

Englisches Seminar Münster
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Abstracts der Sektion II: "The Documentary Turn"

Gerd Bayer:

"Fake Films As Media Criticism"

Even though mockumentary films represent a rather recent sub-genre of the history of cinema, they already come in a number of different shapes and flavours. Some simply try to amuse, others aim for more parodistic effects. Some allude in a reverential manner to earlier films, others introduce a more skeptical note into the discourse on the role of cinematic texts. This paper will concentrate on the latter variety, on mockumentary films that provide a commentary, through their parody, on the state and role of visual media. Since mockery and parody rely heavily on the delivery of precise verbal gestures, the question of style is of prime concern to an understanding of the subtle workings of mockumentaries. Whereas documentary films claim to present to their viewers real events, mockumentaries refer less directly to the everyday reality of their audience. The precise relationship between the filmic text and its purportedly genuine object is determined by its level and degree of artificiality, that is, by its artfulness. This paper, then, will outline some of the aesthetic strategies used in such different mockumentaries as Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983), Rob Reiner's *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, and Benoît Poelvoorde's *Man Bites Dog* (1992), as well as Peter Jackson and Costa Botes's *Forgotten Silver* (1997), commenting also on the films by Christopher Guest. The machinery for creating both the humor and the criticism inherent in mockumentary films rests on a stylistic program that emphasizes the constructedness of film, its artifice, with the intention of glossing over its artificiality. In an ironic twist on viewers' expectations, mockumentaries make use of the mediatory qualities of film for heightening the alleged veracity of their content, or rather, for emphasizing the unavoidable status of film as a mediation and therefore interpretation of reality. I argue, first of all, that the ostentatious use of artifice in mockumentary films functions as a means to lessen the sense of artificiality usually attached to cinematic texts and, in a second step, that this emphasis on the mediality of film derives from the metanarrative criticism of mockumentaries.

Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier:

"'Many a weary mile have I gone with Herr Guillaume at my side': Michael Frayn's *Democracy* as Docudrama"

While the freedom of expression in journalism has suffered from the row about the cartoons of the prophet Muhammad, the ancient medium theatre is becoming the place to freely negotiate political issues. The new genre of verbatim theatre has gained importance over the past years: "[People] come to the fun palace, to the dream house, to hear the truth", as director Samuel West puts it. In an article in *The Guardian*, Lyn Gardner claims that verbatim theatre is the new journalism, but that the journalistic style of the play *Guantanamo* offers only black and white, while Michael Frayn's *Democracy* permits the exploration of grey areas. Interestingly enough, Frayn's play *Democracy* (2000), which depicts the rise and fall of Willy Brandt and focuses on the role of GDR spy Günter Guillaume, has won even greater acclaim by its continued comparison with verbatim theatre. Though

plays like *Democracy* were not initiated by people who were personally involved in the historic events presented, their object is likewise to make history come alive, to physically represent anew what is past but has survived in oral reports, books, journalistic reports, etc. History plays are especially interesting insofar as they represent "true history", but can actually never be "true", because they are only the reproduction of a reproduction (cf. Foucault). Gardner's criticism of *Guantanamo* highlights the question of how much factuality and realism a theatre play needs. This paper argues that actually little is needed to achieve an impact with a documentary-style drama when the author can rely on the audience's knowledge, memory and imagination. With only the help of the actors, lights, noises, chairs and a table, *Democracy* produces the image of a certain medium as well as images known from a certain medium. Without aiming at historic verisimilitude, moments of political importance can be reproduced, cause great compassion and stimulate the discussion of current issues. What the audience experiences is a new perception of something extraordinary that they are already familiar with from other media. I would like to call this an "intermedial déjà-vu", which is achieved by the reproduction of historical events in a "magnified" version or as if they were acted in "slow motion" (cf. Benjamin). Thus Frayn brings about a documentary aesthetics that is at the same time an "intermedial synaesthetics". Due to its strong intermediality, the old medium theatre conjoins well with new media and non-fictional elements. The increasing hybridisation of the theatre emphasises the irretrievable character of historical moments and each theatre performance, nourishes the cult of images (cf. Kamper), but also sharpens the mind for current political discussions.

Martin Doll:

""Documents' from The Atlas Group Archive - Of a Witness Telling His Story/History: 'Hostage: The Bachar Tapes'""

At Documenta 11 a multiplicity of documentary works were exhibited. Thus one could get the impression that artists are awarded the ability to depict historical and social phenomena in a more reliable way. Against this background, Walid Ra'ad showed his project 'The Atlas Group', though his works are characterised by not claiming an authenticity of the representations based on a special artistic gaze but by questioning certain forms of aesthetization, i.e. illustration of historical reality in general. However, I want to focus on Ra'ad's lecture performance *The Loudest Muttering is Over*. Documents from The Atlas Group Archive as a case study. In this performance he presents his works: several forged 'files' of the Lebanese Civil War. On the one hand, he puts found photographs from newspaper archives in a narrative context. On the other hand, he feigns historical materials with a link to well-known events and allegedly made available by eyewitnesses: videos and notebooks with commented photographs. Thereby the audience's background knowledge, primarily derived from the mass media, is used, recontextualised and through the uncovering of the fake - different pieces of information become contradictory or Ra'ad reveals it overtly to the audience during the discussion, which is itself manipulated by briefed audience members - finally rendered doubtful. Sometimes culturally determined previous knowledge of the peripients is demonstrated: The 'witness' of the Bachar Tapes - a pretended, sixth Kuwaitian hostage among the five well-known Americans during the Hostage Crises 1985 and the Iran-Contra Affair respectively - is played by a famous actor in Lebanon. Fakes, as soon as they are revealed or marked as such, may disclose ex post the rules that govern a particular discursive formation of a field of knowledge, because it is this formation that

assures their discursive correctness despite their falsity. The term discursive formation, borrowed from Foucault, is to be understood as a polymorphic network that rules the appearance of a specific discursive practice, i.e. particular utterances of experts. Ra'ad's works, as they are solely presented within the art context, do not pose as direct intervention in the political scene. Because, by evoking a shift in the way we usually conceive historical facts and primarily their arrangement to create meaning, they rather have an indirect impact on the field of knowledge described above. Whereas in historiography contingent, 'irrelevant' and 'minor' events usually are suppressed in favour of a coherent text and argumentation, Ra'ad focuses on these seemingly marginal aspects: Contemporary Lebanese history is therefore shown as a kaleidoscope of heterogeneous events and the search for a historical reality is marked as an inexhaustible task.

Christian Huck:

"Rockumentaries: Putting Music in Pictures"

According to the Guardian's eminent music critic Alexis Petridis, rockumentaries seem to have gone through some kind of a renaissance in recent years. As if to prove this, in October 2005 London's Institute for Contemporary Art screened more than twenty films in their Uncontainable: A Music Documentary Season. However, there is something awkward about the idea of documenting music in pictures, of translating a predominantly aural medium into an audio-visual presentation. It seems no coincidence that the term 'rockumentar' was apparently first used in *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) - a mockumentary about the non-existing heavy metal band Spinal Tap. Fascinatingly, *This is Spinal Tap* is arguably the most successful attempt to produce a documentary on a rock band. In my talk, I attempt to unearth a paradox that lies at the heart of rockumentaries in general, and which is cleverly revealed in *This is Spinal Tap*. My central argument will go along the following lines: Pop/Rock music, although being an aural experience first and foremost, has been just as much obsessed with its visual image as with its sound. From Elvis to Britney Spears, artists and record companies have always attempted to control the visual image: on record covers, in music videos, during live performances, etc. When trying to film such acts in documentary's favourite fly-on-the-wall mode, the films have often great difficulties penetrating the visual image that the bands and the record companies have produced themselves. If a film attempts to go beyond the prefabricated image, it has to create new images. But is that still 'documentary'? *Spinal Tap*, on the other hand, have no image(s) that *This is Spinal Tap* would have to take into consideration in the first place - and consequently the film succeeds in giving an inside view into the life of a rock band, albeit a non-existing one. After outlining a general overview of classical music documentaries from Martin Scorsese's swan song for *The Band*, *The Last Waltz* (1978), to 2003's *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*, I will concentrate on more creative takes on the idea of documenting pop and rock music. Apart from *This is Spinal Tap*, other (more obscure) mockumentaries like Michael Apter's *Stardust* (1974) or the recent *Brothers of the Head* (2006) will be analysed, but also more complicated undertakings like Michael Winterbottom's *24 Hour Party People* (2002), which 'documents' the rise and fall of the Manchester music scene from Joy Division to the Happy Mondays. The aim of my paper is not only to introduce the genre of rockumentaries, but also to question the role of the documentary in an image-based culture in general. Can the documentary show something that is otherwise unseen, or can it merely 'edit' the images that are constantly being produced by companies, stars, mass media, etc.?

Roger Lüdeke:

"'Documentary Drama' and the Theatricality of Politics: Guantanamo: Honour Bound to Defend Freedom by Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo"

Documentary drama assembles "authentic speeches, essays, clippings, pronunciamentos, pamphlets, photographs and films, historical characters and settings" (Erwin Piscator, 1929). It aims at "criticizing deception, counterfeit and lies" (Peter Weiß, 1968). Apparently, the political stance of documentary theatre is based on premises that have undergone a fundamental revision during the last thirty years. Representation and referentiality, intention and authenticity, history and truth have been and still are the major points of attack in the theory of language and culture. Their various reconceptualizations have left their marks both in literary studies and in aesthetic practice. Under these circumstances a contemporary notion of documentary drama seems hardly feasible anymore. However, an important current within contemporary British drama is characterized by a renewal of documentary techniques of representation; not only authors such as Michael Frayn or Tom Stoppard exhibit a - meanwhile rather long lasting - 'turn' to the political documentary. For several years now the London Tricycle Theatre has been a major forum for contemporary documentary theatre. One of the more recent Tricycle productions is Victoria Brittain's and Gillian Slovo's Guantanamo: 'Honor Bound to Defend Freedom'. First performed in 2004, it has meanwhile gained worldwide success. Guantanamo uses interviews with detainees freshly released from the Camp X-Ray detention centre, situated at the Bahía de Guantánamo in Southern Cuba, in February 2004. The way Brittain and Slovo combine personal statements, letters, political speeches, legal and medical comments can hardly be distinguished from the kind of docu-montage the genre's precursors had practiced long before them. It is striking, however, how Guantanamo - possibly drawing back on Brecht's theory of *Verfremdung* - reflects its proper theatrical situation and how it uses illusion breaking techniques of representation for its specific political purposes. The strategic impact of these techniques becomes clearer, once Guantanamo is analysed with the help of contemporary theories of the political. For the last fifteen years authors like Pierre Legendre and Jacques Rancière have discussed the problem of political institution and sovereignty within a decidedly theatrical frame of reference, too: as a stage of language (Jacques Rancière) and as a fantastic scene of primordial violence (Pierre Legendre). Using these conceptualisations of the political seems promising: on the one hand, it allows for a description of the functional particularities of contemporary docu-montage in distinction from its historical precursors; on the other hand, it can help to make us see the gains of freedom of the contemporary docu-drama by concentrating on the aesthetic difference between theatrical performativity and socio-political communication.

Kathleen Starck:

"My Name is Rachel Corrie"

"Theatre can't change the world. But what it can do, when it's as good as this, is to send us out enriched by other people's passionate concern. " (The Guardian) This might well be the motivation behind the 2005 Royal Court staging of the writings of Rachel Corrie, which proved to be a great success in London and at the 2006 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. The text for his production - one hesitates to call it a play - has been edited from Corrie's e-mails and journals by Alan Rickman and Katharina Viner. It is the story of a 23 year-old woman who leaves her comfortable American life to

stand between a bulldozer and a Palestinian home. She does not survive. The question that arises is: why stage it in Corrie's own words instead of writing a script on the basis of her writings? I would like to argue that the use of 'original' writing in combination with a performance aesthetics reminiscent of journal writing itself serves to produce a more immediate audience response. I will analyse how the distance that one would expect to be created between the narrated events and the spectators is seemingly erased by the simultaneity of the staging of the events and their being written down/read out by the actress. All this, in turn, is heightened by the audience's knowledge that these are Corrie's own words and that there are eye witness reports, statements of her friends and family as well as photos to be found on the internet. Within this greater context then, I would like to look at the apparent audience's need of witnessing 'the real thing' and question its value.

Soenke Zehle:

"Passions for the Real: How Sorious Samura Redeems Reality"

Sorious Samura, an acclaimed Sierra Leonean documentary filmmaker now living in London, has taken it upon himself to 'represent the innocents' in his work. His documentaries, characterized by a unique reality-TV style and a maximization of authorial intervention, are regularly featured on CNN International, and Samura has become an important voice in the debate over how issues related to Africa more generally are represented in the media. By way of a critical exploration of his approach, I want to identify elements of a specifically transcultural perspective on contemporary documentary film, with a particular emphasis on the return of 'dv-realism' (Manovich) and its relationship to a violent 'passion for the real' (Badiou).