

CHRISTIANE SCHLOTE
AND ECKART VOIGTS-VIRCHOW

**Introduction: “The Creative Treatment of Actuality” –
New Documentarism¹**

Faced with the ubiquity of mediation, simulation and virtuality, the experience of supposedly ‘real’ identity has become precious and desirable – and the notion of documentary truth precarious. In general terms, constructivism and systems theory hold that we cannot think the real independently of the epistemic subject. Our notions and concepts of the real are inevitably linked to our apparatus of perception and cognition. This awareness of the fact that any kind of experience comes to us in constructed, mediated and performed versions, arguably requires a revision of received notions of ‘documentarism.’ In an attempt to differentiate between documentarism as an aesthetic ploy or a narrative approach Sven Rossel suggests the following three categories: 1) the document as “the very work in question,” 2) reworked or reproduced documents as “the source of inspiration” or a strategy “to enhance the veracity of the narrative” and 3) documentation as a façade. Inevitably, the author’s role changes depending on the concept chosen (Rossel 1997, 4-5). In a similar vein, and in contrast to historiography, Beata Agrell views documentarism as a methodology which “signifies a cluster of textual strategies” and she captures the complexity of the term with the following definition:

[D]ocumentarism may refer to a special way of transforming reality into signs, which we call remnants, testimonies, or traces, and of transforming these signs back to reality – this time reality of a second order: a discursive world [...] where signs are things which we may call documents. A document is thus a signifying thing, or [...] a thing-like sign pointing towards an absent reality or past event, while at the same time being a present reality here and now. (Agrell 1997, 40-1)

The challenge and disruption of international terrorism amidst the centres of Western civilization and the tendency among Western youngsters towards deliberate bodily self-injury may be seen as two vastly different but equally desperate expressions of the increasing desire on the margins of ubiquitous media consumption to unmask the copies and simulacra and to retrieve “an absent reality.” We might term this culture of pervasive media accessibility, using a portmanteau neologism,

¹ This introduction is a revised and expanded version of our introduction to the section on the ‘Documentary Turn’ at the *Anglistentag* 2007 in Münster.

the culture of universal ‘access’ – blending excess and access. There is a growing awareness that the pervasive screens of digital hyperreality screen us from a reality that has become ever more elusive and therefore, in spite of universal access to data, ironically inaccessible. Against this, one may pit the traumata of sudden shock, of pain and harm breaking catastrophically into the insulation and sedation of pervasively and often also perversely screened constructions of reality. Similarly, the agonizing experience of ‘cutting,’ scratching, stabbing or pinching, psychologically explained as a “way of ‘telling without telling’ the story of the original abuse” (D’Onofrio 2007, 36), may also be seen as a complex social phenomenon that responds bodily to the pervasiveness of ‘inauthentic’ experience by reinforcing the sense of one’s own bodily identity of pain.

In themselves necessarily subject to mediation, these ‘performances’ illustrate the current demand to explore the frontier between mediated and ‘real’ experience. Both kinds of intervention may be seen as illustrations of the growing awareness that the screen technologies of Western capitalism have generated a culture of mendacity or at least brought to perfection mendacity as an anthropological *sine qua non*. Distortions of the ‘real’ have become so pervasive as to imperil the very idea of ‘distortion.’ The more counterfeit businesses surface on ebay and elsewhere, the more discourses of the elusive ‘real’ may be felt to be all around us. We know that the real must necessarily remain elusive as we experience only formatted, prepared and performed versions of it. Hence, we have lost faith in ‘reality experts’ who lay claims to universal truths and lecture audiences with seemingly innocent facts, images or texts. On the one hand, the precious and desirable ‘reality’ is in great demand, but on the other hand, it is quite obvious that in the absence of reality we will have to make do with gestures of authentication. As, for instance, Jan Berg (2001) has shown, authenticity effects emerge as a result of media performances. Authenticity is in great demand to make up for the absence of reality in processes of signification. Authenticity, therefore, is primarily the result of an attribution in a signifying strategy.

Famously, Jean Baudrillard saw the ‘real’ vanish in media simulations. The “very definition of the real becomes: that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction” (Baudrillard 1983, 146). In complex media environments, Baudrillard argued, reproduction reigns supreme, generating the hyperreal. In the hyperreal absence of any original, it seemed outdated to continue the discourses of the real, but the term persists in the work of Baudrillard’s philosophical successors. 9/11 is the focal point in which these discourses seemed to find their most valid expression. Slavoj Žižek’s update of Baudrillard’s term “desert of the real” is inspired by Alain Badiou’s diagnosis of a “passion for the real” (Badiou 2003). For Badiou, *la passion du réel* is a marker of the twentieth century, an activist nihilism he finds in terrorist violence from the 1917 Leninists onwards. Barbarian as this terrorist violence may be, Badiou holds, it is linked to the demand to experience real identity and unmask its copies and fakes. It is obsessed with identity. The attack on the WTC towers may be seen as a prime example of this authentication of pain, an unwelcome return

to reality after the bounteous *mise-en-scène* of Hollywood. For Žižek Baudrillard's terminology re-appeared in *The Matrix*:

When the hero (played by Keanu Reeves) awakens into the 'real reality,' he sees a desolate landscape littered with burned ruins – what remained of Chicago after a global war. The resistance leader Morpheus utters the ironic greeting: "Welcome to the desert of the real." Was it not something of the similar order that took place in New York on September 11? Its citizens were introduced to the 'desert of the real' – to us, corrupted by Hollywood, the landscape and the shots we saw of the collapsing towers could not but remind us of the most breathtaking scenes in the catastrophe big productions. (Žižek 2002, 386)

While providing an overview of current documentarisms in the climate of universal digital 'access' in a variety of media (print: Heyne, Voigts-Virchow; film: Geiger; theatre: Paget; television: Kilborn), the papers in this special volume of *ZAA* in various ways also reflect this collision of two real deserts – the "insulated artificial universe" of hyperreal simulation in the Western world and the so-called "deserts of the Real" (Žižek 2002, 387).

The crisis of fiction and the desire for the real, however, are anything but phenomena that emerged with the pivotal event of 9/11. Already in 1989 David Harvey noted that "the preoccupation with identity" has become particularly pervasive since the early 1970s "because of widespread insecurity in labour markets" (Harvey 1989, 87). Thus, the reconceptualization of identity has been closely connected with the economic, cultural and social transformations over the past four decades. Furthermore, the obsession with identity and the desire for the real has also been intricately linked with the emergence of what David Lewis and Darren Bridger call the "New Consumers," whose consumption patterns are markedly different and who identify themselves as 'consumers' rather than 'customers' (Lewis and Bridger 2001, 4). Their search for authenticity, whether in regard to products, services or experiences, is motivated by a desire to overcome the alienation caused by consumerism and because "ownership of the authentic helps bridge a perceived gulf between their real and ideal selves." Consequently, authenticity is also "a function of the story woven around a product or service" and only the most compelling story will be economically viable (*ibid.*, 44). Lewis and Bridger explain this mechanism with the telling example of the 'perceived' authenticity of a Leica camera, whose 'celebrity status' and quality of construction have led to "what the Japanese call *miryokuteki hinshitsu*, quality that fascinates, rather than simply *atarimae hinshitsu*, quality that is expected" (*ibid.*, 11).

In 1996, the very title of Hal Foster's monograph announced *The Return of the Real*. In his discussion of neo-avantgarde art and beyond, Foster claimed that towards the end of the century, real bodies and social sites returned to replace the simulation art of the 1980s. In 1998, Derrick de Kerckhove asked with reference to the emerging connectivity of virtual communities: Faced with the kind of 'reality' we now experience, who still needs 'fiction'? The McLuhanite de Kerckhove radicalized ideas that have been around at least since the 1960s. In his well-known essay 'Writing American Fiction' Philip Roth expressed his envy of the power of American reality which would outdo any writer's "meagre imagination" almost daily (Roth 2001

[1961], 165-82). More than forty years later and in view of a globalised and increasingly complex information society, public desire for authenticity and factuality has grown even more, and increasingly cultural representations are successfully marked (and marketed) by their documentary aesthetics and the incorporation of non-fictional elements.

It is the ubiquity and pervasiveness of information in general, and images, in particular – in other words, a culture of universal ‘access’ – that makes it so timely and urgent to address the current status of documentarism. Rather than falling prey to the currently projected, designed and constructed ‘realities’ or simply dismissing them – the position of choice offered since the spread of various brands of meta-fiction and diagnoses of the ‘hyperreal’ à la Baudrillard across media and genres since the late 1960s – across the various fields of cultural production, authors, artists, filmmakers, TV producers, intellectuals and ‘digerati’ are increasingly re-visiting documentary ethics and aesthetics as their primary point of reference.

One genre, in particular, some critics even call it a movement, usually labelled ‘creative nonfiction,’ has been especially popular and successful. In the US critics speak of ‘the fourth genre,’ ‘the literature of reality,’ ‘real life stories’ or ‘the literature of fact,’ and the overall label of ‘creative nonfiction’ can include genres from autobiography to the memoir to other forms of life-writing. But, again, the popularity of this category of writing is not a new phenomenon, but it already flourished in the 1960s and 1970s when, in a famous introduction to a collection titled *The New Journalism* (1973), Tom Wolfe argued that nonfiction – not the novel – had become “the most important literature being written in America today” and that journalism had become “literature’s main event” (Boynton 2005, xi). But what were the contributions of the *New Journalism Movement*, often described as an avant-garde movement and personified, for example, by one of its most glamorous protagonists, Truman Streckfus Persons, better known as Truman Capote and his masterpiece of a nonfiction novel, *In Cold Blood* (1965) about the murder of a wealthy farmer family in Kansas in 1959?

By transgressing journalism’s rhetorical and literary scope these writers experimented with new forms which included the use of complete dialogues, various points of view and movie-like scenic structures (Boynton 2005, xii). Wolfe’s – often criticised – arguments were based on his assumption that *New Journalism* was not simply an advanced stage of ordinary American journalism, but that writers such as Capote, Norman Mailer, Michael Herr, Joan Didion and others had fostered a revival of the European tradition of literary realism. Thus, in an ingenuous move, Wolfe dismantled the status of the novel while, at the same time, claiming its eighteenth and nineteenth century tradition of literary realism, not least reminiscent of works such as Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) or Dickens’s *Sketches by Boz* (1836) (Boynton 2005, xviii-xix). Today, Wolfe’s “New Journalism” has been replaced by the term ‘literary journalism’ (see Kramer 1995 for a list of “breakable rules for literary journalists”) and, inevitably, the “New Journalists” have been succeeded by the “New New Journalists,” whom Robert Boynton describes as “[n]either frustrated novelists nor wayward newspaper reporters [...]

who have benefited enormously from both the legitimacy Wolfe's legacy has brought to literary nonfiction, and from the concurrent displacement of the novel as the most prestigious form of literary expression" (Boynton 2005, xi-xii). The questions raised by "New Journalism" and "New New Journalism" continue to haunt research into documentary formats: the possibility of 'objective' reporting, selectivity (i.e., the criteria of agenda-setting) and, finally, the distorting requirements of the entertainment industry.

These questions also pertain to visual media, of course. Ever since the invention of photography in the early decades of the nineteenth century, photographic images were seen as light writing the objects themselves. Photographs were seen as records of the real, preserving 'reality' as a trace of a specific moment in time, or, as Alfred Stieglitz explained: "There is a reality – so subtle that it becomes more real than reality. That's what I'm trying to get down in photography" (qtd. in Orvell 1989, 220). This reality-effect of photography made it the 'natural' paradigm of documentary realism, as seen, for example, in the work of the Danish American journalist and photographer Jacob Riis, such as his photo-reportage *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890). As, among others, Bill Nichols states: "The remarkable fidelity of the photographic image to what it records gives such an image the appearance of a document" (Nichols 2001, 83). When the nineteenth-century interest in sequential imaging found a perfect vehicle in the new medium of cinematography, in 1895 the inevitable link between film and documentation was forged immediately. As Nichols (2001) continues to argue, the silent films of the Lumière brothers (then called "actuality films") exhibit a 'documentary' quality even before documentaries proper became part and parcel of the cinema. The case of the recently recovered 'actualities' from 1901 to 1906 in the BFI Mitchell and Kenyon Collection makes clear that even these earliest examples of cinematic 'documentation' were tainted with voyeurist and narcissist impulses – the very people the filmmakers tried to capture in the frame were the film's projected audience for the subsequent screenings at fairgrounds. The "uncanny capacity of film images and photographs to bear the physical imprint of what they record with photomechanical precision thanks to the passage of light energy through lenses and onto a photographic emulsion" (Nichols 2001, 84) was subsequently theorized by André Bazin as 'objective reality' in the hands of invisible filmmakers (*Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, 1958-62) and by Siegfried Kracauer as the eponymous realist "redemption of physical reality" (*Theory of Film*, 1960).

The pioneers of documentary filmmakers such as John Grierson, who named the film genre by turning the adjective 'documentary' into a noun in a 1926 film review, and Robert Flaherty, whose film *Moana* (1926) was being reviewed by Grierson, championed film as being 'scientific' and established the strong links of documentary film and ethnography, as witnessed, for instance, in Flaherty's 'cinematic fieldwork' *Moana* about the citizens of Samoa and Margaret Mead's famous anthropological study *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928). However, the potential of film to violate naïve trust in its supposed authenticity by doctoring, re-enacting and exhibiting voyeuristically has also already been there from the very beginning of

documentary filmmaking. As Nichols notes, “John Grierson’s famous definition of documentary as ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ undercuts the very claim to truth and authenticity on which the documentary depends” (Nichols 2001, 24). Yet Grierson was not only fully aware of this ‘contradiction,’ but did, in fact, acknowledge it openly by “stressing repeatedly that the element which documentaries possessed but which other forms of non-fiction film lacked was ‘dramatisation’” (Brian Winston, qtd. in Bruzzi 2000, 5). Thus, Stella Bruzzi sees the documentary as a more fluid form, “a perpetual negotiation between the real event and its representation” (2000, 9), which cannot be captured by the more rigid classification of Nichols’s ‘documentary modes,’ the Poetic, the Expository, the Observational, the Interactive, the Reflexive and the Performative (*ibid.*, 1; see Nichols 2001, 102-38).

New trends have emerged in documentary television programmes, subverting the “discourse of sobriety” (Nichols 2001, 39) that has traditionally guaranteed institutional framework of authority for documentaries. The discourse of sobriety is under pressure from the recent wave of factual entertainment and reality TV, in which exhibitionism and voyeurism seem to be central. Richard Kilborn (2003, 11-4) has shown that various factors played a part in the rise of factual television or ‘pop-doc,’ such as the need for inexpensive programming, the primacy of diversion over enlightenment, the tailoring of real-life situations for the television formats, the increasing hybridization of these formats (e.g., the ‘game-doc’) and the staging, the performativity of fact-based programmes.

The fertile soil of artificiality and mendacity in their traditional juxtapositions against the yardstick criteria of documentary genres, the ‘natural’ and the ‘real,’ has been ploughed by Manfred Geier (1999) and others. Kenneth Ruthven’s monograph on literary fakes and forgeries seeks to blur and confuse clear boundaries between fact, fiction and forgery (Ruthven 2001). He charts the long tradition of literary interrogations of these permeable and artificial dividing lines. The digital world – from Photoshop to the World Wide Web and Second Life – has given these discussions new impetus. Current media ‘hacktivists’ have taken their inspiration above all from the subversive, anarchic and viral practices suggested by the Situationists and Guy Debord’s critique of the ‘Society of the Spectacle’ since the mid-1960s. They naturally thrive on the Internet, which has emerged as a performative space of fluid identity.

In the art world, self-reflexive modes have become pervasive, from the pseudo event staged by Orson Welles in his 1938 radioplay *The War of the Worlds* to his mockumentary *F for Fake* (1973) and the more recent, so-called ‘fake art,’ which is self-reflexive in making its replication of earlier artworks explicit. One may also note the continuing discourse on the status of documentary material in the arts, for instance in Tacita Dean’s film investigations into the fate of architectural relics, Alison Jackson’s fake paparazzi snapshots, Thomas Weski’s explorations into photographic authenticity in *Click Doubleclick* (2006) or Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis’s collection of photography in *Only Skin Deep* (2003).

The renewed interest in documentary film was spearheaded by the subjective investigations marked by mock-naïveté and *cinéma vérité* style in the work of Michael

Moore, which began with *Roger & Me* (1989) and culminated in the high-impact *Bowling for Columbine* in 2002. Moore spawned a whole brand of similar movies, from Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* (2004) to Robert Greenwald's *Outfoxed* (2004) and Kirby Dick's *Sick* (1997) or *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* (2006). In Britain, Michael Winterbottom, among others, explored the boundaries, styles and politics of documentary film in *In This World* (2002) and *The Road to Guantánamo* (2006). Theatre stages in London and elsewhere have been dominated by revived traditions of documentary theatre and docudrama since the late 1990s – from the tribunal plays staged by the Tricycle Theatre to Michael Frayn's *Democracy* (2003).

This special edition of *ZAA* approaches the 'new documentarism' in the 'desert of the real' by addressing the paradigmatic changes within documentary forms and by posing the following questions: how do discursive formations regulate constructions of 'real' vs. 'fake'; how do documentary formats react to ubiquitous visuality and the emerging formats of 'reality TV' and the 'staged real' (Richard Kilborn); and can we still castigate deception and lies from the vantage point of the documentary filmmaker as fly-on-the-wall or *monteur* of images?

With his discussion of theories of the fiction/nonfiction distinction Eric Heyne opens the debate we would like to initiate, and provides us with a point of departure that invites us to leave the well-trodden paths of the fiction/nonfiction divide. Heyne's exploration and critique of the seemingly clear-cut borders we draw in order to distinguish between conventional binaries such as fiction and nonfiction, between truth and lies, shows that the tools needed to negotiate our way through the "thicket of narrative" are by no means straightforward, but will have to be composed of a set of theories. Thus, Heyne examines the following methods and their function as, what he terms, "sorting machines:" authorial intention, cultural conventions in regard to narrative "adherence to or violations of accepted practices of history, journalism and fiction," reader-centred theory of the fiction/nonfiction division and different text-based approaches. Heyne argues that our evaluation of texts as fiction or nonfiction – whether in the moment of consumption or thereafter – does not rely on static criteria, but that the relationship between reader and text is influenced by various factors and thus remains remarkably fluid. In view of our unwillingness to give up the fiction/nonfiction distinction entirely, Heyne draws on possible worlds theory as a possible approach to capture the complexity of our concept of 'stories as worlds.'

In his outline of the shift from documentary theatre practices to New Documentarism in British theatre between 1990 and 2007 Derek Paget also pays particular attention to the influence of an audience that is "media savvy" on the one hand, and sceptical of the "age of the media" on the other. Focussing on the elements and functions of new forms of 'verbatim' and 'tribunal' theatre, Paget suggests that these have emerged in response to an increasingly privatised political culture, where collectives have been mainly neglected and individual social actors have been foregrounded. According to Paget, documentary theatre has been instrumental in providing a theatrical *agora* where alternative accounts of controversial social and political issues can be staged and discussed. Discourses within this public space

are marked by the “rhetorics of courts and confessionals” which also signify a more problematic shift from political analysis to an individual form of “bearing witness,” where audiences are “implicated in acts of witness.” This use of witnesses and testimonial practices can also be read as a strategy on part of the playwrights to “authenticate their take on truth.” Thus, while the ‘documents’ of earlier documentary theatre have lost their credibility in media societies dominated by the politics of spin, the ‘authenticity’ of witnessing has remained relatively unscathed due to its legalistic and spiritual foundations in Western thought.

Richard Kilborn continues the critical engagement with the fiction/nonfiction distinction in his analysis of so-called factual programming in recent British television. While the term ‘factual’ encompasses a wide variety of formats and genres, the overall claim is that the source material is “directly rooted in the real, historical world.” As in any other media, however, there is an increasing tendency towards blurring the lines between the “imaginatively conceived” and the “allegedly factually based.” Yet despite this, what Kilborn calls “generic hybridisation” and the concern it generates in viewers and critics, the appeal of factual television is unabated, seemingly due to its “real-life connectedness.” As Kilborn emphasizes, however, this kind of “real-life connectedness” translates by no means merely into “real-life ordinariness,” but is often transformed into the representation of “some heightened reality,” which aims at diversion rather than education, hence the increase in “entertainment-oriented factual formats.” Apart from stressing the heterogeneity of formats promoted under the label ‘factual,’ Kilborn also examines the immense economic value of factual entertainment, exemplified by international players such as *National Geographic* as well as companies such as *Endemol* and their successful production and marketing of reality shows. The latter display a most important element of new factual formats that Kilborn terms “reality staging” and that is characterised by the “calculated nature of the producer’s intervention” and the dependence on the “performative ability of the participants.” Yet despite the danger of these “softer factual formats” leading to a ‘Dumbing Down’ of culture, Kilborn also sees their potential of encouraging an audience’s creative interaction with television material.

Moving from the world of television to the world of film, Jeffrey Geiger charts the contours of new documentaries and war and cinematic representations of the war in Iraq, in particular. By examining the historical discourses which link war, film technology and cultural ideology in unexpected ways, Geiger shows how “documentary images of war have been used to harness public sentiments.” In regard to the question whether these media may also be used alternatively as a means to oppose war, Geiger argues that, in direct contrast, antiwar documentaries have mainly framed “sensation within structures of logic and rational argument,” thereby trying to avoid the blurring of “rationality and sensational spectacle.” In a close reading of Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, however, Geiger also examines the effects “media oversaturation, ‘voluntary’ censorship and postmodern disengagement” can have on a film like *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Paying particular attention to the film’s “postmodernist and surrealist tendencies,” Geiger concludes that, like other recent

antiwar films, Moore's film does not really probe into underlying structures of imperial conquest, military force and US foreign policy, but that it, in fact, projects ambiguous "conclusions about the US' reliance on war as a mechanism of global social, ideological and economic control." Moreover, with regard to cinematic representations of the war in Iraq, Geiger does not see the kind of "radical refashioning of American self-perception" that could be observed after the Vietnam War.

Together with Eric Heyne's paper, Eckart Voigts-Virchow's analysis of critical approaches to the Ern Malley case, one of the most prominent literary hoaxes, frames the debate on new documentarism in literature in this special edition. Not unlike Heyne, who stresses the wide range of heterogenous factors that influence the relationship between reader and text, Voigts-Virchow argues that a significant element of the heuristic value of the fake for 'reading' literary production and media culture is that it demonstrates how meaning cannot be thought of as "irrespective of a situation, a performative moment, an event or actualization." Proceeding from Erika Fischer-Lichte's notion of performativity, Voigts-Virchow examines the Ern Malley case "as evidence of the performativity of literature." Utilizing Peter Carey's fictionalized version of the Ern Malley case, *My Life as a Fake* (2003), Voigts-Virchow explores various textual and contextual approaches to the hoax and develops not only a "performative hermeneutics" as the most promising tool for analyses of fakes and hoaxes, but further suggests linking it with a cultural critique that includes "a suspicion of one's own heuristic apparatus as much as a suspicion of expert culture."

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