concept of “death drive” (Freud 1961), Kaplan (2012) argues that, following 9/11, the U.S. and other Western nations are characterized by a culture of trauma. A new aspect of such a trauma culture has emerged, which is specifically concerned about the future of humanity. This is partly due to the collective memory of past traumatic events such as Hiroshima, the Holocaust, slavery, and the eradication of indigenous populations globally. Fantasies about the end of the world are not new, Kaplan notes, but she calls attention to the size and scope with which the present expresses an enduring fear for future catastrophes such as climate change, terrorism and mass migration (364–365). Hence, she focuses on dystopian future images and languages as symbols of unconscious fantasies that shape today's public imagination. Since imaginary worlds, such as the ones we see in Shaw’s films, have real effects on people, it is relevant to understand what is at play when images of the future are produced.

“Utopian and Dystopian thought are but two sides of the same psychological coin” (Kaplan 2012, 366). We have observed how in the trilogy, even in situations where human extinction is lingering on the horizon (*I Can See Forever*), was already a quantifiable certainty (*Liminals*), or has taken place already (*Quickeners*), utopian hopes were still present in the film's narrative. Kaplan identifies this as a natural oscillation between

dystopian and utopian forces in human psychology. This oscillation is what defines "the new futuristic genre" in cinema today, and that reflects what she calls "trauma future–tense" (Kaplan 2012, 366–367). Contrary to previous dystopian visions, the new one abandons the narrative of aliens invading the Earth and becomes instead obsessed with the destruction of human civilization and natural disasters (369). There is a self–destructive force, associated with a Freudian death drive, which may lead to unrealistic fantasies about the end of the world. But there is also the desire to take control and be prepared for any casualty. Cinema, Kaplan argues, is where we allow ourselves to be horrified by seeing ourselves being destroyed, but we take much pleasure in seeing how we live through such horror at the same time (368).[67] One of the problems with this is that imagery of future catastrophes currently circulating do not tamp down anxiety or merely reflect on the present. On the contrary, they "produce a deeper shock through imagining the collapse of systems of meaning and social life altogether" (Kaplan 2012, 369).

Another feature of this genre Kaplan defines is that the future is still recognisable, only one step ahead of us. *I Can See Forever* presents the most traumatic scenario within the trilogy due to the fact that it is the one that already appears probable, a scenario that is already conceivable. Hence, it is not a superficial metaphor. It asserts that the world shown is plausible. Another indication of this is the focus on specific dates, documents and scientific proof that is more present in this film than in the others from the trilogy. The documentary frame is thus relevant here to produce the shock effect, or the trauma Kaplan is referring to here. Historically, documentary imagery is linked to the representation of a marginalized social reality, but it is also linked to representations of the natural world and its transformation due to human intervention. In general, documentary imagery is a source of knowledge of the transformation of the world, a way of knowing the world out there, as Nichols points out (Nichols 1991, ix). And it has become so deeply ingrained that, when presented as representing a dystopian future, it cannot but produce a traumatic result.

While Kaplan's (2012) focus is on mainstream cinema – she gives as an example in speaking about trauma future tense Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), a blockbuster film combining documentary and large-production fiction film approaches. Cuarón and

[67] One question that is relevant to Kaplan's argument and that will not be addressed here is, "how far do authorities encourage fear and paranoia as a way, even in a democracy, of controlling people?" (Kaplan 2012, 368).

Shaw both deal with topics that can be considered essential for life, (in)fertility and (lack of) faith – which can also be understood as the lack of imagination, or infertility of the mind. There are two concepts of time associated with this "new genre" as Kaplan puts it: the trauma of not having a future produces a kind of "dystopian futureless present" and a "utopian messianic future" (Kaplan 2012, 374). This utopian messianic future is, at the end of each film in Shaw's trilogy, figured through the possibilities of the liminal zone allowing humans to escape from biopower, or reappropriating power through their body, as a zone of reflection and rearrangement of social paradigms that could hypothetically serve to change human's fatalistic destiny.

Kaplan (2012) claims that Cuarón's film contains an explicit critique of capitalism by showing how actual global traumas such as environmental damage, racial violence, immigration and terrorism can be exploited by politicians and government officials (379).[68] Whether or not *I Can See Forever* has the same critical power, is hard to say. The strategies imported from the previous films seem, however, to take a different direction than the one pointed by Kaplan. The repetition of these strategies reinforces the trilogy's own convention and creates a category for itself that confronts the work with its own traumatic effects. *I Can See Forever,* however, is disturbingly effective not only because it is closer to our present; but also because it claims to represent the fear and hopes of a particular marginalized community, singularized in the identity of a queer–black–posthuman subject. This character helps distinguish the film from Cuarón's approach and the type of "posthumanism that resuscitates normative subjects through the death of Black and Indigenous peoples," as Tiffany Lethabo King (2017, 178) would put it. However, the "construction" of this identity and the implications of his character deserve more attention in the following section.

4.3.3. The plasticity of the documentary form

I Can See Forever avoids the normative subject matter that is usually associated with utopian or dystopian futures in mainstream cinema – at least until the advent of Netflix, where we are now experiencing an abundance of both normative and not so normative character

[68] Kaplan seems to put more emphasis on the films' critical potential than on the film's problematic gender and racial identity – which she addresses by noting that the plot in this "new genre" is repeatedly about a white man saving a woman or child from destruction (372), but she does not analyze further this crucial element.

identities. But still, there are some less obvious particularities about Roderick Dale's identity and function within this work which can be discussed. For example, portraying Roderick Dale as an orphan echos a narrative of "lack of origins" that has justified violence against black and indigenous communities as well as it continues (disguised) antiblack discourses that have been in circulation for centuries. As an example of such discourses, Tiffany Lethabo King in her article "Humans Involved: Lurking in the Lines of Posthumanist Flight" (2017) mentions how Deleuze and Guattari's concept of an "ever–receding frontier" is often cited without mentioning their engagement with the American West vs Indians narrative as an inspiration to their rhizomatic movement. King asserts,

> It is colonialist on (at least) two accounts: in its need to render the Indian already and inevitably (ontologically) dead as "it" has no ancestors or living community to whom one needs to be accountable; and in its invocation of the vanishing "Indian," which opens up the possibility of an "ever–receding frontier" and inspiration for the metaphor of the rhizome (King 2017, 171).

Roderick Dale, as an orphan subject, evokes the narrative of being devoid of ancestry or an existing community. King sees this as defining the point of departure of most (white) posthuman theories that do not take into account the inclusions and exclusions the (post)human concept entails. Roderick Dale, however, still has his aunt who cares for him, he is not completely vulnerable and is part of a community, even if it is a marginal one. In this sense, his character development oscillates between the two terms vulnerability and emancipation.

Another resonance can be found when considering that the (imaginary) scientific experiment on a black body that the film purports recalls the "experimentation" black bodies suffered since the implementation of plantation camps. Here, I am claiming that the effects of the experimentation we see in the film are reminiscent of the ones Zakiyyah Iman Jackson is proposing below,

> My suggestion is that slavery, as an experimental mode, sought to define and explore the possibilities and limits of sex, gender, and reproduction on the plantation and beyond in a manner distinct from but relational to the assumed proper subject of "civilization," and, in fact, enabled hegemonic notions of sex/gender and reproduction such as "woman," "mother," and "female body (Jackson 2020, 11).

The idea that the plantation can be seen as a zone for experimentation on the black human subject takes Jackson, in her "Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World", to conclude that "the black body is an essential index for the calculation of degree of humanity and the measure of human progress" (Jackson 2020, 46). Here, Jackson moves beyond the dichotomy of human/animal as the fundamental factor that defines the human as a concept – a concept that is not separate from its colonial context – and argues that slavery is more than an unnatural ordering of man and beast. Rather, it is a transmogrification of human form and personality, an experiment in human plasticity and its limitations (47). The act of transmogrification as Jackson describes it, is

> (...) the changing of something into a different form or appearance (especially a fantastic or grotesque one)— the coordinates of the human body are forcefully altered into a different shape or form— bizarre and fantastic: human personality is made "wild" under the weight of blackness's production as seemingly pure potentiality" (Jackson 2020, 71).

Roderick Dale seems to be the result of experimentation. In the film, the white scientist could be considered to represent the same authority as the master on the plantation. And the disfiguration of Roderick's body at the end of the film through Shaw's use of datamoshing and visual effects, could produce the connotation of something that is made wild, brutal, inhuman. But it is the site of experimentation and transmogrification that also becomes the point of Roderick Dale's emancipation, as we shall see. Again his character development within the film is complex and it oscillates between vulnerability and emancipation, trauma and healing.

By exploring the folds of Roderick Dale's identity through King's and Jackson's writings, I move away from any posthumanist theory that is not racialised, i.e. that does not problematise, first and foremost, the historical lack of black and gendered bodies in the concept of "the (post)human," so as to address directly the main concern of ethnic studies when it comes to this relatively new topic. King and Jackson follow Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter in placing Western humanism within a broader context of gendered, sexual, racial, and colonial relations. Their argument is that "the human" is not the same as "man". Instead, they see it as "a technology of slavery and colonialism" that, through racialized force, asserts its legitimacy on "the universal" (Jackson 2013, 670). Coincidentally or not, posthumanist

theory ushered in full development in the 1990s – the aesthetic period the film refers to – at a time when posthumanist thinking challenged many assumptions embedded in the Enlightenment. “What posthumanists held in common” Jackson explains, “was a critique of the Enlightenment subject's claims to mastery, autonomy, and dominance over material and virtual worlds. (...) However,” she continues, “its critics maintained that the acuity of posthumanism's intervention was undercut when its scholars effectively sidestepped the analytical challenges posed by the categories of race, colonialism, and slavery” (Jackson 2013, 671). Which means that posthumanism's provocative theoretical orientation remained devoted to a certain order in which "reason" was still employed to assess the post–modern, post–human subject. In the light of this, Jackson observes that it was not surprising that some racial studies scholars were conflicted over the implications of promoting the "post" modern and "post" human during the 1990s (672). She states,

> Some believed, like Africana philosopher Lewis Gordon, that black people must be humanists for the "obvious" reason that "the dominant group can 'give up' humanism for the simple fact that their humanity is presumed whereas "other communities have struggled too long for the humanistic prize." However, I would argue that these and similar sentiments have been largely misunderstood. It is not that critics such as Gordon simply sought admission into the normative category of “the human” rather, they attempted to transform the category from within, and in fact, they hoped to effect a greater understanding and appreciation of the transformative potential of Africana thought more generally. The hope was not that black people would gain admittance in the fraternity of Man—the aim was to displace the order of Man altogether. Thus, what they aspired to achieve was not the expansion of liberal humanism to those enslaved and colonized, but rather a transformation within humanism (Jackson 2013, 672).

The suspicion that is aroused around the concept of the posthuman is precisely the aspiration for subjectlessness that it entails, an aspiration that only a well–formed (white) subject could strive for, which is perhaps why posthumanism can be used a disguise for the (white) human subject’s transcendence. As King puts it, “Jackson knows that there is often a subject lurking within the bowels or lines of nonrepresentational discourse. Jackson indicts posthumanist calls to move to the ‘beyond’ for reproducing a false and dishonest European transcendentalism” (King 2017, 179). Then, the issue for the black community does not end with gaining subjecthood from the normative perspective of “the human” – a concept that

has traditionally been framed within the parameters of a racist, heteropatriarchal paradigm of sensibility. In other words, the black community does not necessarily aspire to occupy a space of identity or humanity as it is currently conceived. Rather, "the human" is a concept in need of full revision in order to include the black subject.[69]

It is challenging to place the character of Roderick Dale in the context of post–humanist theory, where he seems to belong. Shaw seems to want to avoid the normativity this type of thinking has systematically prefigured particularly until the 1990s. But then, one could ask that: in what senses is the black–queer–posthuman situated? In what terms should we consider Roderick Dale's (post)humanity?

While passing through the fracturing effects of datamoshing at the end of the film, his body, already molded by the practice and discipline of dance, gains yet another level of plasticity. The digital effects that we already know from the previous film resurface here with a new added signifier. If we consider datamoshing effects and what they can do to the body – a deformation of the black body – from the perspective of plasticity, as Jackson suggests below, we can see how the digital effect produces a self–reflexive paraesthetic movement deforming "a form where form shall not hold" (Jackson 2020, 3). Jackson defines plasticity as follows,

> Plasticity is a mode of transmogrification whereby the fleshy being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold: potentially "everything and nothing" at the register of ontology. It is perhaps prior scholarship's interpretation of this tradition as "denied humanity" that has facilitated a call for greater inclusion, as a corrective to what it deems is a historical exclusion of blackness. One consequence of this orientation is that many scholars have essentially ignored alternative conceptions of being and the nonhuman that have been produced by blackened people (Jackson 2020, 3).

The datamoshing effect is a signifier for the entry into a liminal state, but it is also the

[69] King expresses the problem more bluntly when she states, "For example, if Black Lives Matter (BLM) is asking to be absorbed into the category of the human, then BLM's version of the human does not yet exist. Further, if Black lives were to be absorbed into the category of the human, the social order and the scaffolding that upends and holds together the human would collapse. For example, if Black Lives Matter (as a variety of local chapters with their own unique politics) is actually making an appeal to be included within humanity— as an intelligible identity of the living— the request is also accompanied by a demand for the abolition of the police" (King 2017, 180).

paraesthetic strategy that calls into a visual form the meaning a black body carries as a site of potentialities that is 'at the same time everything and nothing,'the basic point of reference from which the posthuman actually should start to take form. "I Can See Forever" – which is at the same time the title of the film and the name Roderick Dale gives to his altered state of consciousness – points to the abyss in this form without a form and its infinite potentialities, to the potentialities of "the human", which are not conceived under the same reasoning, the same order, that has produced the black body as a plastic body. In the introduction of her book *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination*, Kristen Lillvis (2017) points at the intersection between past, present and future temporalities in the expression of black subjects experiences – an intersection that became one of the essential features of "Afrofuturism" as Kodwo Eshun (2003) conceived it. This flexible temporality, according to Lillvis, situates the posthuman being in a state of constant transformation; in a state of transition not only within different time scales but also between self and other. In the same way a cyborg amalgamates human and machine, the transition can also occur internally while crossing genres, races, classes, sexuality, ability and other variables. She proposes the term "posthuman blackness" as a way of describing the empowered subjectivities that black women and men develop by virtue of their experiences in multiple historical contexts. Roderick Dale affirms this posthuman blackness, which is a productive site of potentiality that aims at re–structuring white liberal humanist ways of thinking and imagining the world while pointing at the exclusiveness it produces. Black authority here is developed out of experiences and traumas traditionally unaccredited in Western thinking.[70]

The concept of plasticity as a mode of transmogrification, as Jackson conceives it, guides my final reflection of the documentary frame in Shaw's work. The documentary form has indeed been complicit with the colonial project throughout history, as it carries the authority of its corresponding regime of truth production. It is interesting then to observe that perhaps only through a complete plasticization of the documentary form – by turning it into a form

[70] How could we situate Shaw in relation to his work? As a queer/ white/ western/ migrant/ middle–aged artist, Shaw may not identify as a practitioner of black humanism but he participates in the black, queer humanist project by transforming the past into a present and future source of power for his character Roderick Dale. As Lillvis puts it, "[p]osthuman theorizing [and we could add artistic expression], when executed with an awareness of black histories, acknowledges the significance of the past or present and future ideas of black identity and simultaneously considers alternative temporal reference points for the origin of black autonomy and authority" (Lillvis 2017, 6).

of infinitely malleable lexical matter, as Jackson (2020, 81) would put it – can the documentary form accomplish the position of being a matrix upon which new forms of posthuman blackness could rest. Only as "a form where form shall not hold" could the documentary "destabilise the prevailing grammar of 'the human'" (Jackson 2020, 81).

Throughout this chapter, we have identified self–reflexive paraesthetic strategies that pushed the boundaries of conventional practices associated with documentary film. Among these strategies, we identified the *détournment* of previous documentary imagery, the ventriloquism of characters in interviews, and allusions to the notions of ecstatic truth and liminality, all produced through the method of assisted vérité, in which Shaw assumes his intervention even if the resulting images appear *as if* they were unmodified. Together, Shaw's trilogy is a work of "documentary fiction," in the sense Rancière proposed: a practice constituted by multiple forces that problematizes the regime of truth associated with certain images, thereby producing an open–ended space where infinite relations can be addressed. The documentary form, as Rancière sees it, allows for considerable freedom in manipulating the consonances and dissonances between narrative voices. The documentary future–tense can be perceived in this way, as a series of images linked to different chronological periods that progressively approximate our present, compelling and effective as it registers our proximity to this future trauma.

Chapter 5

All That is Solid, a Desktop Documentary[71]

In 2017, I was introduced to the work of British filmmaker and artist Louis Henderson for the first time. He was presenting his work as part of Doc's Kingdom, *an international seminar about documentary filmmaking taking place annually in Arcos de Valdevez, in Portugal. Here, an international community of filmmakers, academics and enthusiasts gather for a full week of screenings and discussions in the company of the invited filmmakers. Every screening begins with an undisclosed program of films. What* Doc's Kingdom *proposes, unlike regular film festivals, is an experience that allows participants to step outside of their everyday lives and deeply engage with an immersive and transformative experience. As part of the seminar program, filmmakers present their finished films as well as selected works in progress. Louis Henderson presented, among other works, his 'desktop documentary' film* All That is Solid *(2014, 16 min) that will be the focus of discussion in this chapter. Contrary to the other films discussed above, I have so far not experienced Henderson's films exhibited within a gallery context. After the experience of* Doc's Kingdom, *I watched* All That is Solid *several more times, but now at home and through the computer screen. This context helped me take into consideration some aspects of the film that I have not noticed before. Approaching Henderson's 'desktop documentary' by watching it on my personal computer allowed me to relate my own experience directly to one of the main features of the film.* All That is Solid *engages in a tangled web of relationships linking the sensed immateriality of the 'Cloud' to the tangible heavy materiality of e–waste zones in Ghana – a linkage that is mediated through the desktop of the filmmaker's computer.*

[71] This chapter is a rearticulation of some ideas previously published in *Galaxy* - the academic journal of the University of São Paulo, with the title: "Narrative and database in 'All that is Solid', a desktop documentary" (Magno 2019, 14-30).

5.1. Mining and recombining

> The answers to the mystery of racial capitalism must lie in the mystery of capital itself. Or, at the very least, in shadows where capital meets other histories of dispossession (Bhattacharyya 2018, xi).

All That is Solid uses the desktop of the computer as a historical/virtual site for the unfolding of the film's content. 'Desktop documentary' has been identified as one contemporary form of filmmaking that is being used by several artists and filmmakers because it relies on low–cost production, but also because it reveals our direct access to information through the computer and the Internet.[72] The desktop itself, as we will see, becomes the performative leap of the film: on the one hand, it plays with our familiarity with it; and on the other, it turns it into something all too familiar, *unheimlich,* or uncanny. The desktop opens up an abyss of reflecting mirrors/windows between form and content inviting an in–depth encounter with variegated forces at work in society. Connecting information encountered by using an Internet search engine, which is then organized in folders on Henderson's computer's desktop for us to consider. Henderson unfolds an intricate story that he describes as follows:

> As technological progress pushes forward in the West, enormous piles of obsolete computers are thrown away and recycled. Pushed out of sight and sent to the coast of West Africa, these computers are thrown into waste grounds such as Agbogbloshie in Accra, Ghana. On arrival the e–waste is recuperated by young men, who break and burn the plastic casings in order to extract the precious metals contained within. Eventually, the metals are sold, melted and reformed into new objects to be sold; it is a strange system of recycling, a kind of reverse neo–colonial mining, whereby the African is searching for mineral resources in the materials of Europe. Through showing these heavy processes, the video highlights the importance of dispelling the capitalist myth of the immateriality of new technology to reveal the mineral weight with which the Cloud is grounded to its earthly origins (Henderson 2014).

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[72] "Desktop documentary" is a term widespread by film critic and filmmaker Kevin B. Lee. In his words, the desktop documentary "does not procure its footage in the usual way (using a camera) but instead sources its images from the internet. Screen capturing software takes the place of the camera, turning the computer screen into both the method of production and of dissemination of such a documentary" (Lee in http://www.filmscalpel.com/portfolio_page/desktop–documentary/).

All That is Solid confronts us with a jarring recycling scheme, a kind of reverse–engineering of a capitalist system built around an imperial center and its "wasteland" (Sanyal 2007). The film was developed directly from Henderson's previous film, *Lettres du Voyant* (2013), a documentary fiction[73] about spiritism and technology in today's Ghana. *Lettres du Voyant* attempts to unlock the mysteries about a practice called "Sakawa" that combines internet scams and voodoo magic. It shows that in Ghana, internet voodoo is becoming increasingly popular, as is computer scavenging, which designates the practice of digging up valuable metals as well as private information such as bank records and personal photographs from obsolete technologies sent to e–wasteland recycling facilities. This scattered information is retrieved in order to recombine some kind of 'spirit,' lost but eminent, in the discarded materials. *Sakawa* is the name of the performance which brings this 'spirit' to life from the wasted material. In the film, we also see how metals such as gold, aluminum, copper and iron which have been exported to the West from minefields like those in Ghana, are now being returned in the form of discarded hardware. The film proposes to proceed through a kind of reverse archaeology, transmitted through a 'visionary' character. The latter only appears as a voiceover reading letters that he has allegedly written to the filmmaker; letters in which he describes how European colonists have pillaged Ghana's gold and forced their Christian religion on them in the past. Now, he wishes to "tell the truth" about this past by addressing its present neo–colonial reconfiguration, and to "exorcize bad spirits" through an ancient ritual. By connecting scammers' tales with accounts about Ghanaian independence, the film suggests that the practice of *Sakawa* represents a very particular kind of anti–neocolonial resistance. For *All That is Solid*, Henderson 'mined' the material he used for *Lettres du Voyant* and 'recomposed' it to create a new film. Both films share the same research and theme, but they result in two very different objects. The process of alienating and rearticulating the existing material has performative implications that resonate with the films' subject matter. *All That is Solid* has a particular effect on the reception of the film, as it addresses the senses of the viewer and her familiarity with the desktop to produce an affective experience beyond her knowledge of the operative function of the desktop.

Henderson places the viewer in front of his own personal computer. What is framed is nothing but his own screen *as if* we could remotely access his desktop and sense the movements of the person behind it. In a way, the film recreates a parafictional space for the

[73] Cf. chapter 3 for Ranciére's (2006) definition of "documentary fiction".

viewer: it is *as if* she were actually looking at his desktop in real–time. Henderson opens a window of Google Translate on his internet browser, and types the text below in English, while the interface translates it simultaneously into French.

This is a film that takes place,	*– C'est un film qui se déroule,*
in between a hard place,	*– entre un endroit dur,*
a hard drive,	*– un disque dur,*
and an imaginary,	*– et un imaginaire,*
a soft space	*– un espace doux –*
the cloud that holds my data,	*– le nuage qui contient mes données,*
and in the soft grey matter,	*– et dans la matière grise douce,*
contained within the head.	*– contenue dans la tête.*

All That is Solid does not include conventional voiceover commentary, but it does provide its viewers with a "voice" telling what is this film about – by voice I am referring to the sense Bill Nichols ascribes to it: "that which conveys to us a sense of a text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us" (Nichols 1983, 18). This definition of "voice" thus includes all spoken or coded speech. "Voice" Nichols continues, "is perhaps akin to that intangible, moiré–like pattern formed by the unique interaction of all a film's codes, and it applies to all modes of documentary" (Nichols 1983, 18). Hence, it could be said that one way this documentary's voice manifests itself is through the performance of the desktop user and the intertextuality of the various forms and materials we will be presented with from now on.

The film then proceeds with the opening of another tab in Google's search engine, this time directing the viewer to a Wikipedia page about Ghana – formerly known as the Gold Coast during British colonial rule that lasted from 1867 until 1957. As the user scrolls down the page, more information about the Gold Coast's geographical position in the Gulf of Guinea, West Africa, becomes available. We read, for example, that the first Europeans to arrive at the coast were the Portuguese in 1471, where they encountered a variety of African kingdoms, some of which controlled substantial gold reserves. From the white background of the Wikipedia page, another image slowly emerges. It shows a metalsmith melting gold and forging it into the shape of gold bars. It also shows an open field, more specifically, a site for the disposal of unwanted electronic material, an e–waste junkyard where several people, mainly young, black men, seem to be looking for and collecting pieces of metal from

computers or other similar types of electronic equipment (annexes: image 13). Although we are still viewing from the perspective of Henderson's desktop, the montage of this sequence is in fact a work of post–production, which is visible because it consists of layering images with a fading in and out of the screen of the desktop. This subtle montage effect, almost imperceptible to the viewer, reveals how the film elaborates more than just a simple recording of the image on the screen, thereby exposing how the theatrical space of the desktop can also represent a space for cinematic illusions. Eventually, the word "solid" becomes highlighted in the text about the Gold Coast as a hyperlink directing the user to a new search on the meaning of this word. As the user - Henderson - clicks on the hyperlink, a dense layer of clouds takes over the screen, covering the information provided by Wikipedia on the word "solid" as if erasing its meaning and replacing it with its opposing state of matter in nature, that of gas. Several layers of images and text start to overlap, until one of the layers stands out and announces the title of the film: *All That is Solid*.

The title references Karl Marx' famous assertion, "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind" (Marx/Engels 1969, 16). Moreover, it might also refer to the book *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* written by American philosopher Marshall Berman in 1982, which analyzes the social, cultural and economic aspects of modern society and the complex relationship between capitalism and modernist ideologies (Berman 1982). Akin to Berman, who draws on Marx's text to discuss structural features of modernization, *All That is Solid* departs from Marx in order to actualize his thinking in relation to new technology. With that purpose, Henderson introduces us to a contemporary socio–historical structure that includes racial and geographical relations and links it to technology's place in human society. Henderson's film broadens the scope of an implicit critique of capitalism suggested by the authors mentioned above, to include the inescapable dimension of race missing in their argument. Cedric J Robinson, in his seminal book *Black Marxism* (1983), already explained that capitalism's propensity for inequality has been historically shaped by racial differences incurred between people. Although addressed very briefly at the beginning of the film, the relations that connect race to capitalism become more and more visible as the film progresses.

Another insight into the film helps me justify my point here. On the desktop of Henderson's

computer another search engine is opened. Now, it is the search engine of the Apple Computer itself, widely known as the "Finder", facilitating the finding of data stored by the individual user on the computer. Here, the search shifts from online resources such as Wikipedia, which are collectively and anonymously constructed, to access another kind of resource that the artist himself has assembled. Under an external hard drive's icon, a folder titled "soft montage" appears. Inside the folder, Henderson leads the viewer to a selection of ".MOV" files. These files show images captured by Henderson himself for *Lettres du Voyant* in Agbogbloshie in Accra, Ghana. The exploration in his computer moves away from the possibilities offered by the online world to a space where the director archives data related to the fieldwork he did and his actual meetings with the mineworkers in Accra. The video files expand rapidly over the screen and show several videos simultaneously which are juxtaposed one to another. One of these videos shows the image of a hand holding drops of gold in a loop, repeating *ad infinitum* the image, thereby producing an effect of *mise en abyme*. This is followed by images of an open–air mine where gold diggers and machines excavate the landscape. Another video shows several people dismantling electronic devices on an e–waste site. The camera pans over the site and shows people digging for metals in the open air, breaking down old computers with their own improvised, handmade tools. They collect this material and start fires to melt the metals found in these devices. This seemingly organized labor happens within a landscape of relentless chaos. Suddenly, a new layer of sound overlaps with the image. We hear a man speaking in American English saying:

> About ten years ago, we had one of our most important insights. And that was that the PC was going to become the digital hub for your digital life. What did that mean? Well, it meant that that's where you are going to put your digital photos. Where else are you going to put them? (quote from the film).

The *iCloud* icon appears and overlaps with the images of black workers dismantling computers. We continue to see images showing the e–waste deposit site, which appears more and more as a seemingly unlimited resource of precious metals that run beneath the culture of a "computerized society." The voiceover continues:

> So, we got a great solution for this problem. And we think the solution is our next big insight. Just like an iPhone, an iPad, and an iPod. And

> we want to move the digital hub, the center of your digital life into the iCloud. All these new devices have communications built in them and they can all talk to the Cloud whenever they want. And so, now, …now some people think the Cloud is just a hard disk in the sky, right? And you take a bunch of stuff and you put it in your Dropbox, or in your iDisk, or whatever, and it transfers it up to the Cloud and stores it, and you can drag whatever you want back out from your devices. So, everything happens automatically, and there is nothing new to learn. It just all works. It just works! (applause) Now, you might ask, 'Why should I believe them?' (quote from the film).

Suddenly, the voice is interrupted abruptly. The next clip shows a Google tour where one can virtually explore a data center owned by Google using the "Google Street View" tool. A voice–over explains where the Cloud is physically located: "In reality, it lives in our vast network of data centers that provide the foundation for a variety of online services" (quote from the film). The virtual tour takes the viewer inside several data centers, revealing the vast materiality that exists behind the online world. The space of the data center appears to be an immaculate, regulated, and normalized site, reinforcing the impression of the crude materiality of the unregulated, dirty and hazardous e–waste disposal site in Ghana.

Towards the end of *All That is Solid*, another two layers of text appear while scrolling fast over the image: one saying, "know your past" and another asking, "Is the Internet dead?" (quote from the film). The image continues to scroll over the text, accelerating until it becomes impossible to read the displayed information, thereby creating some kind of opacity for the reader's comprehension. During the final sequences of Henderson's film, the film takes us deep into a digital rendition of an underground gold mine rendered through a laser scanning process to produce a 3D animation or what is known as a 'point cloud' and other images of the e-waste site overlaid with bight, pixelated abstract shapes and fragments of text. This sequence then fades into endless abstract geometrical forms and fragments of images of palm trees: the desktop itself becomes a chaotic digital junk space. The image of the desktop finally turns into the 'screen saver', indicating that the user stopped using the computer, which is where the film ends.

The film, which occurs between a hard drive and the 'cloud', also leads us through the filmmaker's imagination. Somewhere along these lines, *All That is Solid* is an attempt to touch upon one of the most complex structural problems that take on a global reach in our time, that of racial capitalism. It presents us with a "flashpoint where capitalist crisis becomes racialised and where that racialisation seems to become a fix or an amplification in

response," as British sociologist Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018, 9) puts it. Linking this statement with the initial quote that opened this section, this film is not about resolving the "mystery of racial capitalism." Rather, it is about the shadows of histories of dispossession under capitalism (Bhattacharyya 2018, xi).

All That is Solid explores the potential of the desktop to bring together different materials from different sources to produce a documentary film without, however, delivering content that can be said to literally inform its viewers in a straightforward way. Instead, the different sources – text or images from Google's search engine or Henderson's personal hard drive – accumulate in a way that can be felt, as an "assault on the senses" (Agostinho 2020, 207). In her text "Cruel Intimacies" (2020), Daniela Agostinho uses this expression in relation to Richard Mosse's film installation *Incoming* (2007) to justify the affectiveness of using weaponized surveillance technology in the artist's work. She states that the use of this technology is supposed to make the viewers experience a "structure of feeling" that pertains to the ways in which "the subjects most vulnerable to war, climate change, and immiseration are targeted and dehumanized by the perceptual system of military power" (Agostinho 2020, 208).[74] In a similar fashion, Henderson has used his desktop to recreate a "structure of feeling" of a device that participates in the perpetuation of labor inequality, thereby taking part in a larger relation of affects resulting from racial capitalism. The film purports the ethos of racial capitalism not just by explaining what *it is* but also by evoking how *it is sensed*. Therefore, one could say that *All That is Solid* is a film about the technological sensorium of capitalism – with its fast–growing Internet infrastructure – and the way it is intimately intertwined with the processes of producing "expendable people and expendable regions," as Bhattacharyya

[74] Here, I would like to acknowledge Daniela Agostinho's (2020) statement of "discomfort" while facing Black people's suffering as my own. Agostinho states, "I therefore approach *Incoming* from a place of discomfort regarding how the suffering of Black and brown people is offered to me as 'the raw material of white pedagogy and enjoyment' and as 'an instrument to facilitate the ethical responses of others.' In her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), in a reflection on images of Black suffering, (...) Chritina Sharpe writes that ' these languages and the material conditions that they re/produce continue to produce our fast and slow deaths.' (...) Seeing and engaging with a work such as *Incoming* is a form of participation in the structures of seeing and feeling that the work solicits from me. At the same time, I am compelled to ask if engaging with this work can activate other affective grammars beyond those directly requested from me." (209–210). Following this line of thought, it is compelling to ask how can we "look differently" and what other modes of engagement with works such as Henderson's are possible? Even though there are already effective modes of engagement such as Agostinho's who proposes to approach moral, affective and material issues through the notion of "cruel intimacies" (2020, 211), I maintain that an engagement through the notion of paraesthetics can also be considered a way to arrive at a different place from that already destined to us as viewers. Paraesthetics, I would argue, addresses not only moments in the work where holes in the frames appear and destabilize the final object but it appears in the viewer's experience of the work as well, and in the way it destabilizes her own frames of reference, a movement that links the work to the world.

(2018, x) would put it. Moreover, the film gives us reasons to consider the ways in which the senses of viewers are invoked to reflect and react to the persistent effects of racial capitalism. The desktop is a symbol for liberal work, in the sense that it offers the possibility for "anyone" to work remotely for globally dispersed organizations in an individualized environment that becomes collective through the extension of the Internet. At the same time, it is also a symbol for liberal work in its most precarious sense.

5.2. The 'postcolonial wasteland'

What is happening in *All That is Solid* is a juxtaposition of several materials with different discursive formations that can be summarized as follows: on the one hand, it echoes the discourses associated with the promise of the Cloud as immaterial and independent from means of production of industrialization; while on the other hand, it reflects the material actuality of this immaterial utopian dream in the rendering of the "wasteland" that it inevitably produces. These are linked by two indissociable forces: capitalism and racialisation. We can address these two forces from a different logical approach than the one adopted by the film, for instance by telling the story of racial capitalism.

Drawing on Bhattacharyya's *Rethinking Racial Capitalism* (2018), we can see how this "is a story about imagining economic formations as demarcating the relations and walls between different groups of human beings" (Bhattacharyya 2018, 1). Based on the writings of Cedric J. Robinson (1983) and Kalyan Sanyal (2007), as well as other contemporary thinkers such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2020),[75] Bhattacharyya provides us with an understanding of the most recognizable features of racial capitalism, which will serve as a background to what is depicted in the film. With this approach, I seek to change the focus from the sensory experience in the film to how it incites us to reflect on how the viewers are always already implicated in the shaping of racial capitalism. In *All That is Solid*, the desktop is presented to us, as viewers, as an aesthetic form constituting an important component of Henderson's critical strategy. Utilizing the computer desktop is a paraesthetic critical strategy that the film adopts in order to bridge socio political issues and make them affective for the viewer. Paraesthetics can be seen as occurring in this context when a certain category

[75] It is already announced Gilmore's next book Change Everything: *Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition,* that will be published later in 2022.

of representation reaches its limits, provoking the filmmaker to seek alternative strategies for setting the work in motion again (cf. chapter 1). To some extent, the desktop resembles a 'ready–made' in the sense that it pertains to our everyday experience, however, it changes its orientation when regarded as an aesthetic tool within a work of art. It intends to be the model for a kind of para–experience similar to that of parafictions (cf. chapter 3), since we experience it *as if* we were looking at the user's steps on the desktop without interference, only to find that there are several visual effects at play.

"I try to use race," Bhattacharyya explains, "to indicate a mode of social organisation, the mode that categorises with unpassable boundaries" (Bhattacharyya 2018, 2). She suggests that, while race is a mode of categorization that references something that is natural to the body, that is constitutive of its nature and inextricable from it, it is also used as a problematic mode of categorization that signals things such as "activity or location or performance" that can also function as ways of fixing people – and not only Black people – in their 'places' (Bhattacharyya 2018, 2). In these terms, race – which includes all racialized people – functions as a boundary; as something that limits access, makes it difficult to cross social, economic and cultural boundaries, and that can be already applied, for example, in the establishment and enforcement of borders to control immigration. Bhattacharyya conceives racial capitalism as "a process by which capitalist formations create by default the edge–populations that serve as the other and limit of the working class" (Bhattacharyya 2018, 5). In order to break this down in a comprehensive manner, she proposes to look at this process from three perspectives: firstly, through Cedric J. Robinson's ground-breaking account of racial capitalism in *Black Marxism* (1983), where he notes that capitalism's underlying characteristic is a racialized division. In other words, capitalism is based on differentiation rather than equality. As Gilmore (2020) puts it "capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it."[76] Secondly, by following Kalyan Sanyal's (2007) account of the "postcolonial wasteland" so as to look into how capitalism creates spaces of 'noncapitalism' or underdeveloped spaces; and how these underdeveloped spaces represent capitalism's imperative to deem some spaces and populations as non–productive. Thirdly, she suggests revisiting the Frankfurt School and its continuing influence in thinking "the role of capitalist subjectivity/subjectification as always already enmeshed in processes of racialisation"

[76] For more on Gilmore's take on racial capitalism watch "Geographies of Racial Capitalism with Ruth Wilson Gilmore – An Antipode Foundation film" on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CS627aKrJI

(Bhattacharyya 2018, 9). Although all three perspectives are interrelated and cannot be isolated from each other, for the purpose of this discussion, we will focus on Sanyal's idea of the "postcolonial wasteland" which Bhattacharyya articulates with Achille Mbembe's (2003) famous account of "necropolitics."

The theoretical acknowledgement of the existence of postcolonial wastelands, Bhattacharyya (2018) explains, begins with Sanyal's recognition of a pronounced difference between a growing formal economy – which in principle should be capable of absorbing the total working population, and the fact that substantial populations continue to be excluded from economic participation (14). With the risk of leaving much of Sanyal's observations aside – in particular with regards to his explanation of how a number of people in the 'developing world' have been classified as proletarians but still have no employment prospects – the focus here is on capitalism's tendency to create permanent divisions among workers, resulting in the exclusion of one group via the temporary entry of another (15). This exclusion, it is argued, results in a 'redundant and surplus'[77] population that occupies a space outside the capitalist center, which is described by Sanyal as the postcolonial wasteland. Furthermore, capitalism not only produces but also relies on this wasteland – a parallel, non–capitalist space based on an informal economy operating underneath to meet the participants' short–term needs, or the so–called 'needs economy.' Referring to Sanyal, Bhattacharyya states,

> Just as the spaces of alleged underdevelopment arise as an outcome of development, the spaces of the informal economy arise as an element of the movement of the so–called formal economy. We should understand that 'informal economy' has come to signify all that cannot be named as 'productive' work but which, nevertheless, enters the money economy (Bhattacharyya 2018, 16).

As a starting point, we can observe that what is being described here is a process in which certain people are not regarded as a labor force, but are nonetheless entwined with capitalism on other levels. The notion of the wasteland suggests a way to think about the emergence of marginal segments of the economy as well as a way of thinking about the relationship

[77] Sanyal states, "The pre–capitalist subsistence sector is constituted as the 'other' of the capitalist sector, as what capital is not. The representation denies the subsistence sector any rationality of its own, subjects it to capitalist profit accounting and thereby renders a section of its inhabitants 'redundant and surplus'" (Sanyal 2007, 142).

between devalued social groups and their partial exclusion from the market economy.

This conception of wasteland is the critical "missing" link between the images we see in *All That is Solid* – missing in the sense that is not explained to us as viewers, but that it is latent all along. Not all wastelands, in the sense Sanyal thought it, are necessarily e–waste sites such as the one we see in the film. However, the conjunction or juxtaposition of waste and technology reinforces the idea of wasteland in *All That is Solid,* in both a material and a conceptual sense. We understand how the young black men we see dismantling the computers and other electronic devices are participants in capitalism's informal economy, an economy that, in the best scenario, will only serve their most immediate needs. Moreover, it is an economy that potentially engages in small scale entrepreneurship mirroring some aspects of the formal economy yet lacking any social or labor rights protection. In addition, because it strives to meet basic and immediate needs, it may as well engage in a variety of parallel illegal, semi–illegal and legal activities that endanger their lives. Another way wasteland dwellers risk lives and well–being results from the necessity to enter into spaces where formal economies are well established, either as internal or transnational migrants. People from the wasteland work with capitalism's waste; and at the same time, they are deemed as "human waste" by capitalism (McIntyre and Nast in Bhattacharyya 2018, 18).

Bhattacharyya introduces a relevant aspect when she observes that Mbembe's account of necropolitics resonates with Sanyal's vision of the postcolonial wasteland. But she also notes that "whereas Sanyal argues that it is the governmentality of development that disciplines this space, Mbembe suggests a more punitive and violent regime of power" (Bhattacharyya 2018, 17). In contrast to Foucault's conception of biopolitics and the conduct of political power that ensures life,[78] Mbembe's concept of necropolitics holds that politics is

[78] One example of where we find Foucault's articulation of his concept of biopolitics is in his book *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction* (1978) where he states: "In concrete terms, starting in the seventeenth century, this power over life evolved in two basic forms; (...). One of these poles–the first to be formed, it seems – centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines: an anatomo–politics of the human body*. The second, formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population*. (...) The setting up, in the course of the classical age, of this great bipolar technology–anatomic and biological, individualizing and specifying, directed toward the performances of the body, with attention to the processes of life characterized a power whose highest function was perhaps no longer to kill, but to invest life through and through" (Foucault 1978, 139).

not only the domain in which life is ensured. Rather, there are other domains in which politics can also operate as the "business of death" (Bhattacharyya 2018, 17). As an example, what Sanyal terms the "needs economy," Mbembe (2003) calls the "living death."[79] Bhattacharyya (2018) begins by explaining that biopolitics and necropolitics go hand–in–hand, and that capitalism's demarcation of zones of living death serves as a way to safeguard 'civilization' (17). She states,

> This is the map of the world made by colonial pasts and presents, in which the privileges of some spaces are built on the chaos and living death of others. Yet, at the same time, the spectre of necropolitics serves as a disciplining reminder and trace within the metropolis. The possibility of this other regime of power runs alongside the more genteel operations of biopolitics, most often in the association with racialised bodies that signal vulnerability to 'exceptional' violences and exclusions. In this way not only the consignment to living (or actual) death but also the suspension of legality and legal redress reveal the traces of a necropolitical order existing in the racialised crevices of metropolitan spaces. Treatment in economic transactions in accordance with the terms of judicial order, including when such terms deem exploitative relations as lawful, is among the central promises of capitalist freedoms. (...) This is one element of the progressive thrust of capitalist societies and has been a key claim and boon of bourgeois revolutions. Practices of racial subordination in the economic realm, alongside state violences, reveal a limit to the judicial order of economic contract. In this way, aspects of the necropolis may enter and exist alongside or within the biopolis and vice versa (Bhattacharyya 2018, 18–19).

The idea that the economic formation of the necropolis is closely linked with that of the biopolis; and that the two are bounded by differentiated geographical zones, is subverted in Henderson's film by juxtaposing both. The necropolis – captured by the lenses of the filmmaker in Agbogbloshie in Accra, the largest e–waste site on the planet, where people

[79] In his essay titled "Necropolitics," Mbembe concludes with the following explanation: "In this essay I have argued that contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death (necropolitics) profoundly reconfigure the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror. I have demonstrated that the notion of biopower is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death. Moreover I have put forward the notion of necropolitics and necropower to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death–worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*. The essay has also outlined some of the repressed topographies of cruelty (the plantation and the colony in particular) and has suggested that under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred" (Mbembe 2003, 39–40).

struggle to survive on a daily basis and life prospects are short; is directly linked with the biopolis – represented by "Google Street View" camera of Google's data center, one of the largest data centers on the planet, storing the memory of people with better life prospects, but whose well–being have also become increasingly reliant on the safeguard of this information. This juxtaposition signals the short–circuit of the materiality that runs beneath these two economies, beginning and ending with the exploitation of racialized workers mining valuable metals in postcolonial wastelands. Yet, Bhattacharyya also claims that "we might consider some of the exclusionary, punishing and demeaning actions of the biopolis as desperately defensive gestures against the potential loss of racialised privilege, a threat embodied in the arrival of necropolitans" (Bhattacharyya 2018, 19). The juxtaposition in *All That is Solid* can also be understood to reflect this fear since "those deemed to be 'necropolitans' become the repository for all manner of anxious symbolism" (Bhattacharyya 2018, 20). By pointing at the core of racial capitalism in our time, Henderson is also, in part at least, hinting at an anxiety expressed in response to changes that threaten previous racialized privileges, including employment and social security.

5.3. Hypercapitalism and contemporary art

At this moment, it is relevant to consider the context in which the film was produced and its intended audience. Certainly, by addressing the topic of racial capitalism with such a wide lens that covers two of the largest epicenters of necropolis and biopolis on a global scale, the addressed public is a global spectator. In fact, and perhaps unexpectedly to the filmmaker himself, the film actually reached out to a large audience – though most of these viewers reside in the Western world. In an e–mail exchange with Henderson, when I asked him about his experience in making the film, he wrote the following:

> *All That is Solid* has been exhibited in so many places I can't really remember the full list. I have literally had hundreds of screenings of that film. It has been shown in film festivals, artists–run spaces, museums, from small computer screens to huge cinema projections. One time, in Milan, it was presented in this enormous cinema with a very old fashioned and beautiful kind of theatre/opera stage and seats – the screen was huge and my desktop looked so weird and out of place blown up so large on the cinema screen. (...)

> I made *All That is Solid* at the poorest moment in my life (economically speaking) I was absolutely broke in Paris, living without a penny at the cité des arts in Montmartre, – I was accepted to exhibit in the Salon de Montrouge, and they suggested that I make a new work for the show, but they had no money to pay for production – I managed to win a prize before the salon opened, to give me extra money to aid production for the exhibition... I was awarded 500 euros. With this money I paid my rent at la cité and probably had a few beers, then I decided to make a brand new video by recycling old pieces of footage that I had shot for my last film *Lettres du Voyant*. That film had been paid for by Le Fresnoy, but as I was no longer there I was faced with the impossibility of making films without money and support. So I sat at my desktop for hours and hours and just trawled through my hard drive, like it was a waste ground itself. And then I started to look online, as I was always fascinated with this idea that the Internet could be understood as a physical space in which we could dig for information – like an archaeologist would do – and anyway, this film was supposed to be a critique of how capitalism was based upon creating waste in the sense that new commodities need to be constantly invented and this in many ways is what we call progress, especially when related to technology – this whole argument about Apple having obsolescence built into their products so they eventually malfunction and break or get old very fast and have to be constantly renewed or updated. So there I was digging through my own trash, and the trash of the internet – searching for some fragments to make a film with – because I had nothing else and no other means of doing it. And in the end, it was the film that made me the most money as an artist. Just a collage of rubbish in the end really (Henderson, quote from a personal email exchange).

It is curious to note that *All That is Solid,* and the topic that it covers, would be one with the economic outcomes it had and still continues to have, as it is such a successful artwork. In a way, this outcome might even be revealing of the topic it addresses. It is widely known that capitalism is constantly producing and reproducing itself, and one way it does so is by integrating any opposing critique. As Bhattacharyya puts it, "[b]etter by far to think of capitalism as highly differentiated and opportunistic in its formations" (Bhattacharyya 2018, 19). Perhaps Bhattacharyya did not mean opportunistic in the sense used here, but it can be considered it in this context – the context of contemporary art. Hito Steyerl once posed the question: "Why and for whom is contemporary art so attractive?" and points to the hypothesis that "the production of art presents a mirror image of post–democratic forms of hypercapitalism that look set to become the dominant political post–Cold War paradigm" (Steyerl 2020). At first, the answer is not obvious, but perhaps breaking it down can give us a better understanding of what it is that she is referring to and how to relate it to Henderson's

film and the context of its production. By post–democratic, Steyerl is referring to contemporary contexts in which economic interests and multinational organizations have more political influence and authority than governments. With the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Cold War in 1989, as well as the advent of the US as the world's dominant superpower, we enter into a stage of what Steyerl is calling hypercapitalism. According to Steyerl, contemporary art is a mirror of the social and political context that has permitted capitalism's growth and success all over the globe (cf. chapter one and six). Steyerl has become well known not only as a visual artist, but also as an art's commentator for e–flux – a prominent online journal of contemporary art. In a short but incisive text, "Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post–Democracy", Steyerl pinpoints contemporary art's conformity with racial capitalism. She explains that "[c]ontemporary art is no unworldly discipline nestled away in some remote ivory tower. On the contrary, it is squarely placed in the neoliberal thick of things" (Steyerl 2010). Here, Steyerl contends that it is not possible to separate contemporary art from certain policies applied to maintain areas of underdevelopment. To make this case, she is looking inward, into art's politics through its own labor politics, and questioning its place within a broader context of capitalism. "What is the function of art within disaster capitalism?" Steyerl asks. "Contemporary art feeds on the crumbs of a massive and widespread redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich, conducted by means of an ongoing class struggle from above. It lends primordial accumulation a whiff of postconceptual razzmatazz" (Steyerl 2020). Steyerl's tone of writing is informed by her own practice as an artist which directly reflects on flashpoints where hypercapitalism becomes evident or problematic.[80] In fact, she writes that contemporary art encourages the growth of "predatory economies" which "are often fueled by internal oppression, class war from above, and radical shock and awe policies. (...) It is involved in mining for raw materials for dual–core processors. It pollutes, gentrifies, and ravishes. It seduces and consumes, then suddenly walks off, breaking your heart" (Steyerl 2010). She thus analyzes how implicated art is in the transformation of power dynamics on a global scale and how deeply embedded it is within capitalism. Capitalism's opportunism is not a

[80] See, for instance, Hito Steyerl's video *In Free Fall* (2010). This is a work that contrasts with other documentaries produced in the aftermath of the global financial crisis by avoiding straight–forward didacticism. As an alternative, it mirrors the dramatic nature of contemporary culture by showcasing a fusion of performance, animation, found–footage of airplane explosions and television science clips with information about climate change and recycling.

deviation of this form of art but inherent in its structure. Despite the fact that political art continues to represent so–called local situations across the globe and systematically displays inequality and suffering, the nuances of its own production and distribution remain largely obscure. Steyerl writes "[t]he art field is a space of wild contradiction and phenomenal exploitation. It is a place of power mongering, speculation, financial engineering, and massive and crooked manipulation. But it is also a site of commonality, movement, energy, and desire" (Steyerl 2010).

5.4. Database as a 'structure of feeling'

> As a cultural form, database represents the world as a list of items and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause–and–effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world (Manovich 1999, 85).

Database, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, can be defined as a large amount of structured information stored in a computer system in such a way that it can be easily located. The citation above shows yet another way to understand the meaning of database. Russian media theorist Lev Manovich considers it to be a "symbolic form." Drawing on Ervin Panofsky's analysis of linear perspective as a 'symbolic form' of modernity, Manovich writes that the database is a new symbolic form of the computer age that disrupts or competes with traditional narratives and represents a way of understanding ourselves and our world that is entirely new (Manovich 1999, 81). In Manovich's account, "if after the death of God (Nietzche), the end of grand Narratives of Enlightenment (Lyotard) and the arrival of the Web (Tim Berners–Lee) the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as a database" (Manovich 1999, 81). Hence, Manovich begins to draw links between the database and poetics, aesthetics, and ethics and sets the stage for considering the database as an alternative form of narrative production.

Considering the database as a symbolic form means understanding it as the new form of cultural expression that competes with the dominance of the novel and cinema's traditional narratives. Manovich observes how the database aggravated a disruption in the

conventional narrative, offering an alternative non–linear form (since it does not follow the usual narrative arc: beginning–development–conclusion). This chapter, focussing on Henderson's desktop documentary, has identified several moments where the cultural logic of the database surfaces and becomes dominant over conventional narrative forms of filmmaking. In effect, *All that is Solid* has the particularity of using the computer not only as the apparatus through which the film is composed, but also as the very setting for the story to unfold, a story that reflects back on the materiality of the desktop itself.[81] As we have discussed above, the formal accumulation of references throughout the film is closely linked to the logic of capitalism, where the idea of accumulating wealth is central, just as the database as a symbolic form is also inevitably linked to capitalism. When Manovich writes that the database is the symbolic form of the computer age, he is referring to the period that has initiated with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and with a climate of hyper/racial capitalism that has grown ever since the aftermath of the Cold War. Hence, it is possible to argue that, in the film, the database assumes its symbolic form and becomes the vehicle through which it is possible to access sensibly the set of relations, in other words, the "structure of feeling"[82] implicit in actual practices of racial capitalism that are often obscured from a Western's perspective.

All the information the film presents to us has been found in and taken from the Internet's database or Henderson's personal database. Sound and images are juxtaposed and collide over the desktop's background, building up a particular discursive constellation throughout the film. In an interview, filmmaker and artist Harun Farocki speaks about his own method of montage that resonates with the method in Henderson's *All That is Solid*.

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[81] As an aesthetic approach it has several precedents, three of which I may cite as framing it: Nick Briz's "Apple Computers" (2013), an investigative documentary into the proprietary restrictions governing the use of Apple products; "Noah", Walter Woodman & Patrick Cederberg, (2013) a Canadian short–film about a high school student who hacks into his girlfriend's Facebook account; and "Grosse Fatigue", (2013) a dense audiovisual work that combines spoken word poetry and the desktop unfolding images from computer´s folders by French artist Camille Henrot.

[82] "Structures of feeling" is a well–known theoretical trade mark of Raymond Williams who introduced this phrase in "Preface to Film" (1954). More recently, in a book with the same title edited by Devika Sharma and Frederik Tygstrup (2015), we see the renewed relevance of these terms within the field of affect studies. In the introduction of the book, the editors make explicit that the principle that chart structures of feeling is essentially a "distributive phenomenon, an assemblage of small parts of different provenance, which make up, due to an internal system of relations, an unmistakable phenomenon, a feeling with a verifiable and identifiable structure" (Sharma and Tygstrup 2015, 5). Here too, the aim is to identify the culturally and socially distributed presence of affect that is associated with the database, and to point out the importance of the database as an affective infrastructure of our everyday life.

Farocki explains it as follows,

> This idea of not saying "A or B," but "A and B" is somehow important to my own conception of soft montage. When Deleuze read Godard, he had this idea that images in his films are not excluding each other, but just building up a relationship between them during a specific film. This is of course a different approach to images beyond iconoclasm. On one hand, there is a soft montage, because there is the presence of several images in the same film that relate to each other in a soft way. On the other hand, you have one film in the space and a different film next to it and they are interrelating. It is not a soft montage, but more like a battle, it is cacophonic. I don't know if there is an equivalent for images – like "caco–images" (laugh). In this sense, montage can also be hard between certain parts of the work (Interview with Harun Farocki *in* "Senses of Cinema" 2016).

Farocki describes "soft montage" as the sequence of images within a film that relate to each other in a 'soft' way, producing meaning not in an antagonistic fashion but by building up relations between them. On the other side of the spectrum, Farouki proposes that instead of a "soft montage", we would face something more like a "battle" where several sequences playing at the same time in the same space struggle with each other to produce meaning. Similarly, images struggle for meaning within Henderson's desktop where several films are allowed to play simultaneously and at times, "battle" each other for attention: they overlap and are superimposed on each other; often "competing" for attention by means of textual information (annexes: image 14). Hence, in the desktop, as in a database, 'soft montage' is replaced by 'hard montage.' In Henderson's film, the biopolis and the necropolis meet; they collide on his desktop. These spaces that in the "real world" occupy the beginning and the end of a long chain of production and circulation, are correlated, reticulated, and ciphered together. This is the extensive and exhausting materiality that Henderson tries to hold on, put together, and edit: filtering, scanning, sorting, and selecting creating a new layered or uneven geography.

The database in Henderson's film gains relevance and predominance, thereby replacing the usual narrative within a continuous change of paradigm. Within the film, the database works as a collection of items: sounds, images and texts from which Henderson can draw and which he can use as raw material. The database appears to the director as a collection of items allowing him to perform several limited operations on his desktop such as view, navigate and search. This gives us, as viewers, a very different experience from that of other

documentary films. It is precisely because this experience is so different that Manovich addresses the database as "cultural form" of its own, and its predominance in culture calls for an understanding of its emerging poetics, aesthetics, and ethics. The new digital media operations we have become familiar with by navigating through the display of the desktop may further signal the power structures and distribution systems governing the image economy from data centers to e–waste sites, where the degree of access to a given site also reveals differences in the governance of space. Since Tim Berners–Lee 'invented' the Internet, Manovich explains, the world appears "as an endless and unstructured collection of images, text and other data, of which the database becomes the only possible way to access it" (Manovich 1999, 81). Databases allow for the elements of narrative to be rearranged virtually endlessly. This is what we witness in Henderson's desktop documentary: an access to the world through the database where the narrative form of the documentary is subjected to, and influenced by, the possibilities of the desktop to mediate the world "outside."

Chapter 6

Reconsidering a Theory of Documentality in Contemporary Art

> "There are always holes in the wall through which we can slip and the unexpected sneak in" (Kracauer as quoted in *The Empty Center* 1998)

The Empty Center (1998) is Hito Steyerl's first documentary film. A relatively conventional documentary in comparison to her more recent films, however, already driven by the same desire to subvert documentary boundaries she appears to more explicitly pursue in subsequent work. Over a period of eight years (1990–1998) Steyerl recorded the transformation of the surroundings of Potsdamer Platz and the Reichstag, an area in the center of Berlin that became vacant after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In the days before World War II, Potsdamer Platz was the heart of the city, its center of power. During the Cold War, the area was heavily mined, obstructed between the borders separating East and West. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the area between the walls, the empty margins of the border, opened and the center reclaimed. In the film, the re–opening of the square stands for the intersection between historical and modern–day conflicts and is the starting point for multiple nonlinear storylines which are narrated through fragments of interviews, archival footage and recordings of demonstrations. In the years following German reunification, international companies rebuilt Potsdam Square, and as a result, people who inhabited this area were evicted to the outskirts of the city. *The Empty Center* explores this history of exclusion, particularly against immigrants and minorities, which is associated with the development of a powerful capital. The film therefore follows the urban renewal processes that took place in Berlin's center, relating this event with two historical events that shed light on the theme of borders: the Berlin Congress of 1878 and the Berlin Conference of 1884. During these events, taking place in the surrounding area of the square, colonial Germany defined new borders for the Balkans and for Africa. By focusing on Potsdam Square, Steyerl conflates a series of events spanning from 1884 to 1998 in order to

investigate global power shifts and how borders are simultaneously deconstructed and rebuilt in the process. The rigid walls of borders are portrayed as fragile structures that become more porous as they are constantly demolished and rebuilt, adapting to different political scenarios. The film ends with the citation from German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer opening this section: "There are always holes in the wall through which we can slip and the unexpected sneak in" (Kracauer as quoted in the film). Narrated alongside images of holes in the Berlin Wall, Kracauer's citation seems to suggest that there is always the possibility of crossing borders and that, at some point, it may lead to something unexpected, eventually, the possibility of changing ingrained systems of dominance.

6.1. Introducing a theory of documentality from *The Empty Center*

In Steyerl's film, the center that it refers to, the center of Berlin – a representation of the center of institutional power – appears not empty but saturated with historical, social and political meaning. Emptiness, void or the unpresentable, however, lies between the borders that define this center (or power, in general terms). Perhaps it is possible to argue that the film's intention is to present emptiness as a form to cultivate a critical attitude as well as a form of paraesthetic self–reflexivity. Steyerl's critical approach is based on confronting the limits that surround this center/power by, for example, incorporating everyday people as expert witnesses on German architecture and identity, such as her friends Dong Yang and Huan Zhu, who appear multiple times in the film commenting on the changes they have seen take place in Berlin's center. "Little narratives," as Jean–François Lyotard (1979)[83] would refer to their statements, that are introduced in the film to disturb the "grand narrative" that mobilizes the destruction and reconstruction of this center. Steyerl focuses on the plurality,

[83] In his seminal book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Lyotard states: "We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives – we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse. But as we have just seen, the little narrative [*petit recit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science" (Lyotard 1979, 60). David Carroll, in his book *Paraesthetics* (1987), explains the necessity of little narratives in Lyotard's work as follows: "A disbelief in metanarrative forces science to legitimate itself on its own terms (in terms of performativity) and also provokes an explosion of non–totalizable 'little narratives' – the smaller and more diversified, in Lyotard's view, the better – whose conflictual multiplicity and heterogeneity resist all forms of totalization. Narrative, at least as long as it remains 'little', is taken by Lyotard to be a kind of open, highly mobile form that, in each instance, determines on its own how the various elements it contains or refers to will be interrelated. The little narrative is, in this sense, a kind of "zero degree" of differentiating discourse – the form discourse takes to express diversity and unresolved conflict and thus, resists homogenization" (Carroll 1987, 158).

heterogeneity, and self–regulating characteristics of what she names "disadvantaged majorities'" narratives (Steyerl in Archey 2021, 184) – essentially describing daily life and social exchange as an antidote to grand narratives. In other words, the aim of using storylines narrated as fragments is to empty all established historical discourse of all exterior content and determination. Karen Archey (2021) writes in a text on Steyerl's work that,

> (...) this is a strategy that dovetails with the tenets of institutional critique, which hold that because the institutions charged with mediating the national narrative tend to only do so in a manner that supports the status quo, critique is necessary in the form of alternative histories that are not always favorable to the identity of the state" (Archey 2021, 187).

The attempt with this critical strategy is to reduce discourse to what is essential to it, to the point where it can act autonomously and determine the relations between its components. Building "alternative stories" is part of the critical work Steyerl assigns to herself as an artist in particular when adopting documentary aesthetics. Documentary, just like other forms of critique, for Steyerl, can be "as much a tool of governance as of that resistance with which it is often assumed to be aligned"[84] (Steyerl 2009b, 14). As a tool of resistance, a large part of her documentary practice focuses on strategies to locate the "empty center" of (institutional) power, the void that cannot be shown in its entirety but only through its self–reflexive manifestations. In her approach to power, Steyerl draws on her experience as a documentary filmmaker, which has prepared her to work with as well as subvert historical documentation. Documentary imagery, hence, constitutes a model for a transgressive critical activity in her work. Historical materials are captured and deconstructed in order to understand how our present is defined by our past. Steyerl's work documents the violence perpetrated in the name of governance, and how it is predominantly waged against minorities living outside of the center. This is a kind of critical attitude that later would lead her to propose a theory of documentality.

[84] In her text, "The Institution of Critique" (2009), Steyerl states: "Freedom consists in accepting that authority should not be questioned. Thus, this form of criticism produces a very ambivalent and governable subject; it is as much a tool of governance as of that resistance with which it is often assumed to be aligned" (Steyerl 2009, 14). I am taking the idea that critique can be used both to rule and to resist ruling into documentary form. Though it has not yet been clarified how this is the case for documentary, it will become apparent as we proceed through this chapter and as we discuss the idea of documentality.

With her practice, Steyerl has always been simultaneously interested in finding a place for the documentary form within the field of art from both an artistic as well as a theoretical point of view. After the heat of Documenta 11 curated by Okwui Enwezor in 2002, mentioned in the first chapter,[85] Steyerl (2003a, b) asserted the need for a theory of documentality. In other words, she advocated for a set of principles that would provide the grounds from which to think through the phenomenon of documentary practice in contemporary art, one that is self-reflexive, and critical of contemporary art's own participation in the systems of violence and exploitation that it often claims to resist, one that understands documentary to either establish or subvert claims to truth. Steyerl notes that "[a]n interest in the formal specific characteristics of the documentary form in the art field has only recently begun, (...) but has hardly taken place yet at the theoretical level" (Steyerl 2003b). Her theory of documentality was one of her first steps to fill in this theoretical gap. Nearly twenty years later, much work has been done in this field parallel to artistic endeavors. Efforts to acknowledge the documentary within the field of contemporary art have been made by different authors arriving from various fields of practice.[86] Yet, a theory of documentality that is useful for understanding the phenomenon of documentary practices within contemporary art, their capacity for self-reflexivity and criticality (not just towards their subjects but also the institution that produces them), is still outstanding.

In what follows, I intend to pursue what is fundamental to this field of practice from documentality's point of view. With the intention of further exploring this theoretical field, Steyerl's theory of documentality will be unpacked, revealing how it feeds off notions such as "politics of truth" and "governmentality"; also, it will be discussed how her theory cannot be completely dissociated from another theory of documentality that studies the formation of social objects (Ferraris 2013); and a connection between Steyerl's notion of documentality and the concept of dissensus (Rancière 2010) will be drawn to illustrate how documentary forms can pertain to the aesthetic paradigm of contemporary art.

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[85] See chapter 2 "The Moving Compositions of the Real" where the curatorial work of Owkui Enwezor for Documenta 11 is mentioned.

[86] *The Green Room, Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, edited by Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl, contains contributions to this field of studies including authors such as Olivier Lugon, Okwui Enwezor, T. J. Demos, Vít Havránek, Carles Guerra, Jan Verwoert and Hito Steyerl. This collection of texts is one of the main sources for the present study on the documentary form in contemporary art as a cultural phenomenon.

6.2. Documentality as a "politics of truth"

Two texts by Steyerl (2003 a, b) mention the notion of documentality: "Documentarism as Politics of Truth" (2003 a) and "Politics of Truth: Documentarism in the Art Field" (2003 b). These texts mirror each other and they utilize the same definition of documentality:

> Documentality describes the permeation of a 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 also describe a critical stance towards these forms (Steyerl 2003 a, b).

In her definition of documentality Steyerl is pointing at two different functions of the documentary: one correlated with procedures for the production of truth and the other taking on a critical stance and problematizing how these procedures are produced. The first focuses on illustrating how the documentary form can be associated with procedures for the production of truth. The second text, by contrast, highlights the critical function of the documentary situated within the field of contemporary art. Although Steyerl separates the focus of attention between the two texts, she does not see the functions of documentary – i.e. establishing *versus* criticizing truth claims – as binary oppositions. Instead, they appear dialectically related. "In both cases," Steyerl explains, "the function of the documentary corresponds to that of governmental techniques (...) [because it is] a matter of structuring the field of possible actions, i.e. suggesting, proposing, evoking, preventing or reshaping actions (or attitudes)" (Steyerl 2003a). Even if Steyerl assumes two different functions of the documentary that change according to the context of production, they cannot be completely separated because "[w]ith the import of documentary forms into the art field, new versions of the classical problems of the documentary appeared there too" (Steyerl 2003a). Thus, one of the questions that can be asked as of now is: what are the classical problems of the documentary, how do they relate to the art field, and what kind of urgency do they gain within this context?

As we can see in Steyerl's definition, documentality draws upon a fundamental operating idea, that of a "politics of truth" as Michel Foucault (1980) thought it. One of the motivations that led Foucault to work through his notion of politics of truth in specific

practices such as science or politics, was his suspicion of claims of universal truths.[87] This suspicion does not mean that he rejected them. Rather, it means that, throughout his career, Foucault responded to his suspicion by consistently historicizing and examining the social function of abstract concepts such as truth and linking knowledge to power (Rabinow 1984, 4). A focus of Foucault's study is to identify the moment when a specific discourse was created and adopted, and where these discourses began seeking and telling their assertions of truth.[88] In a written interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, Foucault (1984) recaps his understanding of the notion of truth as follows:

> ...truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault 1980, 131).

From Foucault's statement we can infer two related propositions that should not work as assertions but as hypotheses. One, is that "truth" can be seen as emerging out of a system of ordered procedures for producing, regulating, distributing, and circulating statements. And, the other is that truth and power are linked, in a circular relationship, to a set of procedures and systems of power, what Foucault names "a 'regime' of truth" (Foucault 1980, 133). Consequently, probing regimes of truth, or in other words, asking how conventions are established, should work as a way of, first, "detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time" (Foucault 1980, 133); and, secondly, as a way of reconfiguring this power into a new form. In short, the politics of truth entails a set of rules that define the production of "truth" within a certain context and through specific means, which should, in principle, help to distinguish

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[87] Paul Rabinow makes a point about Foucault's suspicion of universal truths in his introduction to *The Foucault Reader* (Rabinow 1984, 4).

[88] See, for instance, Foucault's studies on the clinic (1963), the prison (1975), and on sexuality (1976).

true from false statements. Steyerl's notion of documentality tests the propositions put forward by Foucault by applying them to the documentary form for "it is also a necessity in this area to develop procedures for separating true statements from false ones as well as preferred procedures for staging and producing true statements" (Steyerl 2003a).

In using the word 'documentary,' Steyerl is, at this point, referring to a type of documentary imagery that is largely conventional and that has been defined by media scholar Carl Plantinga (2005) as an "asserted veridical representation." Plantinga states,

> I propose that the typical or usual documentary film be conceived of as an asserted veridical representation, that is, as an extended treatment of a subject in one of the moving image media, most often in narrative, rhetorical, categorical, or associative form, in which the film's makers openly signal their intention that the audience (1) take an attitude of belief toward relevant propositional content (the "saying" part), (2) take the images, sounds, and combinations thereof as reliable sources for the formation of beliefs about the film's subject and, in some cases, (3) take relevant shots, recorded sounds, and/or scenes as phenomenological approximations of the look, sound, and/ or some other sense or feel of the pro–filmic event (the "showing" part) (Plantinga 2005, 114).

In general, Plantinga proposes that the conventional documentary filmmaker produces a film with the intention of providing reliable images of a given subject and counting on the expectations of the viewers to believe in the truthiness of such images supported by text, sound and narration. Films that follow the conventional documentary form, as a general rule, aim to convey a certain authenticity and "true" element of social life.[89] The notion of the trace is also relevant in documentary films for it "communicates some phenomenological aspect of the subject, from which the spectator might reasonably be expected to form a sense of that phenomenological aspect and/or form true beliefs about that subject" (Plantinga 2005, 111).

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[89] In a similar vein, Trinh T. Minh–ha offers an in–depth, as well as sarcastic, portrait of how, in Western culture, documentaries are generally perceived. Paraphrasing Minh–ha (1991), the conventional documentary has grown out of a general need to educate the population (32); it was considered as an ideal medium for social persuasion due to its capacity for directly observing life (33). Documentary, in this sense, is largely understood to be an open window to the real world, for capturing life as it happens, and for its affinity with knowledge. Therefore, documentaries tackle "real people and real problems from the real world" (Minh-ha 1991, 33), ideally without interference and never moving away from the factual. In this sense, documentaries are honest and authentic, not manipulative. They are faithful to their own ability to document – for example, when sound synchronization was available it became promptly naturalized within documentary culture. They offer minimal or no editing so the resulting images can be as close as possible to reality in order to avoid distortions in perception. Wide–angle shots are preferable to close–ups, which are avoided for their partiality while the former are claimed to be more inclusive and mirror more accurately a subject and her surroundings in a given moment (34). Hence the formula: documentary is the presentation of actual facts (35).

Meaning that certain images are used as traces to implicitly or directly assert truthful propositions. Hence, the conventional documentary film can be regarded as an "asserted veridical representation" resulting from a standardized procedure for the production of truth defined by a set of rules or a system of beliefs that are accepted by an entire community of filmmakers, producers, subjects and viewers. It takes a community to decide the rules of documentary filmmaking, so the practice becomes conventional. However, even what is considered conventional documentary is based on "ever–changing practices depending on the documentary mode, history, context, and so forth" (Plantinga 2005, 115), which indicates that there is not only one way of being conventional when it comes to documentary practices.[90].

Returning to Steyerl's (2003b) text, she observes that conventional documentary images have historically been closely associated with technologies of control, surveillance, normalization, and other police techniques, which explains why colonial and fascist regimes created their own kinds of images that were closely related to the ethnographic gaze, racist politics and militarism. She states, "[p]hotographs of colonial peoples circulating around the world contributed to the spread of colonial 'knowledge,' just as fascist 'documentalities' endeavored to make Soviet prisoners of war, among others, appear 'subhuman'" (Steyerl 2003b). Through these examples, Steyerl intends to reveal how documentary can be used as an instrument of government control through its ability to "produce" truth. Thus, the concept of governmentality comes to the fore.

Governmentality is an operating concept within Foucault's larger analysis of the politics of truth and understood as a specific way of exercising power. In one of his lectures taught at the Collège de France (1977–1978), he defines it as follows:

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[90] The fact that there are different conventions associated with the documentary form and that they change according to time and context, complicates things if we wish to acknowledge a practice of "non–conventional" documentary. Plantinga adds that the characterization of documentary as an asserted veridical representation will not fit well the poetic mode of documentary, which uses images to an aesthetic more than informational intent. And for that reason, the poetic mode is less prominent in conventional documentary films than the expository or observational modes, for example (Plantinga 2005, 115). A documentary can cover a wide range of films in various moving–image formats, so there are a wide range of documentaries. Bill Nichols proposes six subcategories or modes of the documentary: expository, observational, poetic, participatory, reflexive, and performative. Modes of expression vary according to fashion and critical practice. But documentaries continue to be made in each of these modes, which makes them viable in mapping the documentary terrain. For more information about Bill Nichols' modes of representation see *Introduction to Documentary* (2001).

> First, by "governmentality" I understand the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument. Second, by "governmentality" I understand the tendency, the line of force, that for a long time, and throughout the West, has constantly led towards the pre–eminence over all other types of power— sovereignty, discipline, and so on—of the type of power that we can call "government" and which has led to the development of a series of specific governmental apparatuses (*appareils*) on the one hand, [and, on the other] to the development of a series of knowledges (*savoirs*). Finally, by "governmentality" I think we should understand the process, or rather, the result of the process by which the state of justice of the Middle Ages became the administrative state in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and was gradually "governmentalized" (Foucault 2009, 108–109).

According to Foucault's definition of governmentality, it would be the "truth" that constitutes the fundamental political problem, rather than their falsity, namely the way in which forms of producing truth generate, enforce, or circumvent forms of government. Along these lines, Steyerl argues that documentaries can also secure the role of governmental structures and function as a governmental interface between power and subjectivation (Steyerl 2003b). Therefore, it is to this interface between governmentality and documentary truth production, or to this type of documentality, that Steyerl first directs her attention.

Steyerl offers as an example of how a procedure for the production of truth can take shape when she mentions the approach of the Bush administration with regards to the proof of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in 2002 and 2003. She states,

> 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 (Steyerl 2003a).

What Steyerl is reflecting on in her example is how a justification for war was played out by political figures[91] partly by having added interpretative material over indexical imagery to assert or to prove the existence of weapons of mass destruction in a foreign territory. Steyerl notes that even if other agencies such as the UN agency *UNMovic* used stronger and more rigorous procedures to determine what was the actual situation on site – such as comparing hypotheses based on photo evidence and witness testimonies with measurements and information obtained on the ground – the Bush administration's narrative prevailed justifying an invasion of Iraq's territory. For Steyerl, "[t]he truth politics of the US administration is a perfect example of the documental interplay between power, knowledge and the organization of documents" (Steyerl 2003a). In this context, the production of documents is thus defined as a function of government politics.

Documents derive from legal discourses and represent a technology of truth, which indicates, as we can see through Steyerl's example, that a vast documentary apparatus becomes an essential part of normalizing technologies, as Foucault would put it. At this point, it is important not to confuse documents with documentary,[92] but it is nevertheless relevant to acknowledge their confluence within this context of truth production. We can see here how the concept of "politics of truth" operates in order to identify a certain type of documental formation which helps to recognize the techniques and procedures for producing and determining truth within a certain context. This is, effectively, a type of documentality that streams out of documents produced in the field of social reality. Documentality, in this sense, has developed its own course in the theoretical field. For Maurizio Ferraris (Ferraris 2013), it leads to an ontology of the document. His theory of documentality – which expands

[91] At the time Steyerl was writing, in 2003, this event in American politics was highly controversial and had implications on a global scale. Perhaps today we could find other examples of "politics of truth" associated with more recent events such as the COVID19 pandemic and how governments dealt with information about people's health and how certain forms of governmentality were adopted to fight the spread of the virus. Nevertheless, Steyerl's example is still valid and makes sense to bring up again for it involves the interpretation of images, and their turning into documents that should prove a certain reality on the ground.

[92] Plantinga insists that we should make a distinction between documents and documentary films and that they should not be regarded as equal or interchangeable terms. Plantinga states, "Like many before him, Currie confuses a document with a documentary. A photographic document can be a physical trace, and documentaries often make use of such traces. There are very few documentaries, however, that can legitimately be said to function as traces" (Plantinga 2005, 108). However, for the purpose of defining this field of documentality it is important to recognize their etymological provenance.

beyond the documentary film – integrates the historical condition and circumstances of exhibition that make a document become an artwork or vice versa (Ferraris 2013, 279).

6.3. Documentality as a theory of social objects

In his book *Documentality: Why is it Important to Leave Traces* (2013), Ferraris offers a theory of documentality departing from an ontology of social objects, which also draws on Foucault's notion of governmentality (Ferraris 2013, 271). Ferraris states,

> Documentality (...) comes to be the foundation of what Foucault called "governmentality," and of its developments in biopolitics. (...) The notion of documentality aims to capture and recognize the power of bureaucracy; bureaucracy is not an accident, and the paperwork is indispensable to live and to have power. Biopolitics, the power of life over death, certainly can become more capillary, but it can only do so only through the increasing sophistication of the bureaucratic machinery, of the systems of registering and tracing, which is where (...) we look for the essence of politics (Ferraris 2013, 271).

Ferraris restates the idea that governmental power can only work with the development and application of bureaucratic machinery, systems of registration and tracing. As an example, Ferraris considers the fact that European colonialism had a greater and more devastating impact on Africa, America and Oceania than it did on Asia, which is largely attributable to the pre-existing bureaucratic structures in Asia. Furthermore, drawing on Carl Schmitt (1958),[93] Ferraris also mentions that totalitarianism and fascist regimes, including Hitler's rise to power, has been interpreted as the outcome of bureaucratic power (Ferraris 2013, 288–289). Under this light, the formation of archives, among other forms of bureaucratic organization, contributes to the alignment of institutions, procedures, analysis and reflections that allow a specific and sophisticated form of documentality to be exercised.

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[93] This point has been recognized by Max Weber whose student Carl Schmitt interpreted as follows, "In a system that is modern, which is to say industrialized, highly organized and specialized, based on the division of labour, legality means a determinate method of offices' operating and functioning. The procedures for putting affairs though, the routine and habits of the office, the partially predictable functioning, the care to preserve this sort of structure and the need to have 'cover' against the calls of responsibility: all these features belong to the complex of legality, conceived in functional–bureaucratic terms. If a sociologist like Max Weber can say 'bureaucracy is our destiny,' then we ought to add: legality is the way this bureaucracy works" (Schmitt 1958, 444).

According to Ferraris (2013), what characterizes our contemporary documentality, in contrast to times of totalitarian regimes, is the fact that citizens feel more controlled and sense the multiple pressures of power. He is referring to the power exerted by technically advanced states, which have invested great energy and resources into creating complex bureaucratic systems such as identification or evidence gathering, as well as speeding up the process of executing complex bureaucratic actions (271). By considering how documents are produced, Ferraris' notion of documentality shares a realistic perspective that seeks to capture and recognize the influence of bureaucracy on social life and everyday experience. Ferraris applies a classification system to identify, categorize, and order several types of documents that exist in the world, namely he applies a taxonomy that distinguishes between social, physical and ideal objects to understand the deep–structure within which documents operate. The bulk of his theoretical work focuses on documents as "social objects" of a very peculiar sort. In contrast to natural objects and ideal objects, he defines social objects as follows:

> Unlike natural and ideal objects, social objects exist only insofar as people think that they do. Without human beings, mountains would stay as they are, and numbers would continue to have the properties they do, but it would make no sense to talk of offenses and mortgages, of viscounts or corporals, of artworks or pornographic material" (Ferraris 2013, 33).

Accordingly, social objects exist in space and time, and are dependent on conceptual schemes; they are conceived in the mind of a social subject and made manifest, or inscribed with significance, in the external world. Ferraris maintains that social objects obey one constitutive rule "Object = Inscribed Act" (Ferraris 2013, 43), meaning that every social object depends on, or results in an inscribed act, which is ultimately a document. Among documents' first striking features, according to this theory, is that they underpin every social object, be it a contract, money, or family relations. Whether documents exist intrinsically or each is part of an ever–growing chain of documents, to become documents, inscriptions have to be socially relevant; and most importantly, have to be recognised as valid often by a procedure of document production (165). For that reason, Feraris develops an epistemology of social objects that accounts for the importance of such inscriptions in the construction of social reality. The central role attributed to inscription is one of the main characteristic features of his theory of documentality, and one that appeals to the purpose of this chapter.

The underlying idea in Ferraris' (2013) theory of documentality is that it is not enough that an act is performed, it is necessary to have an inscription of that act (43). There is, Ferraris argues, a crucial difference between thinking of declaring war, of getting married, of promising or buying something; and writing (or saying) that war is declared, that one is married, that one promises, that one is buying (Ferraris 2013, 31). On these terms, society is based on registration systems that record and keep safe inscriptions of acts.

Inscriptions are thus central to institutional reality. Examples are passports, money or identity cards, etc. (Ferraris 2013, 54), which inscribes the objective status of people or things. In Ferraris' view, this theory involves favoring a realism, or a sense of a common reality, in which documents, taxes, and promises are considered "real things" (Ferraris 2013, 33). A document, Ferraris notes, derives from the latin *documentum* and means something that shows or represents some fact (Ferraris 2013, 249). This definition fits the three spheres normally associated with documents: the historical, where 'document' means everything that seems useful for the reconstruction of the past; the informative, which includes all the things that bears of information; and the juridical, where 'document' stands for everything with legal status. Taking into account all these spheres where documents circulate, Ferraris states that "a document is any inscription with institutional value" (Ferraris 2013, 249).

Ferraris offers a theory of documents (Ferraris 2013, 266) where he lays down the most significant aspects to take into consideration regarding the "life" of documents, such as the difference between types of documents and their various forms of realization as well as the different operations that can be performed on documents and the various acts that can be executed thanks to documents. He also accounts for the diverse ways in which those acts can be realized, the institutional systems to which documents belong and their role in them. Ferraris takes into consideration the differences between original, copy and fake documents; and identifies the pragmatic power of documents. Yet, part of his book is also dedicated to a general theory of culture in which another kind of documental inscriptions, namely artworks, are the central focus (Ferraris 2013, 271–282).

In Ferraris theory of documentality, artworks are approached in a completely different way than in Steyerl's. There are two basic reasons why Ferraris is interested in artworks (Ferraris 2013, 272). The first is because artworks tend to reflect the very core of social reality, and the second is because, as Ferraris tries to demonstrate, "if we use documents and social objects as key, we might have a good chance of unlocking the

phenomenon of artworks" (Ferraris 2013, 272).

"[W]orks of art", explains Ferraris, are "those anomalous documents that are without practical utility even though they are carriers of high social prestige" (Ferraris 2013, 248). This idea of an artwork as a document yet one deviating from "normal" documents is one that we should keep in mind for now. Inscriptions are "essentially designed to be exhibited," says Ferraris (Ferraris 2013, 178) and should, in principle, be open to be accessed by more than one person. Informed by Immanuel Kant's philosophy, Ferraris explains that artworks should be considered as inscriptions of acts – in other words, artworks are social objects, documents – with no practical or instrumental value (Ferraris 2013, 272); hence, their value consists precisely in their uselessness (Ferraris 2013, 279). Moreover, Ferraris states that artworks can produce knowledge, but this only occurs accidentally (Ferraris 2013, 277). What turns a thing into an artwork is, for Ferraris, a particular inscription. Therefore, an artwork is a social object appearing through institutional objects, such as museums – here he observes that the social world is circular and the artwork, as document, enters the museum as part of this circuit (Ferraris 2013, 280). However promising, Ferraris' theory of documentality, when applied to artworks, hardly offers us the tools that can help us situate, specifically, documentary film itself in contemporary art. Under this light, the documentary form has little practical or instrumental value, and is not able to produce any objective knowledge. Still, sociologist Vikky Bell (2016) offers an interesting reading of Ferraris' documentality that might be useful to situate documentary filmmaking in the field of contemporary art.

Focusing on curatorial approaches in spaces that are dedicated to the memory of State violence of the last military dictatorship in Argentina (Bell 2016, 1), Bell considers forms of documentality that are implicit in artworks and curatorial programs dealing with the contemporary use of violence. Taking Ferraris' definition of inscription as a point of departure, Bell suggests that artworks as inscriptions create social objects and help determine what should and needs to be remembered; therefore, "their aim is to create social objects whose reach in terms of cultural values and social change operates through their ability to sustain a commitment into the future" (Bell 2016, 4). The artworks Bell is interested in are mainly films which could be described as documentary. Bell does not claim that such films should have a didactic message or should explain their meaning. Rather, she is interested in them because they are works where "one is forced to confront one's own needs and

expectations, for narrative, for documentation, for the film to effect some sort of gathering" (Bell 2016, 4). It is as if the documentary form in such films offered itself as the materialization of the underwritten social reality by "not only registering, marking (a difference) but also deferring (concerning the future)" (Bell 2016, 4). The documentary film can thus be seen as "an inscription that is future–oriented" (Bell 2016, 4). Inspired by a conversation between Ferraris and Derrida,[94] Bell also points to the possibility that works openings towards the future "are not only proposals concerned with their own inscription in that future, (...) but are about producing contexts, a 'chain of marks' which themselves call for a new context, for a future to come" (Bell 2016, 8). At risk of displacing much of Bell's research based on the Argentinian social and political context, what is relevant concerning the present study is her interest in artworks or art programs that produce new contexts even if their outcome is unattainable and linger in the realm of incalculability. Bell describes such works that deal with a violent past as "aporetic experiences" (Bell 2016, 10) in the sense that more than laying a convincing argument they induce doubtful feelings in their spectators insofar as they open up questions about the past and the modes of representation usually associated with it.

Bell opens the scope of her argument to another aspect of inscriptions, the "awareness of the possibility of failure between the inscriptions and their institutionalisation" (Bell 2016, 6). Based on the theories of sociologist Robert Cover, Bell prompts us to consider how some inscriptions/artworks might not work to establish institutions, instead they function as a way to challenge their authority. Bell states,

> Cover's work highlights the importance of the force of a sense of justice among people in relation to their self–understanding. Through a process he called 'jurisgenesis', communities orientate themselves around narratives about law that they continually test and 'try out' through adopting different attitudes to it. That is, through all the activities of the nomos, by advocating, protesting, mocking, interrogating its process and its meaning, communities communicate and generate their dispositions to laws and the institution of law (Cover, 1993: 100). These may result in the confirmation of law as an acceptable reflection of the community's normative sensibilities, or they may not, in which case there is a stimulus to challenge its authority (Bell 2016, 7).

What is at stake in this statement is that some inscriptions, artworks or curatorial programs,

[94] See Derrida and Ferraris' *A Taste for the Secret* (2001).

might advocate, protest, mock and interrogate the processes and meanings of our institutional present. In other words, they problematize our present by constituting in themselves a critical space for an exploration of document(ary)'s significance. And, for that reason, these specific inscriptions may include various strategies in order to foster such exploration ethically, politically and aesthetically.

What both Ferraris and Bell are describing is, therefore, somewhat related to what Steyerl proposed in her theory of documentality, when she identifies "the pivotal point where forms of documentary truth production turn into government – or vice versa" (Steyerl 2003 a, b). What Steyerl is implying is that documentality in the context of contemporary art describes forms of documentary truth production that can criticize and undermine established systems of power. Steyerl argues that documentality can be seen as an attempt to both counter and problematize dominant forms of truth production and government. Hence, documentary filmmaking, when shown/produced in the context of contemporary art produces its *own* documentality (Steyerl 2003a). However, even within this context, Steyerl contends that the documentary form often assumes two opposing functions: one being a strategy of authenticity and the other a strategy of reflexivity.

6.4. Authenticity strategies

> Documentary forms in the art field are currently assuming primarily two contrary functions. First, they represent a strategy of authenticity, which is intended to ensure the claim of artistic works to contact with an auratized field of the social or the political. (...) In contrast to this, there is another, more reflected current of the documentary, which perceives its own devices as socially constructed epistemological tools. In these works there is no intention at all of depicting the authentic truth of the political, but rather of changing the "politics of truth" on which its representation is based. The visual and epistemological formations of the documentary themselves are thus defined as functions of the political. (Steyerl 2003b).

Authenticity strategies in documentary film can be, as Noel Carroll puts it, "making use of homogeneous, unedited space as opposed to the synthetic, constructed space of editing" (Carroll 2017, 87). Examples can be found in observational documentary films or *cinema verité*. The intention of authenticity strategies is to show events objectively and to be as close to factual reality as possible. But, as we already know, the unbridgeable tension between the

authentic nature of pre–camera reality and the ideal of documentary authenticity has been largely problematized ever since documentary theory existed. For Steyerl in particular, the problem of referential authenticity is that it easily turns into/reproduces an hegemonic ideology especially within the context of globalization.[95]

Steyerl considers that authenticity strategies "nourished from the myth of the genuine and different local, which is currently reproduced in post–ethnographic and neo–culturalist exhibitions" (Steyerl 2003b). Writing in 2003, Steyerl is referring to a conception of globalization that is proper to the late twentieth century and thus also aligned with a critique of authenticity that is predicated in a postcolonial point of view. For example, Steyerl's critique of authenticity appears to be similar to that of Hal Foster's "Artist as Ethnographer" (1998), which also deals with the way artists relate to their subjects in local situations and how these relationships are transferred to the global stage.

According to Foster, there are three main assumptions that may lead artists to adhere to authenticity strategies (Foster 1998, 172–178): First, the assumption that the site for political transformation is also the site of artistic transformation. But also the assumption that this site – the politically transformed site – is always elsewhere, in the field of the other: the cultural other, the oppressed, and that it is from this point of departure that the dominant culture will be subverted. Lastly, the assumption that, on the one hand, if the artist is not perceived as socially and cultural other, he or she has but limited access to this transformation; and, on the other hand, if he or she is perceived as other, he or she has automatic access to it. Because of that, Foster (1998) argues, the artist may be required to assume both the roles of native and informant, and ethnographer at the same time (Foster 1998, 172–178).

The implication of Foster's critique – and, by extension, Steyerl's – is that local situations (particularly those with precarious social conditions) can be incorporated into the

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[95] In her book *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (2017), Steyerl uses a definition by Dutch–American sociologist Saskia Sassen to characterize globalization in the late twentieth century. She describes it as those activities such as "citizen practices that go beyond the nation" (Sassen in Steyerl 2017, 16). *Duty Free Art* was written fifteen years after Steyerl wrote on documentality, but she is referring to the most common meaning associated with globalization when she was writing in 2003. This notion of globalization as citizen practices that go beyond the nation is important to also address the context of art at the time. This definition of globalization is important to refer here for there is another meaning that can be associated with globalization but which would take Steyerl's argument into a different direction of what she meant in 2003. For example, in 2017, Steyerl, building on British philosopher Peter Osborne's work on globalization, describes the current state of globalization as "the lack of any common ground, temporality, or space" (Steyerl 2017, 139).

global art field via an ambivalent process that allows the subject's (and, according to Foster, also the artist's) authenticity to go unquestioned and be exhibited within an international art context. In other words, the decontextualization of the representing artists and the represented issues, as well as their transfer into a global art product, lies at the heart of the challenge of authenticity strategies. Reportage–like techniques of recording, for example, are among other authenticity strategies, such as hyper realistic and naturalistic displays, that tend to decontextualize and drain local themes in order to be moved into global art markets, according to Steyerl (2003b).

Trinh T. Minh–ha has stated her skepticism of authenticity tactics in documentary practice from a similar perspective, but in a somewhat different way. According to Minh–ha, authenticity tactics are used to benefit the "documentary–effect" (Minh–ha 1991, 40). The documentary effect is described by Minh-ha as:

> the feeling of participating in a truth–like moment of reality captured despite the filmed subject; the sense of urgency, immediacy, and authenticity in the instability of the hand–held camera; the newsreel look of the grainy image; and the oral–testimony–like quality of the direct interview–to mention just a few (Minh–ha 1991, 40).

When the social realm is raised to an ideal of transparency or authenticity, Minh–ha argues, the gap between the actual and the image becomes blurred to the point of unreality (Minh–ha 1991, 38). As a result, addressing the issue of authenticity, as discussed above, reopens the question of how the real (or the social ideal of ethical representation) is created. Minh–ha outlines the issue as follows:

> The socially oriented filmmaker is thus the almighty voice giver (here, in a vocalizing context that is all–male), whose position of authority in the production of meaning continues to go unchallenged, skillfully masked as it is by its righteous mission. The relationship between mediator and medium or, the mediating activity, is either ignored – that is, assumed to be transparent, as value free and as insentient as an instrument of reproduction ought to be – or else, it is treated most conveniently: by humanizing the gathering of evidence so as to further the status quo. (...) Good documentaries are those whose subject matter is “correct” and whose point of view the viewer agrees with. What is involved may be a question of honesty (vis–a–vis the material; but it is often also a question of (ideological) adherence, hence of legitimization (Minh–ha 1991, 36).

Respectively, strategies of authenticity continue to promote the possibility of an unmediated access to reality. This is an assumption that should not be taken lightly, where the use of poetry, and illogical elements – aspects of human life that are important to Minh-ha – would have to be avoided for they would fall outside of the area of authenticity (Minh–ha 1991, 39).

Authors such as Steyerl, Foster, and Minh–ha, among others, are part of a critical movement in relation to authenticity strategies within contemporary art during the early 2000s. They argue that these strategies are in favor of finding or imposing a notion of "truth" on the subject of representation; strategically ignoring crucial aspects of the subject's lives while overtly producing meaning about the subject and transferring this meaning to different contexts. The exoticism with which the 'genuine,' 'pure,' 'original' subject will be perceived out of context, is a crucial part of this hegemonic transfer. To a certain extent, it is not an easy task to situate such works that employ authenticity strategies. They are inscribed in the field of art and there is no straight path between their production of truth and a specific form of government, that is, as Steyerl puts it, a neo–colonial one (2003b).

6.5. Reflexive strategies as a form of dissensual activity

In contrast to such authenticity strategies, Steyerl concludes that there is another, more reflexive approach incorporated by documentary forms produced within the field of contemporary art (Steyerl 2003b). She offers as an example Croatian photographer Sanja Ivekovic´s installation "Searching for my Mother's Numbers" presented at documenta 11 (2002). In this paradigmatic work, Steyerl emphasizes the contrast between official documents of the Yugoslav government denying the artist's mother a pension after her imprisonment at Auschwitz, and personal documents of her mother's handwritten diary that details her arrest and liberation from Auschwitz's concentration camp. Generally speaking, the personal documents in Ivekovic's work constitute a "little narrative" that challenges the official documents' "grand narrative", in the sense Lyotard (1979) conceived it. By juxtaposing the two types of documents within the artwork, the artist disrupts the order of the official documents and thereby provokes a dissensual activity that reinforces something that is fundamental to documentality in contemporary art. Hence, for Steyerl, contemporary art's documentality problematizes the dual political function of documents.

Other, more recent, examples of the same type of dissensual activity Steyerl identifies in this work can be found in the films this thesis discusses at length in the previous chapters: *Extinction*, *Fatamorgana*, *The Quantification Trilogy* and *All That is Solid*. The focus here, however, is not so much how they deal with an unmistakable opposition between official and personal documents, such as in Ivekovic's work, but rather how they challenge conventional conceptions of documentary filmmaking. The challenge these films propose is at once to distinguish among modes of documentary production – for this purpose Bill Nichols' description of documentary modes of representation helped me in defining the networks and levels to which different frames of the documentary belong; and to recreate the lines along which they are conceived, introducing new variables in their production.

The purpose of these films is not to demonstrate the authenticity of political reality, but to reflect on, and ultimately to challenge the "politics of truth" within which they are deeply involved (Steyerl 2003b). What animates this documentary production is the fact that the documentary itself can constitute a critical stance towards dominant forms of political power. Reflexive documentaries are seen here as a form of reframing the ethical dimension of the subjects represented, stepping outside of the problems associated with authenticity; thus accepting the inevitability of ambivalence and refusing the task of claiming any kind of ultimate truth. This tendency, Steyerl explains, is articulated in an "almost ornamental form of apparatus criticism" (Steyerl 2003b). In this context, Steyerl is referring to an aesthetic form of self-critique that is performed through aesthetics used in the work itself. As the quotation opening this section indicates, Steyerl contends that, as the result of a reflexive practice, the documentary's visual and epistemic structures take on a political function (Steyerl 2003b).

But what is exactly this triangle Steyerl is drawing between reflexivity, aesthetic criticism and political function of the documentary? One possible way to approach this question is to consider the speculative dimension of the documentary in Steyerl's conception of documentality in contemporary art when she states: "[i]n the new documentary conceptualism the documentary image thus functions as a technology of truth and as proof for a proposed hypothesis as well" (Steyerl 2003b). Furthermore, the German version of Steyerl's text on documentary uncertainty (cf. Chapter 2) ends with the following sentence: "(...) critical documentarism cannot show what is there – what is embedded in conditions that we call reality. From this perspective, the only true documentary image is one that shows

what does not yet exist and may one day come" (Steyerl 2008, 16). Indeed, she advocates for a critical form of documentarism that is future oriented, similar to Bell's claim, mentioned above. This implies a temporal dimension associated with this theory of documentality: the documentary as a technology of truth has the capacity to anchor 'things' in the present while the documentary as a proposed hypothesis has the potential to project 'things' into the future. Steyerl states,

> 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 (Steyerl 2003a).

Along with being future–oriented, the purpose of documentary formations have this ambivalent potential of being predictable and unpredictable at the same time; of constituting a norm and destabilizing it. The opposition here is not binary, but dialectical. Considering the politics of truth, Foucault states: "(...) it is not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time" (Foucault 1980, 133). For Steyerl – in line with Foucault's concept of a politics of truth – the essential political challenge that is posed to documentary practice today is not only to criticize the ideological contents of hegemonic structures and to ensure that this practice is accompanied by a 'correct' ideology, but rather to ascertain the possibility of constituting itself as a form of dissensual activity[96] consistent with seeking new possibilities for the political and cultural regimes. Politics and art share the aim that, at a certain point, a given set of social arrangements will fail and another one re–inscribed and, for that purpose, they need to envision new possibilities in the world by producing new

[96] In his text "The Paradoxes of Political Art" Rancière's (2010) defines art and politics as different kinds of dissensual activities and tries to convey the significance of their subversive ability to disrupt established forms of dominance. As Ranciere sees it, politics exist to challenge or disrupt the hierarchical order of a given set of social arrangements. Rancière calls this dissensus – an activity that is specific to both politics and art. Accordingly, dissensus extends beyond disagreement about the fairness of a particular social reality. It also reveals the instability of the conceptual and perceptual framework in which such reality is grounded (Rancière 2010, 139).

mechanisms of dissensual activity. Departing from what Rancière proposes, the documentality that is specific to the documentary practice in contemporary art can be characterized as a form of dissensus activity for its purpose is to challenge and disrupt certain modes of documentary production that are associated with what Nichols calls the "discourses of sobriety" (Nichols 1991, 3). More specifically, documentary art puts into question the production of documents as part of a bureaucratic state's procedure – fictions that, according to Rancière, pass themselves as real (Rancière 2010, 148); or the making of documentary films that are part of a truth production procedure. Hence, as a form of dissensual activity, documentary art shares with politics the capacity to break with the 'natural' order of document(ary).

Then again, is it not more commonly associated that it is the role of fiction and not documentary to anticipate new possibilities into the world? This thesis has considered this question through the analysis of Salomé Lamas and Jeremy Shaw's films (cf. chapter 3 and 4), and found in fiction a strong relation of documentary practice. Drawing on Rancière's understanding of "documentary fiction," (2001) it has been observed that the relationship between documentary and fiction is in fact a fundamental quality of documentary's presence in contemporary art. Rancière states that:

> (...) "fiction" is not a pretty story or evil lie, the flipside of reality that people try to pass off for it. Originally, *fingere* doesn't mean "to feign" but "to forge." Fiction means using the means of art to construct a "system" of representing actions, assembled forms, and internally coherent signs. We cannot think of "documentary" film as the polar opposite of "fiction" film simply because the former works with images from real daily life and archive documents about events that obviously happened, and the latter with actors who act out an invented story. The real difference between them isn't that the documentary sides with the real against the inventions of fiction, it's just that the documentary instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be understood. Documentary film can isolate the artistic work of fiction simply by dissociating that work from its most common use: the imaginary production of verisimilitude, of effects of the real (Rancière 2001, 158).

Fiction as well as constructing an imaginary world, "involves the re–framing of the real," it disrupts the "existing modes of sensory representations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective" (Rancière 2010, 141). Documentary film

within contemporary art, with its incorporation of fictional elements, could represent a movement towards understanding the reflexive practice Steyerl is referring to. This practice essentially employs paraesthetic self–reflexive strategies that involve complex aesthetic shifts of documentary's frames. As discussed in the previous chapters, documentary within the context of contemporary, tends to assume a critical stance towards conventional modes of documentary practice – specifically those that tend to exclude fiction.

As Steyerl has emphasized, documentary forms within contemporary art that rely on strategies of authenticity or other forms of consensual activity are considered as pertaining to a documentality consensual with some form of government. This is not to say that all documentary forms fall into the same category, but to recognize that there are different regimes where art takes place and performs different roles. Since the aesthetic regime (Rancière 2004, 2010) is considered to be the acme of a dissensual practice, I consider that it is to this regime that documentality in contemporary art responds to (cf. chapter 2, part II).

As we have seen above, documentality can be understood as a type of governmental activity that is constituted within bureaucratic machinery as the only possible way of conducting our social reality. But, following Steyerl, we have seen how it is also the name for a type of artistic practice that advocates a dissensual activity as a form of political resistance. While the first form of documentality can be used to predict and target their effects on a community, the second relies only on the sensible distribution of its effects that are always already unpredictable and unmeasurable. The process that characterizes the latter is one that "re–articulates the connection between signs and images, images and times, and signs and spaces" (Rancière 2010, 149). It is a practice that directs its attention to the future but also to subjects of borders, wastelands and other in–between places for it is the work of shifting borders that most defines it.

Conclusion

> I used to teach film theory to aspiring filmmakers. One day the students were told to find an idea for a documentary. One of the students – incidentally, a woman from Korea – said that she wanted to make a documentary about a dream she had dreamt, and proceeded to tell her dream. The teacher told her that she could not make a documentary about a dream because documentaries are about facts and reality. So, the following week the same student went to the teacher and, explaining that she had now found a good subject for a documentary, simply retold her story without, however, saying that it was her dream. This anecdote was told to me by a colleague, the teacher of the documentary module. His intention was to show me that some students really are confused. Contrary to my colleague, I thought that the student had grasped the central problematic of documentary filmmaking and, more generally, the problematic of realism (Vitali in Minh–ha 2005, 27–28).

In an interview with Trinh T. Minh–ha, Valentina Vitali tells this story about a student who would like to make a documentary about one of her dreams. The confrontation between the student and her documentary film mentor serves to demonstrate how mainstream documentary filmmaking conforms to conventions often set up by those in positions of power within the field. According to this teacher, documentaries should tell true stories based on real events that take place in the factual historical world. Dreams, therefore, are not material for documentaries according to this position. The same is true for documentary films portraying people crossing the boundaries of reality and the imaginary, such as in Salomé Lamas' parafictional films; or documentaries that portray events yet to happen through outdated camera technology, as shown in Jeremy Shaw's future–tense documentaries; or documentary films that go beyond the boundaries of the physical world to take place in the virtual landscape of a computer's database as seen in Louis Henderson's desktop documentary. There are still many other documentary films produced within the field of contemporary art that are constantly seeking to rearticulate the conventional boundaries of documentary filmmaking.

Similar to what the above anecdote describes, this thesis is about a field of practice in contemporary art that raises questions about the conventional boundaries of documentary

filmmaking, particularly through the use of paraesthetic strategies, which can be considered as producing a form of documentality of its own. By proposing to explore this field of practice, this thesis problematizes the central dilemma of documentary filmmaking today, which is the ambivalent nature of this practice, especially visible when facts and fiction are interwoven within the same structural frame. This is undoubtedly not a new question for documentary practices, yet, it has a renewed relevance within the so–called post–truth era.

Theorists of documentary practice, such as Erika Balsom (2017) criticize contemporary documentary that blurs fact and fiction and thereby participates in the politics of fakery largely associated with this "new" era of post–truth. According to her, this blurring of borders contributes to a state of uncertainty, suspicion and paranoia. Hito Steyerl (2007), by contrast, explains that the uncertainty we find in documentary images, never knowing whether they are true or not, is documentary's greatest strength, particularly for those documentaries who wish to reflect on the current state of affairs. This does not necessarily mean to participate in or to contribute to an already established state of uncertainty. Quite the contrary: according to Steyerl, those practices are critically engaging with the contemporary world. This debate has its tenets in two different world views: one that claims that documentary should purport activism and therefore regulate its aesthetics in order to respond to or to resist a certain ideology; the other sees documentary as pertaining to the aesthetic regime of art and, therefore, as a type of dissensual activity – an activity that intends to destabilize the natural order of things. In this case, if the dominant order of our contemporary media landscape is that of post–truth, the intention would be to undermine it by mirroring and distorting it.

The debate between these two different priorities of documentary practice led this research project towards identifying and critically analyzing what it means to 'blur' documentary with fiction. The research led me towards filmmakers who were not actually blurring these categories, but who work productively within and beyond their limits. Documentary, as a genre that is conventionally established, is an important frame of reference for filmmakers who wish to disturb the equilibrium of things as they are. This research demonstrates productive approaches to documentary within contemporary art that actively seek a crossing between boundaries rather than a blurring. Blurring facts and fiction can be equated with participating in the politics of fakery, acknowledging and expanding their boundaries holds a different, more transformative potential.

Crossing between boundaries means, recognizing that the boundaries exist, and that these boundaries serve a purpose. Most often, the purpose of boundaries is to limit, exclude, control and restrict. To cross between boundaries, ultimately, leads to the potential of them becoming more inclusive, less restrictive, more porous, allowing space for new forms of filmmaking to emerge and for subjects that are typically not incorporated within the documentary frame to be present — such as dreams, fiction, the future, the virtual, and so on. By carefully analyzing some the films of Salomé Lamas, Jeremy Shaw and Louis Henderson, but also Trinh T. Minh–ha and Hito Steyerl's, I was able to identify paraesthetic strategies disrupting the frames of the documentary, preventing it from being categorized into a conventional mode of representation, while at the same time drawing from, appropriating, rearticulating and reflecting on documentary conventions. The films selected for analysis in this dissertation illustrate mechanisms of self–reflexivity. From a paraesthetical perspective, it is possible to critically address the crossing between documentary and fiction, to identify the moments at which these frames are crossed, as well as to ask what this crossing signifies, how it is presented, and what it may trigger in spectatorial/critical experience. Carroll's (1987) notion of paraesthetics thus enabled the identification of what lies within and outside these frames, in addition to asserting some of the possibilities associated with this field of practice.

Moreover, I have revisited the concept of documentality as a theory intended to address the structures of our society that rely on the production of documentation. Yet, documentality, in the sense Steyerl (2003a, b) attributed to it, presents us with a dilemma. On the one hand, drawing on Michel Foucault's notions of governmentality and politics of truth, Steyerl outlines the most essential aspects of the development of the documentary form is its relationship with governmental policy, including the difference between types of documentary production and the institutional systems to which they belong, and how they fit into those systems. On the other hand, documentality, for Steyerl, is critical of the performance of these procedures and seeks the possibility to subvert them. This is the type of documentality I am highlighting in the films discussed in this thesis. Steyerl (2003a, b) demonstrates that documentality in contemporary art is fundamentally driven by two dynamics: authenticity strategies and reflexive strategies. This dissertation focuses on reflexive strategies, that reveal and reflect on their own means and strategies of production, for they are the ones capable of creating a dissensual experience, in the terms defined by

Jacques Rancière (2010). Documentality in the context of contemporary art is here defined as always responding, reflecting and resisting another documentality that is the result of a consensual activity and that regulates most of our social interactions. After the in-depth analysis of films by Salomé Lamas, Jeremy Shaw and Louis Henderson, namely: *Extinction*, *Fatamorgana*, *The Quantification Trilogy* and *All That is Solid*, it was possible to identify how this dissensual activity is performed within the films themselves, always in different ways and each responding to specific contexts. The different approaches undertaken by the filmmakers I investigated intend to illustrate that documentality in contemporary art, contrary to the 'other documentality' of state bureaucracy, is not limited to specific procedures, but rather involves a continual process of re–articulation of conventional and non-conventional procedures, so as to envision new possibilities and alternatives for the documentary. It is this process of re–articulation that defines the internal politics of documentality in contemporary art: a re–articulation of existing frameworks, resulting in other frameworks that intend, ultimately, to be more inclusive.

In summary, this research project has undertaken four distinct tasks: first to draw a historical path that puts into perspective the conjunction between documentary and art. By looking at the discourses that surround this conjunction – sometimes associating them, sometimes conceiving them as different realms – it was possible to locate and circumscribe the documentary as an artistic practice, distinguishing its configuration from other documentary formats. Secondly, to look into how documentary practice and theory have influenced one another and how this influence expands the limits of what defines documentary and the theoretical/philosophical discourse that surround it. Thirdly, to undertake a close reading of films that work with the frames of documentary and fiction in different ways; and to identify different strategies as paraesthetic and self–reflexive. Lastly, to revisit the concept of documentality in order to locate the guidelines with which the documentary within contemporary art can be approached. Rather than defining documentary in this context, such guidelines aim at grasping the oscillations between, on the one hand, what constitutes documentary practice conventionally, and on the other, what constitutes documentary as a critical practice.

There are three main conclusions that can be derived from this work. The first is that documentary and art are intimately related, and their conjunction results mainly from their

articulation within different artistic regimes. This can be observed by tracing back the appropriations of documentary form from the avant–garde movements to post–colonial discourses and contemporary art. Additionally, as pertaining to the aesthetic regime of art, documentary practice makes use of paraesthetic self–reflexive strategies, which acknowledge the necessity of working with the frame of documentary as an aesthetic form. Self–reflexive paraesthetic strategies allow the artists to navigate between different realms, such as theory and practice, fiction and documentary, past and future, historical and virtual. These crossings do not leave the categories untouched: the movement affects them, influencing their boundaries, making space for new inclusions. Lastly, the concept of documentality expands the scope of the study of paraesthetic self–reflexive strategies and allows for the recognition of the politics at play within this practice more broadly.

To say that the practice of documentary film within contemporary art produces its own documentality does not mean that it could be reduced to a style, a school or an aim. Documentality, in the way that it is conceived here, is essentially a principle aiming to produce dissensual practices against the *status quo*. This dissertation addresses documentality based on documentary film practice, although the archive and other forms of 'documents' are alternative avenues for entering this debate, and ones that could expand the research done until here.

This thesis can be read as an analysis of the problems that attempting to categorize documentary poses, and an investigation, through film analysis, into how power relations associated with this practice can be subverted, counteracted and resisted. This resistance takes on the conceptual form of the transformation of the documentary frame itself. It invites a movement that begins in an identification of common forms, means and formats, to move towards new forms and intentions, from conventional to experimental, from ideological to political.

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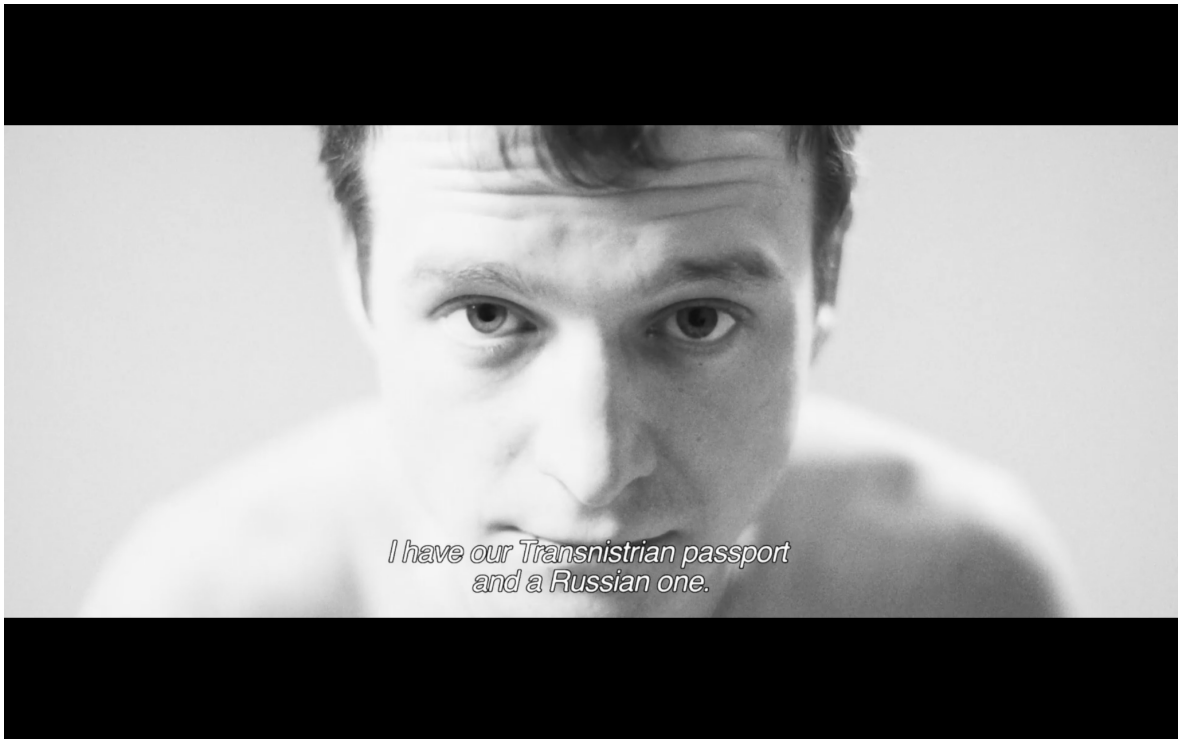
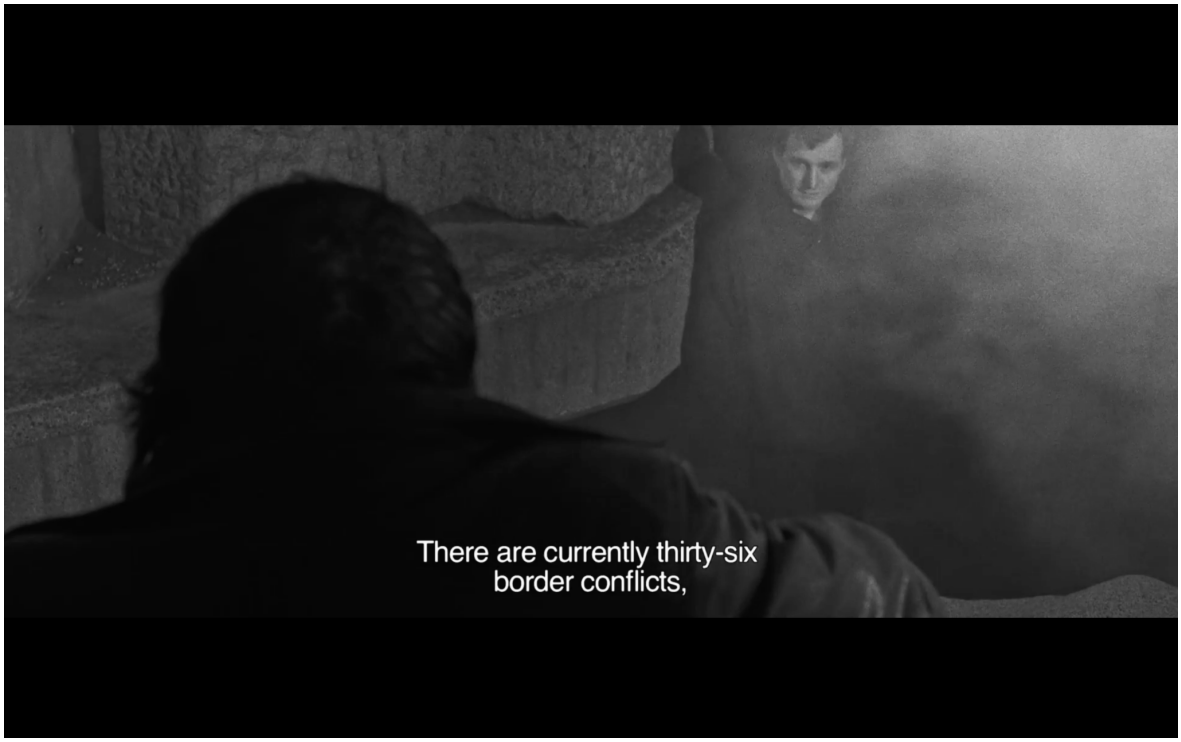
Annexes

Image 1



Film still: *Extinction* by Salomé Lamas (2017)

Image 2



Film still: *Extinction* by Salomé Lamas (2017)

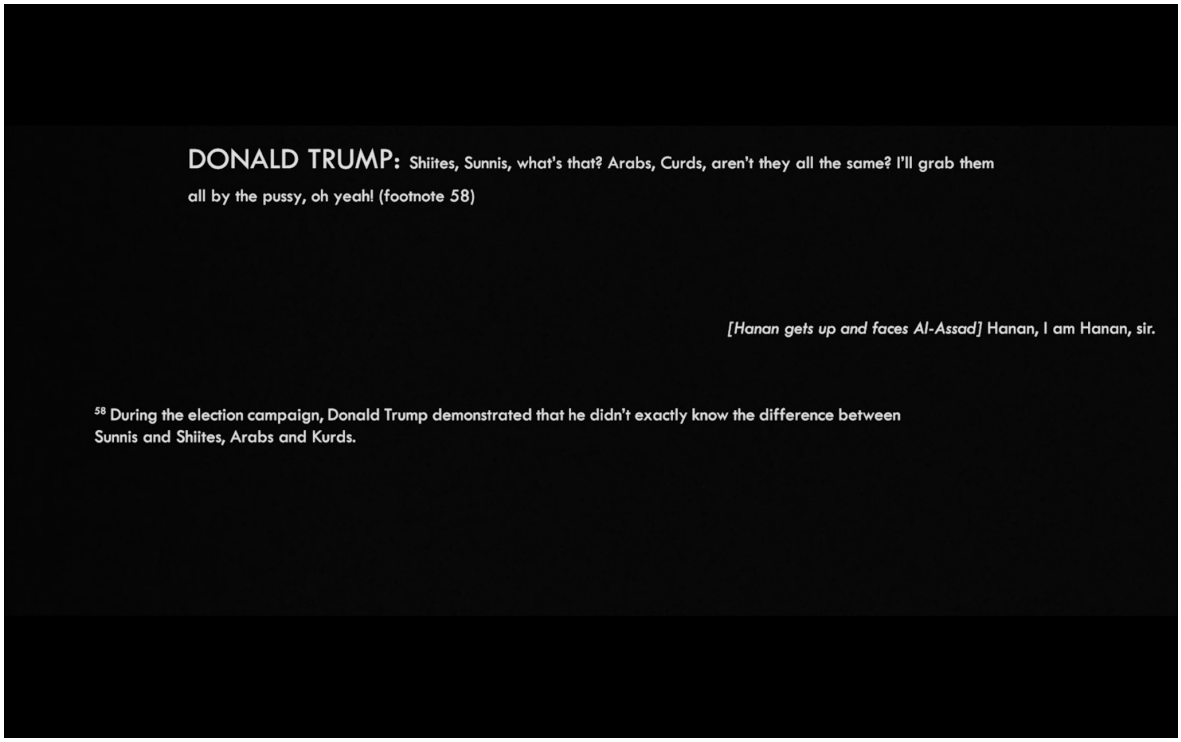
Image 3

Film still: *Fatamorgana* by Salomé Lamas (2018)

Image 4

Film still: *Fatamorgana* by Salomé Lamas (2018)

Image 5

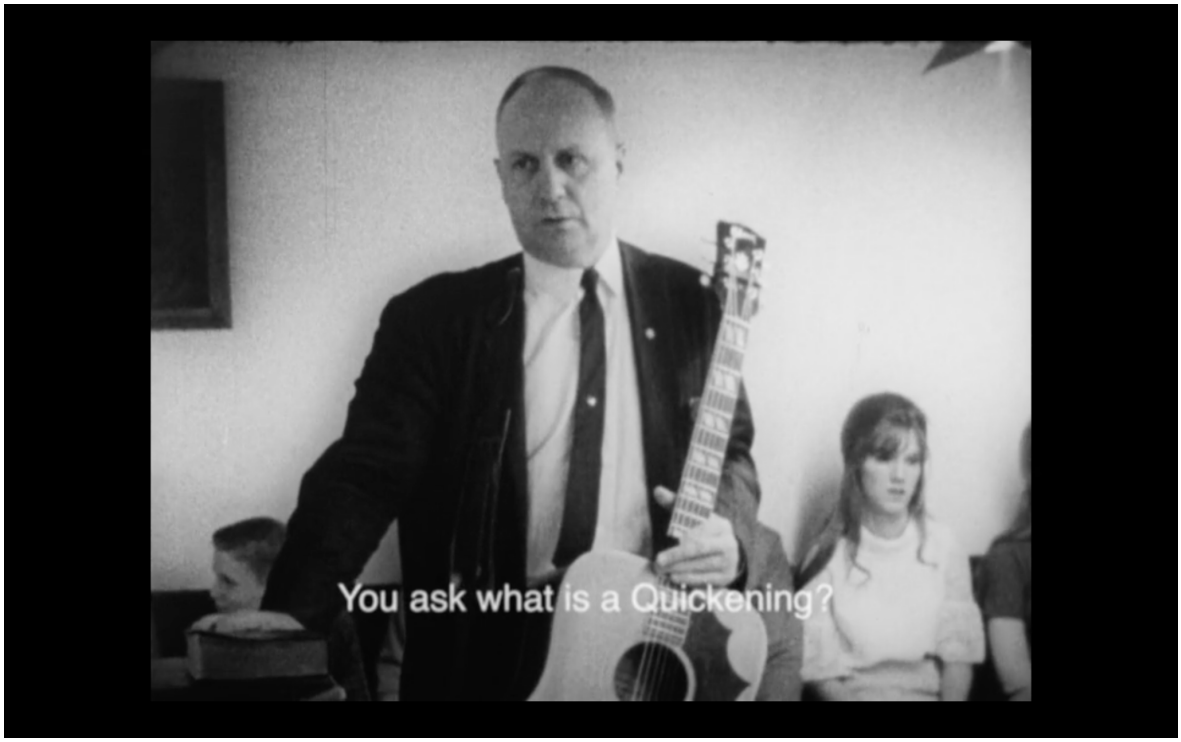


Film still: *Fatamorgana* by Salomé Lamas (2018)

Image 6

Film still: *Quickeners* by Jeremy Shaw (2014)

Image 7



Film still: *Quickeners* by Jeremy Shaw (2014)

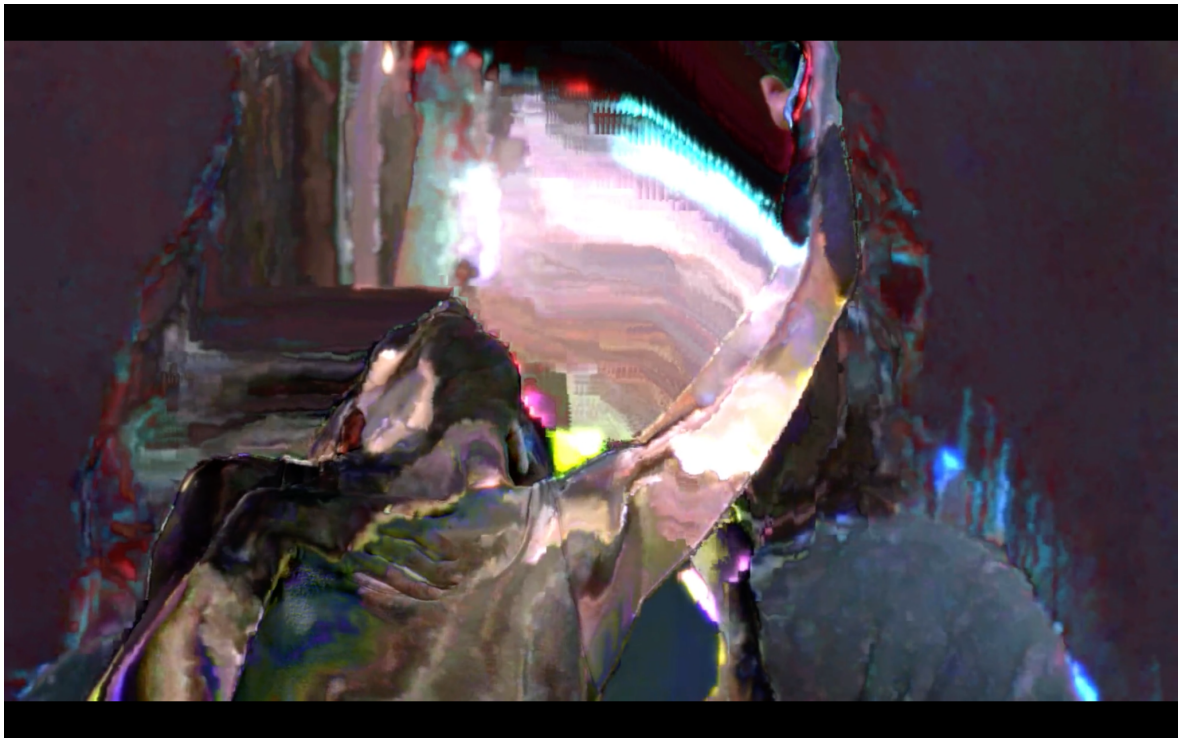
Image 8

Film still: *Quickeners* by Jeremy Shaw (2014)

Image 9

Film still: *Liminals* by Jeremy Shaw (2017)

Image 10



Film still: *Liminals* by Jeremy Shaw (2017)

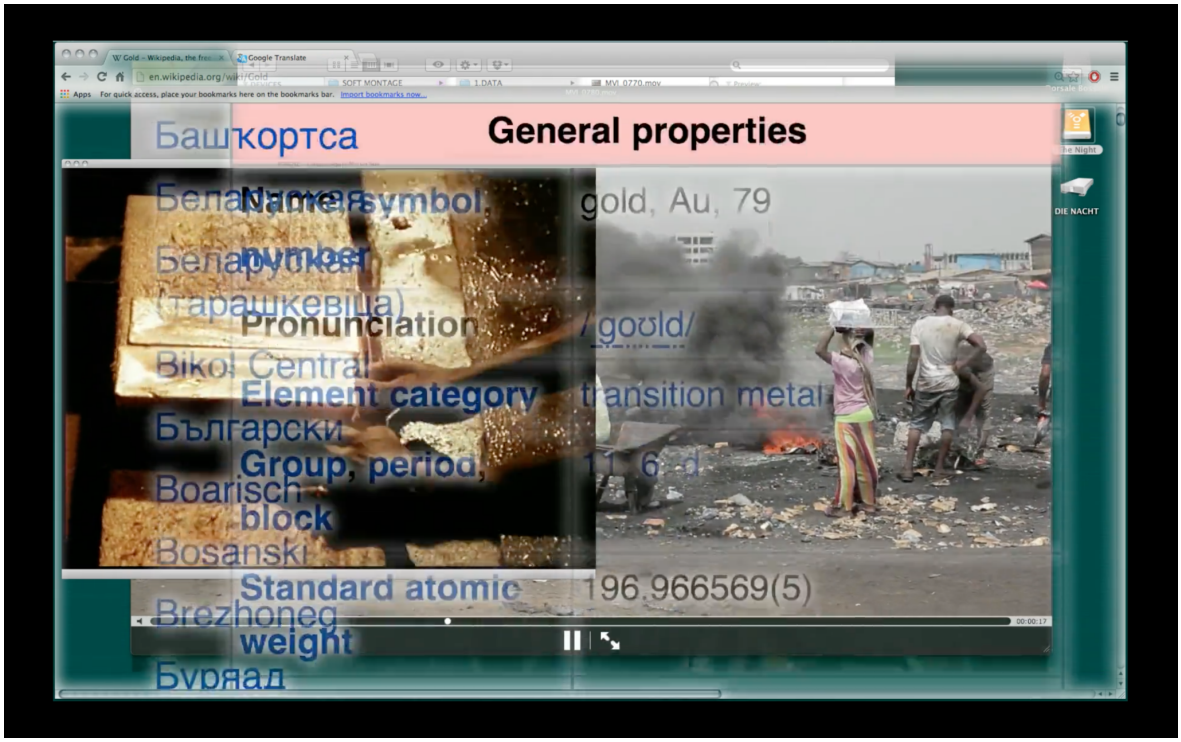
Image 11

Film still: *I Can See Forever* by Jeremy Shaw (2018)

Image 12

Film still: *I Can See Forever* by Jeremy Shaw (2018)

Image 13



Film still: *All That is Solid* by Louis Henderson (2014)

Image 14

Film still: *All That is Solid* by Louis Henderson (2014)