

# HISTORY, MEMORY, TRUTH, FICTION

## CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARY PRACTICES

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LESSON – WEEK 3

THE DOCUMENTARY IMAGE, BETWEEN EVIDENCE AND ALLEGORY

3 SEPTEMBER, 2019

OBJECTIVES: ADDRESSING THE QUESTION, "WHAT ONE 'DOES' WITH DOCUMENTARY?"

### [Slide 2]

- \* Explore in greater depth the conflation of "documentary" with "document," particularly as it pertains to the confusion of *photographic document* for *evidence*
- \* Analyze this conflation in Fredy Alborta's photograph of Che Guevara's cadaver
- \* Examine art of Alfredo Jaar, which *embraces* the inherent ambiguity and polysemy of the photograph to "document" the Rwandan genocide

### I. CONCEPTUAL GROUNDWORK: JOAN FONTCUBERTA

#### \* [Slide 3] PEDRO MEYER, "DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHER"

- Fontcuberta takes work of Pedro Meyer as case study for analysis of certain *evolution* of photographic image towards seamless, undetectable *manipulation*.

In effect, Meyer's work responds to following question:

**"But, what happens when [...] the altered representation lacks any fissures, such that it cannot be differentiated from a simple snapshot?" (156-57)**

- Meyer: begins as traditional "documentary" photographer ("photojournalist"), working in b/w, full-frame, etc.
- With advent of digital technology, takes up digital photography (or processing of analog images on computer using software), in tradition of *photomontage*
  - ◊ [Slide 4] His work in this vein has affinities with that of other artists: Jeff Wall, Thomas Ruff
- Nonetheless, Meyer continues to refer to himself as a "documentary photographer, even as his work follows this "digital" trajectory of manipulation. **Ask: Why?**

#### \* [Slide 5] DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY, "OBJECTIVITY," and "TRUTH"

- **Ask:** Based on observations of these photographers, do you think digital technology has *altered* the very "nature of photography"?

- Citations from Fontcuberta

- ◊ Against “documentary fundamentalism”: all technological means are legitimate when it comes to leaving an “impression” on the viewer

- > All (documentary) photography is “propaganda” in the end (Dorthea Lange): a means not of *evidence* but of *persuasion*:

- “El realismo no tiene nada que ver con “la realidad”, que es un concepto vago e ingenuo; el realismo sólo adquiere sentido en tanto que opción ideológica y política” (156)**

- ◊ The technology of photography was itself a late “invention” of “photographic culture”; the *ontological basis* of photography predates this invention, forms part of that culture

- ◊ If digital tech. has had any consequence for photography, it has been to ***rid us once and for all of the myth of photographic objectivity***

- > Photography—and with it, documentary—has *never* been “objective”: the *frame itself*—not to mention common practices of cropping and montage in post-production—are forms of “manipulation”

- ◊ [Last two quotes]: Kaprov’s intervention in *Die Zeit*: reveal the lie of “photojournalism”: captions themselves form part of the *system of manipulation* inherent to “documentary photography”: they inflect the meaning of *any* image...

- The passivity of viewer, in part, is what makes this manipulation possible: i.e. the *faith* in “truth” of photographic image...

- Upshot: digital tech has not so much *altered* nature of photography by rendering manipulation invisible... as it has ***amplified and consummated the aspirations of “realism” since before the invention of photography***

- Fredy Alborta’s image of dead Che: an object lesson of this fact...

## II. ALBORTA - KATZ - MESTMAN

### \* FIRST IMPRESSIONS [Slide 6]

- **Ask:** What did *you all* feel upon seeing these images for the first time?

- What was the “official” purpose of inviting press photographers like Alborta to make images of Che’s cadaver?

- To “identify” and “prove” Che’s death... i.e. to serve as *negative example*: failure of Lat. Am. revolutionary movements...

- And yet... this mission was “doomed” from the outset. **Ask: Why?**

### \* [Slide 7] FREDDY ALBORTA ON PHOTOGRAPHING THE CADAVER OF CHE GUEVARA:

- Alborta’s own testimony is instructive of the failure of his photograph to serve simply as “evidence”

- [Show/discuss quotes from film transcript... Ask group to analyze Alborta's self-contradictions...]

- What do we make of the particular way in which Alborta contradicts himself?

- Perhaps all too obviously, Alborta's own testimony underscores a number of the complexities/contradictions **inherent to the documentary image itself** (described by Fontcuberta)

(In case of Alborta's subject matter, contradictions are merely *amplified* by the "mythical/sacred" status of Che Guevara in 1967):

◊ Alborta– the *photojournalist* whose duty it is to *report* objectively and *relay information* about *real events*... is unable to *merely* "see" the body of a dead man

... To the contrary—as Mestman explains—he necessarily sees Che's body through the "lens" or filter of an immense iconographic imaginary...

...not only derived from the representation of Che himself *while he was alive* (Alberto Korda's famous image),

... but also from the long *history* of the representation of death of Jesus Christ as *martyr*... in Western art

... and the **"more generalized and extensive iconographic legacy [in Latin America] of an imaginative tradition for which the adoration of saints and of the wounded or flagellated Christ was central"** (Mestman 29)

◊ Or, in words of Joan Fontcuberta: No one by this point could truly, directly "witness" something as iconographically *saturated* as the cadaver of Che...

... I.e. Alborta could not but see it *already as an image*, i.e., **through** already existing images.

- By same token: as Katz's film demonstrates: there are *numerous* elements in (and around) any photograph/doc. image that "escape", "exceed", or "subvert" its evidentiary impulse (**Ask group for examples:** i.e. the bodies of other *guerilleros* on the ground; Che's hidden hand, other photographs made by Alborta...)

◊ Note here how Mestman also points to possible *co-penetration* of late-60s progressive Catholicism in Lat. Am. (Liberation Theology) with *political* revolutionary ideology of time

### [Animate slide 7]

◊ Hence, a kind of "speculative philosophy of photography" emerges here, according to Joan Fontcuberta:

> *To see the world through other images means to place before our eyes the filter of memory and, in a certain way, to prioritize the archive—and not the reality to which it alludes—as the space of experience.*

> ...the strictly documental use of of the camara fails in its attempt to capture reality; it is only by deception that we can achieve a certain truth...

- Indeed, the motif of Che-as-Christ was not the *only* way image of Che's cadaver was "deceptively" (strategically) "deployed" in years immediately following his death
  - ◊ In fact, *competing* sides of ideological order of the time were keen to *appropriate* Alborta's photograph in order to "achieve a certain truth"...
  - ◊ Mestman discusses one case in particular worth further consideration: *La hora de los hornos*

\* LA HORA DE LOS HORNOS: THE POLITICAL USES OF THE DOC. IMAGE

**[Slide 8: extracts from film]**

- **Ask: Who has seen *La hora de los hornos*?**
- Describe film/context briefly, then run clips

**[Slide 9: close-up of Che muerto]**

- **Ask:** How can we characterize the use of Che's image here? How should we *distinguish* it's use from the it is used by Alborta, and later by Katz?

\* THE LESSONS OF "THE DOC. IMAGE" OF CHE'S CADAVER (MESTMAN)

**[Slide 10]**

- **Ask/Discuss:** What are the "lessons" about doc. image to be gleaned from these materials?
- It is precisely due to its many "second meanings"—symbolic, iconographic—that the photo of Che's cadaver lends itself *at one and the same time* to political appropriations like that of Solanas/Getino...  
...and to "depoliticizations" (Sontag) like those of Warhol/pop-culture
- This kind of *political* appropriation intends presumably to seek a deeper "truth," beyond the mere *facticity* of historical facts (according to discourse of *Hora*, this would be truth which the neo-colonial "System" seeks always to hide or disguise)
- This project, at the same time, aims to provoke the spectator... i.e., to activate the spectator's own iconographic "archive" (imaginary), so that she becomes conscious of the "*real*" Truth... and resolves to act on the basis of this "political" knowledge
- The "documentary" image is thus conceived as a means of veracity that depends *neither* on objectivity *nor* on testimonial evidence
- But the *effects—political, allegorical, etc.*—of even the most *intentionally* "objective" documentary image (i.e. image as pure *evidence*, as *proof*) cannot be fully pre-determined:

- ◊ The contexts of *circulation* and *reception* (cf. case of debates at ICAIC re: *La hora de los hornos*) are fundamental to the production/activation of "second meanings" of doc. image.
- ◊ By same token, the *temporalities* of such images and their circulation also *reinscribes* them with new "second meanings"
  - > Hence, very *different* "uses" and "effects" of Alborta's image in Katz's film, vs. uses and effects of Che's corpse immediately following death
  - > Even Alborta's own sense of meaning of his image of Che's corpse seems changed by time... or more specifically, by *participation* of Katz in reconstruction/recuperation of that meaning

#### IV. THE INTOLERABLE IMAGE

##### \* [Slide 11] CONCEPTS

- [Ask] What does Rancière mean by the "intolerable image"?

##### [Animate each point below (slide 11)]

- First: an image of a specific humanitarian horror (Rwandan genocide; famine; holocaust)
- Second: an image whose political efficacy assumes—and relies upon—the *public's discomfort* with this type of image (or at least, it assumes a certain critical attitude among the public with regard to such images)...
  - ...while also counting on the public's *sense of guilt* for their own participation (wittingly or not) in the very system that has produced the horrors depicted in the image
  - ◊ Note that for Ranciere, this leads to the same long-standing paradox of all so-called "political art": some believe they have the *authority*— knowledge and right -- to lay guilt upon those who "don't realize" (the passive ones; the indifferent ones)
  - ◊ Thus a link exists between the **intolerable in the image** (representation) to the **intolerable of the image** (reception... Effects...*politics*)
- Third: an image of horror that asserts (paradoxically) that with any "horrific" event, there is always something that *cannot be represented*...
  - ◊ To compensate, such images rely on *testimony* by victims (i.e. the only ones who presumably have the "right" to represent the irrepresentable)
  - ◊ The problem is that *words*, too, "represent," that is, they form part of the complex "construction of the (intolerable) image" (*We*, as spectators, construct the image in part on the basis of what we hear in the testimony)
- The "intolerable image" poses a particularly grave challenge to the notion of the *documentary image as evidence*:

- To sustain this myth, we need to believe in the infallible *indexicality* of the doc. image...
- But if the image is not available to us (for supposedly moral reasons) as a means to "document" a horrific event... then how can we *know* the "truth" of that event?

\* [Slide 12] JAAR - *THE RWANDA PROJECT*

- Jaar's work on Rwandan genocide is an attempt—from the field of art—to contend with this dilemma
- **Ask: Does he succeed?** In other words, does Jaar's work on Rwanda sufficiently address/contend with the *inherent ambiguities, polysemy, and manipulations* of the "documentary image"?
- Let's consider some of the methods used for various components of project
  - ◊ Jaar travels to Rwanda in 1994, takes 1000s of images of genocide... including of dead bodies, which he refuses to release to public
  - ◊ Among first installations: every cover of *Newsweek* from beginning to end of genocide, juxtaposed to document describing events in Rwanda that day...  
...demonstrating that *no* mention of Rwanda appears in one of world's leading news periodicals **until very end of genocide (Aug. 1, 1994)**
  - ◊ Public intervention: Malmö, Sweden: Poster with RWANDA RWANDA RWANDA posted throughout city
  - ◊ Another installation: *Real Pictures* (1995): images from Rwanda, representing various aspects of genocide (murders, refugee camps, etc) concealed in black boxes, with caption on top of each, describing image inside

\* [Slide 13] THE EYES OF GUTETE EMERITA (1996)

- Jaar's strategy with this piece: "to reduce the scale of the tragedy. Basically, when we say, "one million dead," it's meaningless. So, the strategy was to reduce the scale to a single human being with a name, a story."
- Installation: two light boxes at entrance, with brief text, in white script on black background in black box, recounting story of Gutete Emerita, who witnessed massacre of 400 Tutsi's attending Sunday mass, among them her husband and two sons. She somehow escapes... and later, Jaar meets her...  
... The final lines of the story: "I remember her eyes. The eyes of Gutete Emerita"  
... At which point, an image of one of her eyes appears in each light box
- Second iteration of project: same text, this time printed in line of white script on black wallt eye level along four walls. At end, we arrive at final lines, then turn corner...  
... To find massive table (16 x 16 ft) with 1 million slides of image of Gutete Emerita's eyes (with loupes to examine closely)

## [Slide 14]

- For Rancière:

- ◊ " It is a question of constructing an image—that is to say, a certain connection between the verbal and the visual. The power of this image is that it disturbs the ordinary regime of that connection, such as it is employed in the official system of information."

"If horror is banalized, it is not because we see too many images of it. We do not see too many suffering bodies on the screen. But we do see too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak."

- For John Steppling:

- ◊ "...the Jaar piece is highly problematic. In fact its far worse than problematic It is introducing the consumption of third world violence, as a subject, as a theme, even if making a rather portentous point about NOT showing the violence. The audience is asked to project their conceits onto the 'eyes' of the victim. A black African woman. But first, first the audience is admonished to read a bit of description. Except the description is the U.S. state department version of events. Griselda Pollock asks will you remember her eyes? This is white paternalism, and its additionally puerile and sophistic. Again, positing the savage, the one who saw ONLY murder."