How to Critique Authoritarian Populism

Methodologies of the Frankfurt School

Edited by

Jeremiah Morelock

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CHAPTER 15

How to Mediate Reality: Thinking Documentary Film with Adorno and Horkheimer

Stefanie Baumann

> The responsibility lies with the How, not with the What.
>
> THEODOR W. ADORNO, Prologue to Television: 53

•••

> To deny the reality of film in claiming (to capture) reality is to stay "in ideology" – that is, to indulge in the (deliberate or not) confusion of filmic with phenomenal reality.
>
> TRINH T. MIN-HA, Documentary Is/Not a Name: 90

⁂

When Robert Kramer wrote, in 1991, that "[p]ower is the possibility to define what is real,"[1] he was referring to the complex political and ideological potency of documentary formats. A documentary filmmaker himself, he was well aware of the political element of perception and the persuasive force of films claiming to address reality directly. And indeed, documentaries, especially those that are transmitted through official channels, are commonly considered as serious, trustworthy productions. Allegedly based on facts, they are supposed to document, explain, reveal that which matters in the actual state of the world – the real world, the one that we share with those that appear in the films and in which "issues of life and death are always at hand," as Bill Nichols puts it (Nichols 1991: 109). Therein lies the additional value and characteristic seriousness of documentary. And therein also lies its assumed authority: its direct association with the factual world grants it with a specific credibility likely to become ideology when it remains unquestioned. Thus, documentary formats are particularly susceptible for authoritarian instrumentalization, all the more so if they take on a neutral, affirmative stance and conceal the fact that the empirical reality captured by the camera necessarily goes through the subjective mediation of the filmmaker.

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[1] Translated from French by the author.

It was such authoritarian tendencies that Kramer detected both in American news coverage and official journalistic reports. As a critical response, he co-founded the New York Newsreel collective in 1967 in order to counter the alleged authority of official representations as sole suppliers of truthful information. Through independent experimental works, the members of the collective aimed to disrupt the consensual appearance of reality. They opposed subversive forms to the normalized standards of image production, so as to open up a space for discordant voices and emancipatory perspectives. Evidently, Kramer and the New York Newsreel collective were neither the first, nor the only filmmakers who engaged critically with the mediatic representations of reality delivered by the reigning institutions of society. Many independent artistic productions, activist videos, and essay films were and continue to be driven by the idea to challenge the hegemonic legitimacy claim of authorized versions – either by questioning the ideological impact of media, their subliminal strategies and the appearance of immediacy on which they rely; or by problematizing reductionist or misleading representations, and using documentary films to give a visibility to subjects and objects that "must be represented" (Rabinowitz 1994). However, such critical works are usually available only through specialized festivals, art galleries, more or less private circuits or the internet, and require insider knowledge to be found.

During the last decades, commercial productions have appropriated critical issues in order to convert them into "culinary"[2] entertainment products. Alongside with documentaries praising the beauty of allegedly 'authentic' nature, narrating the fascinating biographies of celebrities, exposing the newest technological inventions, ancient civilizations, or impressive discoveries, the offer of popular documentary formats featuring serious content is overwhelming. Hence, documentaries of all shapes are nowadays omnipresent in the sphere of what Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer have called, since the 1940s, the culture industry. When the two philosophers first problematized the potency of culture industry, the permissible content of media formats was still largely subjected to legal constraints. Political campaigns against fascism, communism or, on the other side of the iron curtain, capitalism, as well as moral restrictions as the (in)famous Hays Code in the USA, significantly limited the topics that could be raised in the public sphere. Meanwhile, the media landscape has been widely liberated from direct political and moral censorship, at least in those countries that have adopted the Western model of neoliberalism. Consequently, the situation of documentary film has radically changed. Besides officially authorized documentary formats on the one hand, and their subversive counterpart, independent productions, on the other, we are nowadays confronted with a great diversity of films that present themselves, as it were, as their popular synthesis. Claiming to be critical visions of reality, they nevertheless rely on documentary's persuasive agency, while being entertaining enough to suit for mass consumption.

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[2] This expression, often employed by Theodor W. Adorno, stems from Bertolt Brecht.

Hence, big commercial productions like *An Inconvenient Truth* (dir. Davis Guggenheim 2006), *Leaving Neverland* (dir. Dan Reed 2019), *Blackfish* (dir. Gabriela Cowperthwaite 2013), *Fahrenheit 11/9* (dir. Michael Moore 2018), *Citizen 4* (dir. Laura Poitras 2014) or *Inside Job* (dir. Charles Ferguson 2010) are released in multiplex cinemas, available on public tv programs, internet platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo, or payable streaming services such as Amazon Prime, Hulu, or Netflix. More often than not, they disclose shocking scandals (be they political, economic, social, or ecological), uncover illicit practices or humanitarian atrocities, and constitute by themselves an intervention in the debate in question. Covering a wide range of miscellaneous subjects, documentary films present themselves nowadays as critical consciousness of societal evil and watchdog of ongoing or forthcoming crises. They are considered as an appropriate medium to address virtually any issue of contemporary society, including failures of state management or even the bias of media coverage – as long as it is spectacular enough to raise public interest, and thus promising enough to turn into a box-office success. Climate change, racism, the global financial crises, devastating wars, the malfeasance of capitalism, communism or the evangelist church, the Cambridge Analytica affair, the viciousness and egocentrism of the American or the North Korean president, the danger of terrorism and extremist groups, worldwide sex trafficking and horrifying abuse cases – broaching severe societal problems through compelling non-fiction formats has become as common a cultural praxis as watching action movies, soap operas, or quiz shows.

Admittedly, this does neither mean that everything shown under the sign of mainstream documentary is nowadays critically motivated, nor that truly every topic has since then come into the focus of the public sphere. Nevertheless, the broadened diversity of topics embraced in the media, together with their compelling presentation, affect the societal perception of reality significantly. The public exhibition of seemingly every issue nourishes not only the impression that virtually any aspect of the global society was potentially in the reach of everyone's grasp, but also the assumption that a comprehensive understanding of a respective topic in particular – or even a critical attitude in general – could be attained simply by watching the right films. The problem is not only that it becomes more and more difficult to discern whether a documentary representation is based on thorough research, populist interests, or pure market orientation, but also that the idea of critique as something that could be smoothly consumed is misleading. What is more: such an idea hides in its folds signs of what Adorno et al. called an authoritarian character trait (Adorno et al. 2019). By inherently claiming to show "reality as it is," many commercial documentaries feed such an attitude, and thereby incite the viewer to subordinate herself to the authority of the provided information and its explanation rather than leaving space for her own interpretation and critical assessment. A critical behavior, on the contrary, requires "the ability to distinguish between what is known and what is accepted merely by convention or under constraint of authority" (Adorno 2005a: 282). Thus, it is fundamentally different from the compelling media treatment of a sensitive topic and its passive consumption.

This is not to say that popular documentary films inciting to adopt a genuine critical attitude rather than conformist faith cannot or do not exist beyond the margins of the public media space. It does not mean either that simply by watching conformist films, one necessarily loses the capacity for critical thinking. However, in order not to succumb to a relation of pure belief, it is important to understand how contemporary documentary films deal with the authority attributed to them, how they produce and legitimate certain effects of reality, how they relate to society as a whole, and how the forms through which contents are mediated shape and orientate our perception. The critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno can therefore provide a productive starting point. For even if they never addressed the authoritarian agency of documentary films directly, their insights on the representation of reality through the culture industry and its intimate relationship with authoritarian tendencies touch upon the genre in a particularly acute manner. This chapter aims at problematizing certain recurrent features of documentary films through the lens of the critical theory of the early Frankfurt school, in order to open up a critical space for the understanding of documentary formats today.

1 Dividing the Real: The Common Ground of the Culture Industry and Positivism

As already mentioned, the authority attributed to documentary films is related to its allegedly direct association with the objective world. The reason why they appear as truthful is that the representation of reality they provide is not only thought to be accurate because of the direct recording through a camera, but also because the complementary information is supposedly based on factual truth. Just as positivistic tendencies in the sciences, such documentaries thus adhere to the "cult of fact" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 119), which pervades the entire sphere of the culture industry. Both, positivistic science and the products of the culture industry, rely on the uncritical belief in the factual as an objective, neutral, detachable realm, and the conviction that this realm could be approached empirically, without relating it to the historically developed society from which it stems and in which it is imbedded. This underlying idea that factual truth equates truth *tout court* seems to be taken for granted. Horkheimer and Adorno vehemently criticized this assumption, and urged to scrutinize its social, political and epistemological implications. A short consideration of their argument might help to understand what makes an uncritical faith in the veracity of a documentary representation susceptible for authoritarian behavior.

The elective affinity between the culture industry and positivism consists in their tacit agreement upon the existence of two distinguishable spheres: the objective one understood as the real world of hard facts, and the subjective one encompassing sensations, experiences, personal opinions, and individual biases. This division is presupposed to be naturally given. In science, it translates into an intentional exclusion of everything that is thought to be subjective, and a rigid definition of what is supposed to be relevant – the cold facts –, combined with an accurate system of classification which anticipates a specific category for any given element. In the case of the culture industry, this separation is already apparent in the categorization of its products into different genres, some of which are considered as serious because they address the objective realm (like the news and documentary forms), while fictional formats are usually associated with trivial entertainment (e.g. romances, comedies, dramas or action movies) that appeals to feelings such as love, hope, aggression, or distress. "These types have developed into formula," writes Adorno, "which, to a certain degree, pre-establish the attitudinal pattern of the spectator before he is confronted with any specific content and which largely determine the way in which any specific content is being perceived" (1954: 226).

Accordingly, many commercial documentaries not only claim to depict the factual real in its immediacy but also legitimate this allegedly direct link through their conventional formal constitution, which has become so familiar that its constructedness all too easily falls into oblivion. Yet, it is exactly because mainstream documentaries rely on generalized patterns and standardized approaches that they are taken to be credible. "Each statement, each piece of news, each thought has been preformed by the centres of the culture industry," writes Adorno in *Minima Moralia.* "Whatever lacks the familiar trace of such pre-formation lacks credibility, the more so because the institutions of public opinion accompany what they send forth by a thousand factual proofs and all the plausibility that total power can lay hands on" (2005b: 108). Through mechanisms such as the use of authoritative voice-over, talking head interviews with experts, victims, or other people who are directly or indirectly concerned with the respective topic, impressive 'authentic' media footage, participatory interventions, graphic depictions of alleged proofs, statistic data, or scientific diagrams, documentary films have adopted characteristic shapes making them recognizable as genuine sources of evidence. Contemporary commercial documentaries further link their claim to truthfulness with depictions of powerful emotional responses to the factual events, e.g. through dramatic testimonies of victims, often accompanied by a dramatic music score – a stylistic means already criticized by Adorno in *Composing for the Film* for its stimulation of artificial inwardness when employed uncritically (Adorno and Eisler 1974). However, those different aspects are usually kept separated in contemporary documentary films. Each is associated with a particular function: while the factual data accounts for the veracity of the representation, the subjective add-ons appeal to the spectators' emotions and thus communicate its impact through an adaptation to the subject. Rather than dialectically relating subjective and objective moments, this division exacerbates their separation even further. The alleged authority of the representation is thereby endorsed: it fills all the voids, appeals comprehensively, but on different levels, to the viewers' emotions and discernment, without however leaving any space for personal interpretation or subjective experiences.

What is problematic in the division between an objective and a subjective sphere is that it fails to address the complex ways through which those spheres are interrelated. Knowledge cannot be reduced to isolated contents and is thus not merely a matter of methodological analysis, verification, and proof alone. For contents only become meaningful when they are dialectically related to the experiences and forms that mediate them. Neither content nor form are ahistorical, neutral, independent givens: both have been historically developed and continue to evolve with regards to each other, both are products of society, just as both affect, in turn, the actual constitution of this society. What is ignored by both, positivism and the culture industry, is thus, as Horkheimer puts it, that "[t]he facts which our senses present to us are socially preformed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ. Both are not simply natural; they are shaped by human activity" (2002: 200). Therefore, "[t]he very concept of ‘fact’ is a product – a product of social alienation; in it, the abstract object of exchange is conceived as a model for all objects of experience in a given category” (Horkheimer 2004: 56). Far from being a neutral conception of the objective world, far from being as disinterested as it is presented by those who dogmatically rely on it, the idea of the factual, the social practices it engenders and the cultural productions that rely on it, are part of the reigning ideology.

Institutionalized science in a positivistic sense and its divulgation through popular formats are thus indeed related to all the other layers of society. Adopting an authoritarian stance by considering themselves as actual providers of knowledge – the only ones able to do so, as it is them defining the conditions for knowledge production – they are perfectly integrated in the reigning power structures of society. They perpetually reproduce the capitalistic principle of division of labor, consolidate its implicit value structure, and impose a worldview in which individuals are considered as passive receivers of information and its accurate interpretation rather than subjects capable of experiencing on their own. Through the products of the culture industry, “[e]xperience – the continuity of consciousness in which everything not present survives, in which practice and association establish tradition in the individual – is replaced by the selective, disconnected, inter-changeable and ephemeral state of being informed which, as one can already observe, will promptly be cancelled by other information” (Adorno 1993: 33). Rather than instigating the development of a critical awareness, many entertaining documentaries, even when they deal with serious topics, thus feed a consumerist attitude that is perfectly adapted to capitalism.

2 Becoming Cliché: The Homogenizing Agency of Culture Industrial Production

The problem we are faced with when we question the agency of commercial documentary film is thus wide-ranging: it is a matter of how perceptual habits are shaped and perpetually endorsed through the standardization of cultural expressions in modern capitalism. It is this normalization of the perception which facilitates that authoritarian presentations are not only established, but also pass almost unnoticed. Obviously, technically produced images and sounds play thereby an important role. Combining indexical images that seem to be exact copies of the empirical world, with the repetitive use of stereotyped patterns, frozen genres and rigid forms, films are likely to generate the internalization of benchmarks and thereby to endorse the normalized values which underlie the current state of society. For the culture industry’s “inherent tendency to adopt the tone of a factual report" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002: 118) operates to blur the boundaries between reality and its replication. This is true for any product of the culture industry, but especially decisive when it comes to documentaries. What makes the appearance of the artificial world of the culture industry as immediate reflection of reality so strong is that its clichéd imagery imposes a strong and all-encompassing scheme which assimilates any element of the empirical world by converting it into a recognizable commonplace. "Reality becomes its own ideology through the spell cast by its faithful duplication," writes Adorno in *The Schema of Mass Culture*. "This is how the technological veil and the myth of the positive is woven. If the real becomes an image insofar as in its particularity it becomes as equivalent to the whole as one Ford car is to all the others of the same range, then the image on the other hand turns into immediate reality" (2001b: 63).

What Adorno articulated, prophetically, in the 1940s, has in the meantime become reality: nowadays, events, situations, objects, individual appearances or memories are often said to be akin to films or photographs. It is telling that many contemporary feature-length documentaries or serials, as well as various hybrid forms such as docudrama, true-crime stories, reality tv and the like, have meanwhile converged with their fictional counterparts on many levels: like fiction films, they display intriguing characters and fascinating circumstances, rely on thrilling, often spectacular narratives and are provided with intense soundtracks and special effects, while keeping the aura of the factual intact. In the late 1980s, the recourse to fictional strategies and Hollywood-aesthetic in a non-fiction film like Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) was still an extraordinary, subversive stylistic device with a strong, very concrete political impact.[3] Since then, it has developed into a widespread formula in documentary film-making. It seems as if the reality-effect of fiction films had superseded even reality itself – as if "real life" happened where the drama is and, in order to be recognized as such, required specific patterns that stand for its significance.

The problem is that when reality is automatically associated with the ubiquitous images that command the way of perceiving it, this very reality, in turn, appears as if it was as flat, consistent and univocal as the products of the culture industry pretend it to be, even if it takes on a spectacular look in their representation. For through their dazzling appearance, the products of the culture industry obscure the persisting antagonisms and structural contradictions of society by upholding an imagery in which it appears as coherent in itself. Rather than critically assessing conflicts in their substantial social and political dimension, they are treated in a particularistic manner, dissociated from their manifold imbrications with other layers of society, and isolated from the structurally related problems which facilitate their emanation. Documentaries today widely reproduce this pattern. It is particularly visible, for instance, in nature films such as *March of the Penguins* (dir. Luc Jacquet 2005) or series such as *Our Planet* (prod. Netflix 2019) which present savage animals as authentic creatures of nature completely disconnected from the global society. The occasional remarks about the precariousness of their living environment because of human destructiveness are thoroughly overshadowed by the stunning images of their intact surroundings and the moving stories of their peculiar ways of living, peppered with stirring soundtracks.

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[3] Morris' film depicts the conviction of Randall Dale Adams for the shooting of a police officer. The documentary discloses serious inconsistencies of the official investigation, which led to the liberation of the accused one year after the film was released.

But this pattern is also visible, to a certain extent, in documentaries that aim at addressing critical issues. Recently, for example, a feature-length film about the Hollywood-mogul Harvey Weinstein (*Untouchable,* dir. Ursula Macfarlane 2019), accused of severe and repeated sexual abuse on women at his mercy, resonates in several ways with a such a figure that Adorno already criticized in the mid 20th century as "the spurious personalization of objective issues" (1957: 485) – a figure that corresponds to one of the patterns analyzed in the comprehensive study on the *Authoritarian Personality.*[4] Adorno's (fictional) example relates to the representation of a dictator as "nothing but a bad, pompous, and cowardly man," while his wife is depicted as warmhearted, helpless victim and those who defend her and the "right cause" are "personally idealized." In *Untouchable,* several of the abused women and other people in Weinstein's surroundings disclose terrifying situations of harassment, abuse of power and rape, and describe him as fascinating, but power-hungry and perverse, while physically unattractive and vulgar. However, by focusing on the personage and presenting him as an evil, all-mighty perpetrator, while the witnesses appear as his vulnerable targets, the film ratifies the stereotypical representation it aims, at the same time, to overcome. Rather than problematizing the structural conditions of the Hollywood-system, based on hard, merciless, misogynic business which not only perpetually reproduces stereotyped representations, but also generates both the unquestioned desire to become a star and the aura of those in power, in relation to the fact that this very system serves as a blueprint for society as a whole and is at the same time its glossy reflection, the film concentrates on one exceptional individual who seemingly degenerated and became a monster. This is not to say that the 'real' affair – which opened a huge critical debate about women's vulnerable position in society and triggered the world-wide #MeToo movement – was itself nothing but another repetition of a recurrent media scheme. Even if it is surely characteristic of contemporary society that such a subject gains attention precisely when it touches those who are already in a privileged position, it is still an emancipatory move to problematize the conditions of those who are subjected to the power of others. However, its coverage through a film like *Untouchable* reduces its impact to a Hollywood-like drama about Hollywood itself.

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[4] In Chapter XVII (written by Adorno), "Ticket Thinking and Personalization in Politics," personalization is mentioned as one of the formal constituents of fascist approaches to political thinking.

Another aspect of Adorno's statement, which is intimately linked with the elaborations above, touches upon the fact that through the culture industrial standardization of the perception of reality, any singularity is immediately superseded by familiar tropes, associated with generalized features, and thus absorbed by reproduceable patterns. Instead of appearing in its particularity, its irreducible otherness and complexity, any singular being or event is converted into that which makes it comparable with allegedly identical others. Even the most exotic feature thus loses its uniqueness, turns into a cliché and gets thereby associated with preconceived ideas. Any remote tribe turns into an example of savageness or, inversely, of respectful unison with nature similar to many others of the like, when shown through the ever-same formal devices; any individual history becomes ordinary when narrated in a conventional, stereotypical way.

This reduction to attributed traits also appears in many documentaries with humanitarian aspirations. In her book *Immediations,* Pooja Rangan (2017) demonstrates comprehensively how certain aesthetic strategies used in documentary in order to produce the impression of immediacy, authenticity, urgency, and commitment, rely on an authoritarian projection of consensual ideas onto their subjects that remain unquestioned. One of her examples is the award-winning film *Born into Brothels* (dir. Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman 2005) about a group of children raised in an Indian red-light district. The filmmaker documents how she teaches them to use a camera in order to help them emancipate themselves from their social condition. Yet, she thereby reproduces not only the trope of "feral innocence" – the stereotyped representation of children as pure "figure[s] that exist[…] outside mediation and political economy" (Rangan 2017: 27), as opposed to the sheer cruelty of their mothers and the context into which they were born. She also reinforces the colonial fantasy of the superior humanitarian moralism of the Western subject over Third World barbarism. Rather than challenging the perception of these children in relation to the generalized context of exploitation of late capitalism, the film upholds the hegemonic world view of domination and thus sanctions the status quo.

Such an ambiguous dimension can also be found in the example given above, in which Harvey Weinstein himself, despite the focus on his personae, appears as the perfect stereotyped image of a repulsive, power-obsessive, very rich man. However, the message is double: the film suggests that such individuals are evil, but at the same time, they are well-off and thus remain societal models to follow in a society in which success largely determines the value of a person. Likewise, the representation of his victims in the film makes them resemble each other in their expressions and the way they tell their experiences, and thereby conform to the socially established way how victims are supposed to behave. Moreover, their physical appearance as shown in the film also sets the beauty standards of contemporary society; their objectified bodies thus serve as ideal irrespective of the history they have gone through. Adorno calls this dimension of the culture industry its "hieroglyphic script" (2001b: 93), akin to the appearance of value as hieroglyphic in Marx's Capital[5] (Marx 1976: 167, cf. also Behrens 2003: 76), which is supposed to instill messages in a subliminal way that affect the spectator on a more unconscious level and are thus all the more powerful as they remain undetected. Adorno goes as far as to claim that "the hidden message may be more important than the overt since this hidden message will escape the controls of consciousness, will not be 'looked through', will not be warded off by sales resistance, but is likely to sink into the spectator" (1954: 221).

These underlying messages are all the more efficient because the overarching presence of all kinds of images that are, despite their apparent disparity, aligned through normalized patterns, does not leave much space for subjective appropriation, genuine experience, and the development of awareness. For it generates the spontaneous association of any image with a meaning, an emotion, a value, which supersede any deviant instinctive reaction. Hence, the problem raised by Horkheimer and Adorno is a structural one. It touches upon society as a whole, its self-understanding and the perceptional conventions it continually reproduces. The culture industry – understood as a principle of standardization based on market criteria rather than an ominous godlike power controlling the market – is thus much more than a mere means to sell entertainment products to the masses. The problem is that it provides an all-encompassing schema in the Kantian sense of the term,[6] which directly links images with more or less inflexible ideas. “Kant intuitively anticipated what Hollywood has consciously put into practice: images are precensored during production by the same standard of understanding which will later determine their reception by viewers.” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 65) Thus, a normalized perception of society as a whole and of any of its respective elements is generated, which directly associates reality with unquestioned, seemingly consensual values. Yet, this consensual, inflexible view is problematic in itself. Claiming to represent ‘realistically’ the society as such, it facilitates authoritarian tendencies by cutting down the ability to develop critical awareness of society. As Horkheimer puts it with regards to the critical attitude he defends, “it is suspicious of the very categories of the better, useful, appropriate, productive, and valuable, as these are understood in the present order, and refuses to take them as nonscientific presuppositions about which one can do nothing” (2002: 206). Documentary formats which adopt the recurrent normalized schema intrinsically validate its pretention to represent the real, as if the association between specific contents with predetermined moral and political implications was a natural given rather than a socially formed, historically developed construction. But when the standardization of allegedly accurate forms automatically validates a representation as truthful, the mere application of such forms, in turn, facilitates the instrumentalization of such a representation for any political, ideological or populistic trend, as long as the underlying schema remains intact. Whence the importance to develop a sensitivity for the agency of forms, and to approach them through an immanent critique.

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[5] In Capital, Marx writes: "Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language." (167).

3 Non-identical Forms: That which Resists the Schema of Culture Industry

A thorough examination of that which distinguishes the products of the culture industry from their antipode – genuine artworks – can help grasp how different mediations of content through form correspond to different attitudes towards reality, and how critical approaches hold the potential to subvert authoritarian truth claims. Both, the products of the culture industry and genuine artworks, are according to Adorno social facts,[7] both emanate from the same historically developed society and mediate it through artistic forms, and both address it in one way or another. As both are intimately linked with the society and thus subject to its perpetual transformations, Adorno refuses to provide any formal, material or topical criteria supposed to be eternally valid for either of them. "Because art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain," he writes in *Aesthetic Theory*. "Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not by any set of invariants" (1997: 3). Hence, the fundamental divergence between genuine art and the products of the culture industry lies not in their aesthetic appearance as such, but in the stance they take on towards the social reality, its underlying power structure, and its conventionalized perception. This stance is expressed through their relation with their own material. While artworks follow their material as strictly as possible in order to carve out its inner truth content through a thorough formal construction, the products of the culture industry subordinate their material to the intentional purpose of producing effects, as we have seen previously. Thus, they are likely to adopt any fashionable form, regardless its relation to the content it mediates.

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[6] Briefly said, for Kant, a (transcendental) schema is that which relates non-empirical concepts to sensory perception (cf. Kant 1999, Book 2 Chapter 1).

Genuine artworks, by contrast, are only able to deploy their critical potential by resisting through their formal arrangement to their total integration into the codes of society. "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form," writes Adorno. "This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society. The complex of tensions in artworks crystallizes undisturbed in these problems of form and through emancipation from the external world's factual façade converges with the real essence" (7). Only by not conforming to conventionalized forms and formats that would immediately orient the meaning, only by subverting perceptual habits and frustrating the normalized expectations towards a given matter, can an object still be perceived, through its artistic mediation, in its singularity, instead of being seized through established criteria and thus absorbed in the realm of the return of the ever same. In order to allow contradictory elements to unfold in their dialectical movement, artworks must wrest their appearance from the veil of familiar consistency imposed by the culture industry. As Adorno, puts it: "Form works like a magnet that orders elements of the empirical in such a fashion that they are estranged from their extra-aesthetic existence, and it is only as a result of this estrangement that they master the extra-aesthetic essence" (309). It is precisely in their unassimilable otherness that lies the autonomy of artworks and thus their utopian moment which foreshadows the possibility of a not yet fathomable, different social reality.

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[7] Adorno grasps genuine artworks through their double constitution "as both autonomous and fait social" (1997: 7).

Accordingly, Adorno also insists on the fact that art is opposed to communication. Contrary to most products of the culture industry, art's inherent protest is all but a message: this is why Adorno rejects not only all kind of propaganda and advertising, but also the various shapes of artistic realism and committed art. "The notion of a 'message' in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world: the stance of the lecturer conceals a clandestine entente with the listeners, who could only be rescued by refusing it," he writes in *Commitment* (1974: 193). While the products of the culture industry consist of images meant to dissolve into signs associated with an accommodated signification, artworks, as "imageless images" (Adorno 1997: 379), immanently protest against the reality principle shaped by the societal logic of capitalism, in which every meaning is already determined in advance. The meaning of artworks eludes categorial prehension and defies unilateral interpretation; therein lies their singular enigmatic character.

Concerning films, Adorno was primarily critical about the medium and its potential as an artform because of its representational character and its perfect adaption to the culture industry. However, he also saw the possibility of emancipating film from its direct association with the tropes of mass production (cf. Adorno 2001c; Hansen 2012). And indeed, the works of many independent documentary filmmakers resonate strongly with his critical elaborations. Instead of taking the indexical material as evidence of reality and concentrating exclusively on the content, they consider their artistic material to be the genre's inherent tension between its seemingly direct relationship with the empirical world on the one hand, and its aesthetic configuration through which it acquires its meaning, on the other – a tension already stressed by John Grierson in the 1930s when he famously defined documentary as "creative treatment of reality" (2016: 216). While many mainstream productions exploit the fact that the artistic mediation is all too easily overshadowed by the film's appearance as immediate, artistically exigent documentary films unfold their form while taking heed of the complexity of their medium. Alexander Kluge for example – Adorno's disciple and friend – challenges in his hybrid films the "pseudo-realism of the culture industry" (Adorno 2005b: 141) by merging fictional elements, paintings, heterogeneous music scores, subjective narration, archival material and direct intervention into real situations, in order to produce a multiplicity of interrelations and contexts that refuse any unilateral interpretation. Mingling not only different modes, but also temporalities and perspectives, Kluge's films critically deconstruct the recurrent representation of reality through mainstream formats, re-inscribe it in its history and deploy heterogeneous layers of sense at the same time. Rather than stipulating a meaning by declaring it as truth, films like Kluge's interrupt the habits of perception and destabilize conventional preconceptions.

In a similar manner, the filmmaker Trinh T. Min-ha writes that in films addressing the real, "[m]eaning can […] be political only when it does not let itself be easily stabilized, and when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but, rather, empties or decentralizes it" (1990: 89). Hence, she refuses to provide clarifications on the people or situations appearing in her films, and develops an approach of "speaking nearby" her subjects rather than taking on an authoritarian perspective. Examples for artistic strategies to open up questions through formal devices rather than presenting contents as factual evidence are multifold. Some filmmakers disrupt the impression of conclusive coherence in their films by refusing to harmonize sound and images, or by abstaining from imposing a comprehensive narrative. Others undermine the appearance of immediacy of the images by taking on a reflective stance and exposing their materiality as such, or discursively disclose the precariousness of their own position. And still others problematize the ideological force of images by alienating them from their initial context and editing them together anew. For example, Angela Ricci Lucchi's and Yervant Gianikian's compositions of colonial film material (e.g. *Pays Barbare* 2013, or *Images d'Orient – Tourisme Vandal* 2001) or Susana de Sousa Dias' arrangements of propaganda films made during the Portuguese dictatorship (e.g. *Natureza Morta/Still Life* 2015) bear a strange compelling quality. With the slow rhythm and the absence of comments, the spectator is encouraged to sense that which hides in the folds of representation. For despite their link with a political agenda, those films make transpire a "mark of [the] society" (Adorno 2001c: 182) from which they originate, which exceeds the intentions of the filmmaker – Adorno alludes to this potential of medium in his text *Transparencies*. There are lots of independent films that carve out such a truth content of already existing images by recomposing them, estranging their initial aim and configuring them in subversive ways – Harun Farocki's critical filmic essays on the use of images in military or penitentiary contexts are particularly strong examples in this regard (cf *War at a Distance* 2003, *Images-War* 1987, *Prison Images* 2000). Other artistic devices proceed for example through a radical change of focus which betrays the sclerosed stereotypical embedding of their subjects (e.g. Roberto Minervini's docu-fiction *The Other Side* 2015, portraying a group of drug-addicts in Louisiana, Wang Bing's *Till Madness Do Us Part* 2013 focusing on patients in a mental asylum; or Sergei Loznitsa's *Factory* 2004, about a working day in a factory), or disrupt the common connotations of a representation through subversive formal intercessions. Marie Voignier's film *International Tourism* (2014) for example features videos she made during her visit in North Korea with a group of tourists. The images show what all traveler films of the otherwise inaccessible country show: captures of carefully selected tourist attractions, geographical sites, mass spectacles approved by the authorities in order to produce a specific image, as opposed to the demonized representations of the West. *International Tourism* neither tries to corroborate the official views, nor to present an alternative reality. Instead, the film interrupts the flow of perception through a thorough reconstitution of the soundtrack, which features all the environmental sounds but cuts off the voices, thereby producing a strange distance which reverberates the spectator back on her own gaze. Otherwise disorienting is Lucien Castaing-Taylor's and Véréna Paravel's film *Leviathan* (2012), a documentary featuring a fish trawler by night. The film is constituted by a strange composition of immersive images produced by cameras attached on different objects, without any associated spoken comment. Here, the difficulty to identify what is shown by the images subverts even the understanding of what documentary film might be.

What such artistic documentaries have in common despite the heterogeneous formal devices through which they operate is that they challenge the normalized perception of reality by wresting the images out of their immediacy and undoing their direct association with a specific meaning. However, this subversive force can only deploy itself as long as the forms retain their unfamiliar particularity which marks them as artistic rather than mainstream productions. For as both artworks and the products of the culture industry are intimately linked with the society in which they are embedded, their agency always depends on their position in and vis-à-vis the actual historically developed reality. And just as society is in constant transformation, so are the conventions on which its perception is based. The perceptive habits and schemes of the reality that artworks seek to challenge are molded by the products of the culture industry, while the latter strives to assimilate autonomous artworks and typecast their particularity as yet another pattern. Hence, the products of the culture industry as affirmative expressions of society and their subversive counterpart, genuine artworks, are also permanently mediated one through the other. Rather than two distinct spheres, they constitute opposed, but dialectically interconnected poles.

Therefore, autonomous artworks are likely to lose their subversive potential when they "age" (cf. Adorno 1988), when their formerly unique, idiosyncratic form turns into a generalized design applied on indifferent topics and integrated in the canon of the culture industry as yet another trendy novelty. While a documentary film as *Silverlake Life: The View from Here* (dir. Peter Friedman and Tom

Joslin 1993) showing the disturbing intimacy between a couple of two men suffering of AIDS and their camera until one of them dies still provided an unsettling account of private life in the 1990s, self-representations though reality television and documentary formats have become the norm today and largely provide material for mass consumption. At the same time, home-made video material and its large diffusion on the internet also facilitates that otherwise prohibited representations reach international audiences, as non-professional films made during the Arab revolutions comprehensively show for example. Once again, the problem needs to be faced dialectically with regards to society as a whole.

Not every documentary film shown on big screens is *per se* ideologically suspicious, and not every independent production necessarily subversive. What needs to be stressed is that "[d]ocumentary is always about something more or other than what it depicts," as Jonathan Kahana puts it (2009: 7). Rather than blindly believing or straightforwardly rejecting what passes as immediate reality, as objectively real or undoubtedly true through documentary formats, the recourse to the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer leads us to question how a meaning is constructed, embedded, and mediatized in society. Only by considering the multiple mediations through which a content acquires its meaning, a form appears as trustworthy, and a societal issue as worthy to be addressed, can a critique of the documentary realm become at the same time an immanent critique of the historically developed society in which it acquired its significance, by which it is informed, and which it addresses.

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