

The languages of documentary

Hito Steyerl

With whom does the lamp communicate? The mountain? The fox?

Walter Benjamin

What if things could speak? What would they tell us? Or are they speaking already and we just don't hear them? Ask Walter Benjamin. In fact, he started asking those quite bizarre questions already in 1916 in a text entitled "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man"¹ Of all weird texts by Benjamin, this is definitely the weirdest. In this text he develops the concept of a language of things. According to Benjamin, this language of things is mute, it is magical and its medium is material community. Thus, we have to assume that there is a language of stones, pans, and cardboard boxes. Lamps speak as if inhabited by spirits. Mountains and foxes are involved in discourse. High rise buildings chat with each other. Paintings gossip. Language is not just transmitted by telephone, there is even a language of the telephone itself. The language of things is a silent symphony of matter, which transforms into pulsating energy. And this mute language translates into the language of men, whose nature is naming.

How does documentary relate to such language of things? By effacing the author, documentary objects were supposed to be enabled to autonomous expression². One of the persistent hopes in documentary expressions is that they could let speak things for themselves. More often than not they were supposed to work like loudspeakers, which would faithfully transmit the meanings of their subjects without distortion or interference.

¹Walter Benjamin: On Language as Such and on the Language of Man. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. In: Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. London: New Left Books 1979, pp107-123.

²See Olivier Lugon: L'anonymat d'auteur. In: *Le statut de l'auteur dans l'image documentaire: signature du neutre*. Ed. Marie Muracciole. Paris: Jeu de Paume, 2005. pp6-14.

But why let things speak in the first place? What are the emancipatory expectations in their forces? Benjamin hoped that the energies congealed within things by the spell of commodity fetishism could be unleashed in the service of revolution.

According to him things are not represented within language but instead present themselves. They are actualised in the present. Benjamin thinks that things are never just inert objects, passive items or lifeless shucks at the disposal of the documentary gaze. But they consist of tensions, forces, hidden powers, which keep being exchanged. While this opinion borders on magical thought, according to which things are invested with supernatural powers, it is also a classical materialist one³. Because the commodity too is not understood as a simple object but a condensation of social forces. Thus things can be interpreted as conglomerates of desires, wishes, intensities and power relations. A thing is never just something, but a fossil in which a constellation of forces is petrified⁴.

The language of things is thus an expression of an exchange of the powers, potentials and tensions condensed in things. They are not understood as static objects but as dynamic bundles, which carry not yet realised possibilities and from which new relations and constellations can be developed. The language of things, charged with the energy of matter, can also exceed description and become productive. It might transform the existing power relations and actualise our present. If we apply these ideas to documentary articulations, they might not just represent things, but also contain the potential to transform them. Their new form of expression should know neither means nor ends, neither a subject nor an object of communication.⁵

But these hopes might have been premature; certainly so in the sector of documentary expression. The genuine attempt to let things speak has too often lapsed into naive naturalism, or various propagandist versions of state controlled realism. During the last century documentary articulations were all too often instrumentalised in the service of propaganda

³See Bracken p344f.

⁴Ibid.

⁵I owe many interpretations of Benjamin's text to Christopher Bracken „The language of things“ In: *Semiotica* Volume: 2002 Issue: 138 February 2002 pp.321-350. p338.

and agitation. While purporting to show mere nature, they repeatedly became actively implicated in processes of Othering and social disintegration. Things were not only spoken for; not only were they patronized but they became pretexts for subjection.

But what if the focus shifts just slightly⁶? What if the things speaking through documentary expression were less the things shown, but rather the specific combination of things and people which makes it possible in the first place? What if its objects were less animals, exotic dishes or other privileged interests of standard documentary mainfare, but rather cameras, databases as well all aspects of human communication? Perhaps it makes more sense to locate the thing world, which Benjamin originally sought to empower within the material conditions of the documentary itself; in its relations of production – or more precisely within the tensions and contradictions which make up its reality. Whether they are emancipatory or not then depends on their specific constellation.

Thing language

The documentary form clearly is no direct transmission of any thing language. It partly belongs to the language of things, partly to the language of humans. It is half visual, half vocal, it is at once receptive and productive, inquisitive and explanatory, it participates in the exchange of things but also freezes the relations between them within visual and conceptual still lifes. While things articulate themselves within documentary forms, documentary forms also articulate things. Within it the language of things and humans mix with one another.

To investigate their interaction sheds light though on many impasses of traditional documentary theory; it highlights it's current deadlock. Theories of the documentary have historically above all been based on ideas of representation; they have forever been obsessed

⁶These ideas are developed by Benjamin in his later work f.ex. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. Pp.217-251., "Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia", *New Left Review*, no.108, 1978. Pp. 47-56, or "The Author as Producer", in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock, London: Verso, 1983. Pp. 85-103.

with it. Does the object of documentary correspond to its representation? Does it correctly transmit reality? Does it really report the truth?

From the point of view of representation, the documentary image is a sign, which corresponds either by convention or mimetic semblance to its object. The documentary form is understood as a measure, which is supposed to correctly gauge an external reality, even though there is no consensus on a common standard. The desire for the identity of image and object is founded on this primordial disagreement. Thus the debate hovers between certainty and its dismantling; exaggerated expectations in the documentary's truth claims alternate with disillusionment, relativism and cynicism.

Benjamin's approach initially seems to transcend this deadlock. By emphasizing the productive forces congealed in objects, he points at their revolutionary potential.

Language of judgement

But usually things are comprehended differently: they are represented. From the perspective of the human language of judgement they look like mere static objects, whose sense is conveyed to them by a subject and who are represented by signs within language. This language objectifies the thing in question, fixes its meaning and constructs stable categories of power/knowledge. It aims at the objecthood of things as well as at their subjection to human intentions. A photographic representation of an object is understood as its reality, its idea as its truth. The language of judgement is less interested in the transformation of things than in their permanence, less in their duration than in their eternity.

The document as a historical and juridical form undoubtedly belongs to this language of judgement, it is an expression of a politics of truth. From this perspective documentary articulations express rather the power over something than its potential. If the language of things is productive, the language of humans is descriptive. It identifies and puts things in their place. It thus creates hierarchies and order. It also creates a knowledge, which is always already a power/knowledge. It contains magical elements as well, but this magic aims at the domination of things. As Michel Foucault and Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer have

shown in very different ways, the hidden magic of knowledge is intrinsically connected to the control of the world. Science is magic objectified; an amplified ritual, backed by the power of institution.

These power relations within the documentary or more generally representation as such have recently been investigated within diverse strands of a critique of representation; feminist, queer, postcolonial. Thus it's implications are familiar – the notorious complicity of documentary forms with dominance and epistemic hierarchies.

Potestas and Potentia

If we combine both points of view, documentary articulations express both power and potentials. On the one hand, they function as representations, which are dominated by human conventions and rules, and reproduce the hierarchies between knowing subjects and known and passive objects. I have once referred to this condition as documentality, an uneasy and ambiguous alliance between the documentary and governmentality⁷: that is the way in which documents govern and are implicated in constituting and disseminating power and knowledge.

But the documentary form also realises potentials. By connecting with the language of things it taps into their capacity of transformation. Maurizio Lazzarato has beautifully described the creative potentials of signs, words and, images⁸. They do not represent the world, but realise it. The documentary form as potential is not concerned with representation but with the development and realisation of it's inherent possibilities.

In the first instance, the documentary articulation follows a logic of „potestas,“ an authoritarian power which dominates and rules. In the second case it becomes a vessel of creative power, of „potentia.“⁹ In the former mode, it obeys a logic of representation, which

⁷Hito Steyerl: „Dokumentarismus als Politik der Wahrheit,“ In *Bildräume und Raumbilder*, ed. Gerald Raunig. (Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2008), 166f.

⁸Lazzarato in this volume.

⁹For an in-depth discussion of both terms see Antonio Negri: *The Savage Anomaly: the Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

organises signs into a language, which describes and recognizes, which analyses and orders. In the second case it doesn't describe anything, but becomes productive, it creates and transmits forces, affects and energies.

Both poles--potestas and potentia--are not separated within documentary articulations but instead permeate each other. The conventionality of documentary forms, their juridical aspect anchors them in the realm of „potestas“, the power of authority, which controls the relations of things to representations. Their productivity on the contrary aligns them with the dynamics of „potentia“, to creative forces, which are able to create a world after an image.

Conjuration

It would be overly optimistic though to conclude, that the unrestrained unleashing of productive power is necessarily desirable. Didn't an advisor of the U.S. president recently state that the media have an oldfashioned view of reality, since reality is essentially something created by the United States? The productive power which makes reality happen is not innocent at all, nor does it always serve emancipation. The language of things also partakes in the transmission of unbridled power and commodity fetishism. It has become the affective language of a world whose commodified objects and intensities have turned into new religious symbols of capitalism. The language of things can be instrumentalised to govern human souls; a new form of governmentality, which doesn't rule through laws but by afflicting affect.

Benjamin seems to foresee the dark side of creativity, its instrumentalisation as propaganda, and calls it conjuration.¹⁰ If there is so to speak a benevolent magic of things, bristling with creativity and power, there is also a malignant one, charged with the powers of the taboo, illusion, and the fetish. The power of conjuration tries to tap into the vital forces of things without reflection, or as Benjamin specifies: without interruption by the inexpressive.¹¹

¹⁰Walter Benjamin „Goethes elective affinities“ In: Selected Writings. Volume One: 1913±1926, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996. p340. See also Bracken, p.344f.

¹¹Ibid.

Documentary forms also partake in the arousal of fear and feelings of ubiquitous threat. They inform panicked subjects as well as hostile and mutually suspicious collectives. In times of a presumed war between cultures, they become active players defining those cultures in the first place. The general uncertainty catalysed by recent political upheavals is channeled into simplifying clichés about others. Those pseudo-documentary images do not represent any reality in the first place. They tend to realise themselves instead within the political dynamics they originally helped to unleash. Stereotypical assumptions about so-called cultures can catalyse dangerous social dynamics and align reality step by step to its caricature. Those documentary assumptions become the more persuasive the more they rely on affective address and the more they abstain from the laborious arguments of rational judgement. They tend to overwhelm perception, but fail to introduce any reflection into it.

Historically, the forces of conjuration are very much active in the realm of documentary expression: propaganda, historical revisionism, and pervasive relativism are all examples how conjuration – that is creativity without reflexive interruption – functions by means of documentary articulations. It engages with the forces of resentment, individual interest and fear.

The affective and asignificant potential of things is thus not only beneficial, and only because something is potentially becoming, this does not mean that this is necessarily desirable. On the other hand, the conventional, representative and juridical aspect of documents is not only harmful. By establishing rules and standards, documentary languages ideally create transparency. Even though the conventions they follow may be arbitrary, they might also provide the base for a contextualisation of its contents. Documentary reports could become verifiable and open up to review and public debate. The language of humans may be guided by conventions. It is thus not only susceptible to an instrumental politics of truth, but possibly also able to provide a framework for common conversation.

A global language?

But there is also an external aspect, which is relevant for the discussion of the language of documentary. And this aspect addresses the documentary mode as a transnational

language of practice. Its standard narratives are recognised all over the world and its forms are almost independent of national or cultural difference. Precisely because they operate so closely on material reality, they are intelligible wherever this reality is relevant.

This aspect was recognised as early as the 1920s, when Dziga Vertov euphorically praised the qualities of the film of facts. In the preface of his film „The man with the movie camera“ he claimed that documentary forms were able to organise visible facts in a truly international absolute language, which could establish an optical connection between the workers of the world. He imagined a sort of communist visual adamic language, which should not only inform or entertain, but also organise its viewers. It would not only transmit messages, but connect its audience to an universal circulation of energies which literally shot through their nervous systems. By articulating visible facts, Vertov wanted to shortcircuit his audience with the language of things itself, with the pulsating drives of matter.

In a sense, his dream has become true, if only in inverted form under the rule of global information capitalism. A transnational documentary jargon is now connecting people within global media networks. The standardised language of newsreels with its economy of attention based on fear, the racing time of flexible production, and hysteria is as fluid and affective, as immediate and immersive as Vertov could have imagined. It creates global public spheres whose participants are linked almost in a physical sense by mutual excitement and anxiety. Thus the documentary form is now more potent than ever; it conjures up the most spectacular aspects of the language of things and amplifies their power.

But while Vertov aimed at unleashing the social forces which were congealed in things by the occult powers of capitalist relations, contemporary documentary jargons have on the contrary exploited the occult potentials of the documentary form. They short-circuit fear and superstition with the realm of information. There is sometimes only a minimal difference between a documentary information and a stereotype, between a guide for orientation in a complex world and wholesale judgments about whole regions and populations. Information and desinformation, rationalism and hysteria, sobriety and exaggeration are not clearly separated within these networks. The border between description and confabulation blurs and fact and fiction fuse into „factions“. The docu-jargons of the present immerse their public into a barrage of intense affects, an incoherent mix of tragedy and grotesqueness, which catapults

the old curiosity of the vaudeville into the digital age. Ever more coarse and blurry images - which show less and less content – evoke a permanent state of crisis. These images create the norm by reporting the exceptional, even unimaginable; they transform the exception into the rule.

But the documentary languages of the present also have a different function. In an age of globalisation, when traditional forms of the social are shattered and national languages are downsized to local idioms, they offer orientation in an ever expanding world. Paolo Virno recently remarked, that clichés or jargons were not exclusively misleading. Rather than blatant misinformation, they may also turn out to be just empty common-places¹². If we understand this term literally, it also designates a site of common communication. A language based on such common-places is able to transcend borders and enable a public debate across them. But the real existing documentary public spheres are underlying severe restrictions. As Virno also remarked, commodified public spheres are not public at all¹³. These public spheres remain lopsided, they speak in a standardised industrial international jargon, but don't allow any participation. The non-public public sphere isolates while it connects people to each other, it locates people in the world by fanning fears of homelessness, it communicates by simplifying, it is affective but only insofar as it serves instincts and a feeling of general menace.

The non-public public sphere can be fearsome. Lets be honest; it can also be fun. It connects us in realtime to the most improbable things, but prescribes the form and the speed of these connections. It is based on effects of immediacy, on innervation, the thrill of voyeurism, or the complacency of bias. The languages of news media transport the conformism of things, not their potential of transformation. The more extraordinary, catastrophic and excentric things behave within them, the more everything else can stay the same.

Private public spheres

¹²Paolo Virno *Grammatik der Multitude* Wien: Turia und Kant 2006. P42ff.

¹³Ibid. p51.

The formula of the general transformation of documentary forms under the conditions of globalisation can be expressed by the notion of privatisation. In an economical perspective, documentary forms came under pressure by the privatisation of national and state-funded public spheres; in a content perspective, this pressure intensified the demand for private and intimate subject matter. The consequence of this double privatisation is the development of an increasingly private public sphere – metaphorically condensed within voyeuristic docu-soaps broadcast on private TV channels.

But there is also a very different consequence of this widespread privatisation for documentary practices in the present. After digital technology trickled down to consumer good production, access to it was extremely facilitated. The means of production of documentaries are more accessible than ever; they can literally be privatised and no longer exclusively belong to the tightly guarded privilege of state controlled organisations or large media corporations. Throughout the 20th century the control over the means of audiovisual production was repeatedly reorganised in the wake of key advances in technology: most recently with the advent of the digital era.

The keyword for this development is: camcorder revolution. It describes the mass circulation of audiovisual equipment as well as the political upheavals – for example the Romanian revolution 1989 - which were ambivalently entangled with these new technologies. These optical-political transformations proceeded simultaneously to a general restructuring of production, to the demise of industrial labour in the industrial centers and the emergence of new types of flexibilised workers. The production of documentary tends to increasingly merge with other fields of mass symbolic production within contemporary cultural industries, which are all characterised by creative output, freelancing and widespread flexibilisation. Even the previously elitist and highly limited realm of documentary image production was largely proletarianised. Small teams of freelancers and I-reporters replace fully employed journalists. On the other hand the extreme reduction of costs within digital production also created a space for deprofessionalised popular media experimentation.

Networked production

The conditions of documentary productions within the artfield are a case in point of such ongoing deprofessionalisation¹⁴. While experimentation is possible and often even desired in this area, it becomes possible by producing it at minimal cost. Experimental or low-budget documentary production in the artfield is often performed under do-it-yourself conditions with small digital cameras and homecomputers. Work place and private sphere blur. But although this production is increasingly individualised - the author is very often indeed the producer (and the sound person, the scriptwiter and best girl) - , it also tends to take place more and more in common. A rather anonymous common located within databases. Images are swapped, sounds downloaded. Ideas shared with aliases. P2P networks provide darkrooms for illicit archival downloads. Experimental documentary production increasingly immerses itself into malleable streams of digital data, it intercepts, appropriates, copies and distributes. The printing lab is replaced by ripping software. Authorship, copyright, intellectual property are reassessed. This type of production taps into the streams of dramas and desires, that are invisibly flowing around the world and traverse our bodies in form of WiFi signals. This is reality now. The new documentary doesn't picture this reality, but rips off large chunks to incorporate it.

Dziga Vertovs slogan of an „optical connection“ between the workers of the world is ironically updated within these communication networks, which link volatile and geographically dispersed groups of people in partially common operational procedures. Those linkages are transitory sites of the production of common, channels through which images, sounds and ideas travel.

Production vs. Distribution

All these ambivalent transformations contribute to reorganizing documentary practices. The very processes, which have extended the reach of documentary articulations across the globe not only dramatically altered their conditions of production but also their channels of distribution. But while production was on the whole rather facilitated, distribution becomes more and more tricky.

¹⁴Although there is no systematic research into these conditions as yet (and although it does'nt concern a low budget production either) Harun Farockis production diary of his work „Deep Play“ provides a fascinating case study. The German version is accessible online at: <http://newfilmkritik.de/archiv/2007-12/auf-zwolf-flachen-schirmen/>

The progressive privatisation of state media has led to a rapid commercialisation of their content. Formal experiments are replaced by docutainment and serial catastrophe. This means that experimental and reflexive documentary practices, have lost their base and have become homeless. This applies to some areas of classical documentary film production as well as to more experimental and artistic works. They have dispersed into a fluid and uncertain space, which is neither exclusively governed by the claims of specific national cultures nor by any single clearly distinguishable market logic. This space extends from alternative public spheres into the artfield, from university auditoriums to youtube and self-organised projections, from glamorous film festivals and blockbuster art shows to the informal distribution of video tapes from hand to hand. In a certain way this sphere constitutes the soft belly of a not yet existant transnational sphere of common, which might realise Vertov's vision as an optical connection 2.0.

Optical connection

Contemporary documentary expression does represent things and also tunes into their forces. But importantly it also organises things and humans in ever shifting combinations. It connects humans and machines, images and sounds, hard drives and desires. By indiscriminately articulating things and humans onto each other, it anticipates alternative forms of social composition. To work on these conditions, means to work on reality today.

An extended version of this text was first published in German as chapter 10 and 11 of Hito Steyerl, „Die Farbe der Wahrheit“ Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2008. Pp121-138.