

ConTrust AG 5 – Workshop, June 13-14, 2022

Location: Normative Orders Building, Max Horkheimer-Straße 2, Room 5.01

Contested Forms. A Workshop on Documentary, Trust and Conflict

Organized by Laliv Melamed and Vinzenz Hediger

How does documentary relate to trust and conflict? This workshop explores documentary as a tool of democratic deliberation. It starts from the assumption that we are approaching, or have already reached, a tipping point at which documentary is no longer just a means for articulating social conflict but has itself become a contested form. This has serious implications for trust in the veracity of documentary and trust in documentary as a means of political agency.

Documentary has always been more than the “creative treatment of actuality”. Documentary as a form of (audio)visual representation with privileged truth claims emerged in the 1920s in response to a perceived crisis of democracy and the seeming demise of the “omni-competent citizen” (Walter Lippman). As such, documentary has always been not just about representing reality, but about democratic deliberation and eliciting and enforcing certain norms of citizenship. Social documentary is a particular case in point. Social documentary makes injustice visible. It puts the spectator in a position which political theorist Judith Sklar has described as “passive injustice”, i.e. a position in which he becomes witness to injustice without assuming responsibility and doing something about it. Social documentary thus addresses – or interpellates, to use Althusser’s term – the spectator as a citizen with agency who can and should do something to correct the injustice to which she has become a witness.

Documentary in that sense is an integral part of what Pierre Rosanvallon proposes to call “counter-democracy”, i.e. that aspect of democratic governance which takes place outside of the electoral cycle and parliamentary representation and which takes shape in vigilance, the public denunciation of dysfunction and various forms of judgment to correct dysfunction. If counter-democracy is an “invisible institution” in the sense of Kenneth Arrow, then documentary can be understood as a highly visible part of that invisible institution – a form of practical resistance through organized distrust which, somewhat paradoxically, hinges on the trust invested in the documentary form by the citizen-subject.

The assumption of privileged agency of the presumed citizen-subject of (Western) liberal democracy connected to the truth-claims of documentary has been criticized by scholars such as Pooja Rangan in her work on the humanitarian impulse in documentary. But the assumption that the documentary representation of social and political injustice will create a consensus for action has run up against obstacles in documentary filmmaking practice as well. The emergence of digital portable camera devices, in particular smart phones, seem to quickly change the field of social and political action. Instant documentary footage uploaded to the internet triggered and sustained protest movements across the Middle East and North Africa in the early 2010s. The availability of digital cameras also seemed to create an opening

for a documentary critique of the Israeli governance regime in the occupied territories. But it soon turned out that what we might call the accountability feedback loop which promises to make the documentary visualization of injustice effective in democracies does not compensate for the absence of resilient democratic institutions in a country like Egypt, while in the occupied territories settler activists quickly tried to turn the privileged truth claims of the documentary form to their advantage and started making their own activist videos countering those of anti-settler activists, a dynamic closely observed and analyzed by Israeli documentary (or rather, meta-documentary) “The Viewing Booth” (2021). In a similar fashion we can observe that climate change sceptics and right-wing activists in Europe and the US ranging from the extreme right-wing German AfD party to Steve Bannon and Dinesh D’Souza produce documentaries to get their message across to their constituencies and rely on the inherent truth claims of the form in the hope of broadening their audience.

The documentary form, in other words, is no longer just a means for articulating social conflict. It has itself become a site of social and political conflict, a conflict which could also be described as a contest for the trust reflexively afforded the documentary form by audiences. In the ideal type of documentary, which addresses a citizen-subject in a liberal democracy, documentary will demand, but also foster what Mark Warren proposes to call “generalized trust”, i.e. trust in the ability of existing institutional arrangements to address social injustice, and trust in the willingness of other citizen-subjects to have the best interest of those suffering from social injustice at heart. Once documentary form itself becomes contested, it can become a source of particularized trust, the kind which binds together in-groups against out-groups (climate change deniers vs. climate activists, etc.). Through this transformation, however, the documentary form thus broadly understood shows resilience in conflict, so to speak, a continued ability to marshal the kind of trust in veracity which makes it an effective device for argument and deliberation regardless of context and content.

Taking Ra’anan Alexandrowicz’ “The Viewing Booth” as its point of departure, this workshop will explore documentary as a means for articulating conflict and as site of conflict and contest.

Program:

Monday, June 13, 6-8 pm

Screening of “The Viewing Booth”, ISR 2021, 70 min.
Followed by a discussion with Ra’anan Alexandrowicz and Laliv Melamed

Tuesday, June 14, 9-10:30 am: Session 1

Work in progress: Short Impulses/Presentations by Pooja Rangan (Amherst), Ra’anan Alexandrowicz (Tel Aviv), and Laliv Melamed (Groningen)

11 am – 3 pm: Session 2 (including lunch break)

Conflict, Trust, and Documentary Representation: Three Case Studies by Asja Makarevic (Vienna), Des O’Rawe (Belfast), Rebecca Boguska (Mainz). Response: Pooja Rangan

11 am -12 noon

Asja Makarevic: Knowledge Production in the Post-Conflict Society of Former Yugoslavia: From Documentary to Legal Evidence

12 noon – 1 pm

Des O’Rawe: Disturbing the Peace? Documentary Film and the Politics of Memory in Post-Conflict N. Ireland

1 pm-2 pm: Lunch Break

2 pm – 3 pm

Rebecca Boguska:

3:30 pm – 5 pm: Session 3

Round Table

Pooja Rangan (Amherst)

Hanna Pfeiffer (Frankfurt, ConTrust, International Relations)

Pavan Malreddy (Frankfurt, ConTrust, Literature/Conflict Studies)

Sagorika Singha (Delhi Center for the Study of Developing Societies, Film/Media Studies)

Finn-Lauritz Schmidt (Frankfurt, ConTrust; Penal Law/International Law)

Vinzenz Hediger (Frankfurt, ConTrust)

Abstracts Session 2

Asja Makarevic

Knowledge Production in the Post-Conflict Society of Former Yugoslavia: From Documentary to Legal Evidence

Filmmakers, visual artists and photographers, who are active in conflict and post-conflict societies, such as the former Yugoslav countries, often engage in investigations. They document ongoing violations of human rights or visualise past, unresolved crimes. Intentionally or not, their work can lead to the creation of evidence at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia or state courts. Reversely, established criminal records are put in use as a way of reflecting and contextualising publicly unknown or disputed

facts. Sometimes it is difficult to tell where a visual practice stops and a legal evidence begins, or the other way around.

By eye-witnessing military or militia abuse of power, image-makers become integral to the *dispositif* of modern warfare. Their images come under careful scrutiny of critical scholars, whose mode of operation is characterised by suspicion of the authority of established truths. Post-structural theories rightly argue for skepticism of master narratives and media representations, but, when used with disregard to specific socio-political considerations immanent to analyzed images of war, can sow doubt about non-negotiable points of reference of a country's past and its history of war. The resulting performance of discourse resembles a performance of ideology for its own sake. As such it aligns with anti-epistemology as defined by Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman (2021). When the applied critical theory shares characteristics with anti-epistemology, it plays into hands of radical ethno-nationalists. In those instances, it has a potential to accelerate further fragmentation of ethnically diverse societies such as present Bosnia and Herzegovina. Against this background I am interested in studying *visual practices which contribute to knowledge production as a factor of stability in multicultural societies*.

Images which help secure evidence in time when there is no political will or ability yet to engage official public bodies to investigate or reinvestigate war crimes in the former Yugoslavia will be carefully analyzed. A particular attention will be paid to the aesthetic investigation carried out by Pawel Pawlikowski's observational documentary *Serbian Epics* (1992).

Asja Makarevic is a visiting assistant professor at the University of the Arts in Vienna. Her book *Post-Yugoslav Cinema in Transition: Non Representational Images of Post-War (Culture)* is forthcoming from Amsterdam University Press.

Des O'Rawe

Disturbing the Peace? Documentary Film and the Politics of Memory in Post-Conflict N. Ireland

This presentation explores how documentary filmmakers are responding to the fraught politics of memory and reconciliation in contemporary Northern Ireland. Beginning with a brief overview of the key local production funding and screening issues, the discussion focusses on several recent expository-poetic or 'experimental' documentaries that explicitly incorporate other artistic practices and artefacts within their *mise en scène* and narrative framework, and asks: Do such intermedial strategies risk decontextualising history by becoming complicit in the aestheticization of suffering? In activating the 'aura of art' do these documentaries foreground particular artists and their art at the expense of representing the experiences, memories, and testimonies of victims and survivors of the conflict? Or, in eschewing more typically mainstream investigative and journalistic styles, do they in fact create alternative spaces for dialogue and reconciliation in an otherwise dysfunctional post-conflict democracy?

Des O’Rawe is Senior Lecturer in Film in the School of Arts, English and Languages at Queens University Belfast and a researcher at the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice.

Rebecca Boguska

The Public’s Right to Know, or the Government’s Right to Secrecy.

In this talk I discuss a PDF file published by the US Department of Defense in 2016 containing 162 scanned pages from different government documents that show photographs of indistinct body parts, redacted mugshots, and “crime scenes.” The release of these photographs was authorized by the US Secretary of Defense, who reviewed and certified approximately 2,000 photographs of people detained, abused and tortured by the US forces in the aftermath of 9/11 – a certification process that was prompted by an American Civil Liberties’ lawsuit following their 2003 *Freedom of Information Act* request. By analyzing not only the photographs themselves, but also the legal frameworks as well as the certification process, I argue that this PDF file produces a form of documentary visibility that tries to conceal and render the torture invisible, obscuring yet again the knowledge about what has been happening to prisoners and detainees in the course of the US’ “War on Terror.” As I will show, the US Department of Defense’s withholding of evidence of torture, even as it apparently provides visibility to it in this PDF file, allows us to trace the ways in which the Department has been continuously negotiating the public’s right to know and its own right to secrecy in relation to the abuse and torture of prisoners in US detention centers overseas.

Dr. Rebecca Boguska is an Assistant Professor (Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin) of Film Studies at the Institute for Film, Theater, Media and Cultural Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. Her research interests include military, infrastructural, and filmic knowledge, methods of film studies, and the experimental environments of coastal research.