

HISTORY AND FICTION

A roundtable discussion on the (re)construction of history in art and film with Yael Bartana, Maryam Jafri, Romuald Karmakar and Clemens von Wedemeyer, moderated by Kathrin Peters



How do art and cinema respond to “history”? To answer this equally difficult as fundamental question, four artists and filmmakers met in the editorial offices of “Texte zur Kunst” in Berlin to discuss the significance of historical documents, narratives and aesthetics for and in their works.

Which methods of dealing with history beyond university research and popular events promise productive insights into the past and its impact on the present? These and other topics are addressed by the three artists Yael Bartana, Maryam Jafri and Clemens von Wedemeyer and filmmaker Romuald Karmakar in the following roundtable discussion, moderated by the art historian Kathrin Peters.

KATHRIN PETERS: By way of introducing this roundtable discussion, I would like to stress that “history” to a large extent is still considered to be a matter of secured facts, immediately available for a reconstruction of the past. This widespread notion is said to enable us to understand and even relive the past – and we consequently find it in TV documentaries, costume films, popular exhibitions and the realm of reenactments of historical events. However, it seems evident that documents are fragments and demand to be interpreted and connected to make history palpable. By consequence, history is a matter of narratives, media and more generally speaking modes of representation involving elisions and discontinuities. I would like to bring that theoretical perspective to

bear on contemporary art and initiate a discussion on different strategies of representing and reflecting history in your distinct artistic practices, that for the sake of an admittedly simplifying introduction could be characterized as follows: Yael consciously employs an ambivalent modern film aesthetic in order to deal with the politics of contemporary Israel, Romuald returns to original documents and has them reenacted in a nearly minimalist cinematic form, Maryam examines historical representations in film and on stage and Clemens questions the status of documents vis-à-vis their reception history and filmic representation. A common denominator of these works, it seems to me, is an analysis of the existing conventions of film as one of the nowadays dominant media of conveying history. In other words, I think that you do not only deal with historical topics in your respective works, but also with the aesthetics of historical accounts which you then quote, trigger, appropriate, comment on or refuse altogether. Maybe you, Yael, could start by talking about your most recent project?

Yael Bartana: Sure. My new film “Mur i wieża”, “Wall and Tower”, is the second part of a trilogy that, to put it briefly, is an utopian vision of turning back the wheel of history. It deals with the charged history of both the Polish and the Jewish Nation. The first film I did in this context, “Mary Koszmary”, stages a fake propaganda speech by the Polish publicist Slawomir Sierakowski, who is the editor-in-chief of the left-wing magazine for politics and culture “Krytyka Polityczna”, in the empty Olympic Stadium of Warsaw, which is actually now renovated but was still pretty much in ruins when we filmed there. In a very inflammatory rhetoric, Slawomir invites the Jews to return to Poland, coming up with the slogan: “3.3 million Jews can change the life of 40 million Poles” The second part now follows this lead and shows how the Jews, who followed this appeal, actually come to Poland, found the “The Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland” (“JRMiP”) and build a first kibbutz in Warsaw. It is, if you like, a

very sober political hallucination. And both films employ a decidedly non-contemporary aesthetic. I generally want to demonstrate how fascist films of the 1930s were influenced by the Bolsheviks' propaganda, and more importantly, how the Zionist movement was equally influenced by it. You can see the same aesthetic thus appearing in totally different, if not opposed contexts. Communists, Fascists, Zionists, they were all using very similar techniques, very similar imagery, a lot of close-ups, frames that are empowering the heroes, creating glorifying narratives. I'm again using this very language, appropriating it, to suggest imaginary events that can maybe be read in the future as part of history. I am often told that it is not valid anymore to use this cinematic aesthetic, that it is outdated. But for me that's the whole point and actually the reason why I use it. It provokes emotional reactions; because it takes people into a different time when those films were truly ideological and influential.

PETERS: This re-settlement of Jews in Warsaw takes place on the site of the former Ghetto. It is centred around the image of kibbutz architecture and by the end of the film one looks at a high wooden fence with barbed wire on top and a control tower. I am very interested in that shift in *mise-en-scène* – from a hopeful beginning to notions of confinement and exclusion.

BARTANA: The kibbutz architecture is remodeled after the very first Wall and Tower kibbutzim, Homa U'migdal kibbutzim in Hebrew, erected in Palestine between 1936 and 1939. I worked together with an architect who rebuilt it according to historic photographs. The Wall and Tower project took place during the same years that were also known for the Great Arab revolt in Palestine. The violent uprising against the British mandate and Jewish immigration triggered the Jewish pioneers to embark on an operation declaring a new territorial reality through the expansion of Jewish settlements in Palestine. Through well-planned and quick operations more than 57 settlements

were constructed, many of which were built over night. Operation Wall and Tower redefined Jewish possession of land throughout Palestine and served until this very day as a constitutive Zionist ethos: "We came to this land to build and to be built by it". But to resettle in the area of the Warsaw Ghetto certainly produces a very different image. After building the set and for the film and posting the action in the media and the JRMiP, one fascist declared a demonstration against the movement. He wanted to protect Poland from 3 million Jews who are coming back, claiming that Israel had after all already occupied Palestinian territory and that Jews should definitely stay out of Poland. The demonstration was scheduled for 1st of September this year on the Freedom Square in Lodz. His reaction was unexpected. And felt that life is faster than art. Finally, the city hall cancelled the demonstration. For me this whole project is a reflection of contemporary life, an attempt to return to specific historical moments. Yet I am in doubt about the possibility of reversing history, even though I am investing in it.

PETERS: Compared to Yael's approach, one might say that you, Romuald, are pursuing a nearly opposite strategy. Your films "Himmler-Projekt" and "Hamburger Lektionen" don't stage an event, but concentrate on one actor, in both cases Manfred Zapatka, reading a speech in a studio setting. Maybe you talk about your approach and its stakes?

ROMUALD KARMAKAR: The basis for both works is an original document. In case of "Himmler Project" it is a secret speech by Heinrich Himmler, that he held in Poland, in Posen, in October 1943 at the annual meeting of the generals of the SS. So it's a secret speech. And it was taped on wax-records and then transferred onto paper. The document was later used by the prosecution in the Nuremberg Trials. But when you compare the document of Nuremberg to the original sound-recording you notice differences. The differences do not concern the content as much as the form

of delivery. Himmler gave the speech without a script, and in talking he twisted the German grammar, so that his assistant later on corrected it in the transcript. What is also missing in the file is the reaction of the audience to the speech and this is quite interesting because it is a speech held within a social body. The SS generals say “Oh yes”, “oh no”, or “we like that”, and this also is not captured in the document used by historians. In doing the film, I first went back to the original sound file, then I added the reactions of the generals to Himmler’s speech by adding subtitles and I took an actor who is dressed in normal civilian clothes in a studio, which is grey, and he is reading the whole speech from the paper. It takes three hours. It’s a complete transfer of the document. We did the film in 2000, forty five years after the end of the war and it was interesting because although the original source exists and it’s publicly accessible, you can see it in an archive or in the state-library, the Berlin Film Festival didn’t want to show the film, because they were arguing that the film would put the audience into being like a SS-General.

PETERS: Why did you go back to the originally taped sound material?

KARMAKAR: In every book on National Socialism and especially in the history of the SS, this speech is referred to. The speech is three and a half hours long, yet the quotes in which Himmler is talking about the extermination of the Jews – that is what makes this an important document – used by historians are only two minutes. But if you listen to the speech you realize that it doesn’t take on this emphasis as in 1943 the fate of the European Jews was already determined by the Nazis.

PETERS: But you could also realize this in the published version of Himmler’s speech. So the question for me is in how far the invention or at least definition of an aesthetic form plays a decisive role in dealing with this historic moment and its consequent reception?

KARMAKAR: In German you have a word that is important for me in this regard, it’s “Rekonkretisierung” – making issues and matters concrete again, if you will. One has to realize, though, that every decade has a different approach towards an issue and artists and filmmakers choose certain quotes from historical materials that can be connected to their times that have a contemporary meaning. But we always have to look back to the source material to gauge how this quote is used. In that sense it doesn’t matter for me if you make a film or take a picture.

MARYAM JAFRI: My approach to documents is transformative rather than representational. I tend to work through source material – be it a newspaper article, an old photo or a literary text – often by fusing it with elements of theatre and cinema in a process I’d call fictionalizing. However, to my mind that does not necessarily make the final result less political or even less ‘true.’ Fictional narratives today often have, especially in contemporary cinema and television, a stronger effect on reality, precisely because the audience is willing to suspend disbelief and enter into what they are told is an imaginary space. In my film “Staged Archive” the source material were historical photographs of mobile cinemas, taken from the National Archives of Ghana. Mobile cinemas were a kind of travelling cinemas on a van, used mostly by European missionaries in colonial regions. I used these images as a slide show within a fictional, nine minute film about a man on trial for a mysterious crime. The film’s narrative draws upon travel literature, like Conrad and Maugham and various film genres such as noir, courtroom drama, road movie and a translation of theatre into film à la Fassbinder or Visconti. At first glance these genres seem to have nothing to do with the documentary material, but in fact the noir and the theatrical sequences make evident the performative and psychological subtext of the photos. That said, I am highly critical of any stance that purports that all documents and all accounts are equal because they’re all on some level fictionalized.

PETERS: Indeed it is crucial to insist on the distinction between fact and fiction. And all of you use documents and research methods. However, I would like to propose a continuum between fact and fiction rather than a strict opposition or separation.

JAFRI: Yes. And I find this continuum reflected more often in artistic projects than in the work of historians. Historians are still more wedded to the truth-value of what they are doing. And I think artists are willing to question this claim and suspend immediate legibility when it comes to historical narratives. Ambiguity, contradiction – problematics that historians attempt to resolve or in the worst case, even repress – are often brought to the forefront in the work of artists, I think.

PETERS: This is an important point. Your latest work, Clemens, for instance focuses on a case from the 1970s that could in a sense be regarded as an epitome of the continuum between fact and fiction at play in every kind of historiography and reflects on it in terms of film.

CLEMENS VON WEDEMEYER: True. In earlier works I used historical films as a tool to look at contemporary conditions, for example in “Big Business” a “Laurel and Hardy” film is restaged in a German prison. The original film functions as a kind of Trojan horse to get inside, as well as a tool to deconstruct the situation inside of the prison which soon sets the foreground. The work I have been focussing on over the last year is called “The Fourth Wall”. Its starting point is the case of a group of twenty-six people, who were living in the rainforest of Mindanao, in the Philippines. They were supposedly first contacted by Westerners in 1971. At that point they were living as if still in the stone-age, using “primitive” tools etc. Naturally, they got a lot of media attention which went on for the following two, three years. It’s interesting to note, I think, that this discovery of course was totally in synch with the zeitgeist of the early seventies, romantic hippies seeking

a life close to nature in alternative communities etc. Fifteen years later, in 1986 a Swiss journalist went to the Philippines, found and interviewed this group who now lived in nearby houses. He claimed that it all had been staged 15 years before. That it was a hoax. But again, this “revelation” fitted well into the spirit of the eighties. So maybe the eighties could be described as the decade of deceit and doubt. What had fifteen years before been romantic, peaceful, authentic life, now turned out to be made-up. Just as the case of the “Hitler Diaries” published in Stern magazine in the early 80s, the hoax gets even more attention than the real thing. In a way, these 26 people in the Philippines became a screen-like projection surface for a lot of fantasies of both of these eras. For my work I interviewed people, for example a film maker from Italy, Ruggero Deodato, who was inspired by a National Geographic feature on this case and turned it a cannibal-film. In this case, I think fiction is the point of departure. It is always there when you look back. Trying to get history straight in that sense would mean to get under the surface of fiction through its vacancies.

PETERS: Does that for you imply to break up mythologies to get to the truth? Or is it about creating another mythology instead?

VON WEDEMEYER: It’s interesting for me to demonstrate how narratives are working, by making a model work, if you like. The Tasaday became a model in anthropology of a bad example of unsound field work. When pursuing an artistic project based on this group I was interested more generally in how we believe in reports, images, in acting. It would be useful to write a history of inspiration to follow ever new layers of imagination. My exhibition at the Barbican Centre in London could then ideally add aspects to the existing mythology and thereby make the mythology itself readable. A new fiction could put the old footage in another light, for instance. The exhibition consisted of 5 or more short films and 3 interviews, appearing in different formats, even in TV, and

in the gallery spaces, of course. It was necessary for me to use different formats in order to show how each of them functions differently: a mute ethnographic film besides a fiction film besides a found footage essay, all produced and collected for the exhibition.

BARTANA: More generally speaking, I think the question always is, how far we can go when employing fictitious elements and concomitant filmic rhetoric when dealing with history. Where does the notion of responsibility come into play? Fictions have material and political effects, they are working in people's minds. So I think we are responsible for the images we produce.

KARMAKAR: I would like to talk about specific narratives instead of using this very general term "fiction". A documentary film, let's say, about the Killing of Nanking and a television drama about the bombing of Dresden in WW II and a video shown in an art institution shouldn't be confused, I think – exactly because the way each of these formats is narrated and the perception generated by it works completely differently. It doesn't say anything about the quality, but you have to keep things separate.

PETERS: But why this insistence on keeping popular culture, film and contemporary art apart? Aren't all these realms closely related?

KARMAKAR: Since 9-11, especially in the German public, in television and print media, there is an iconography of evil. How a preacher has to look and so on. So if you make a film dealing with this issue, you have to be aware of this. And you have to decide if you want to use this charged iconography or if you want to smash it up or make the attempt to neglect it completely. This is a fundamental artistic choice. And only then the question arises how to impose this choice in a cinema, gallery or in public television. Everything is a matter of form and content. And you can decide to make a clip on Youtube or to produce and

direct a three-hour long feature film that costs 10 Million Euro. In every format or genre there are ruling conditions of talking that I would coin "conditioned narrative". They work in television, they work in history-writing, in film-making, I'm sure in art too. Good art starts with an awareness of these conditions and conventions. When you work about National Socialism, it was in power in Germany for twelve years, but at this point we are in the sixth decade of the post war period. Everyone inside and outside of Germany has a pool of reflection on these twelve years. And if you now make a film on the Nazi period, I demand of a film-director to be aware of that. And to me it seems that many filmmakers who direct films on this topic don't give a shit. It is really annoying for me that today you can exchange every historic item as long as you keep the narrative structure of accepted media. You can make a film on Rwanda or Nazi Germany, in any case you will need a love story, a good ending conveying hope, although thousands of people were killed.

PETERS: Would you all define your work as working against these "conditioned narratives" and dominant structures of the representation of history?

KARMAKAR: All of these works try to establish a counter-public. And that's very important.

BARTANA: For me it has actually become more and more interesting to create proposals rather than countering existing narratives. Proposals for solutions or to create affects that make people think differently. That's why I created this fictional movement of "JRMiP", to suggest that there is always something behind the aesthetics of the propaganda films I quote in my most recent projects. The proposal, as I said, is that three Million Jews go to Poland to resettle on the site of the former Ghetto. I'm trying to connect a few facts and a few ideas.

VON WEDEMEYER: To change history?

BARTANA: It's more about the admittedly dubious idea of reversing history; maybe even correcting it, to give the Polish nation a chance to overcome guilt by asking Jews to return. And I choose these obsolete film aesthetics exactly because it seems not to be the right way to discuss those issues to begin with. I think the obsolescence of these images is clear, so that even if I propose a reversal of history, I think the impossibility becomes obvious at the same time. It is about making people react.

KARMAKAR: By the same token, I have the feeling that simply the fact that there are articles and features on television gives most of the people in the society the feeling that the issue is dealt with, the feeling that I personally don't have to care.

PETERS: Do you all feel this urgency to intervene with your work in a discourse that today seems more and more obsessed with historicism rather than history?

JAFRI: It is an important part of my practice to critique any teleological view of history and in that respect my thinking has been greatly influenced by feminist and postcolonial criticism which aims to show that narratives and canons exclude as much as they include and what is excluded is a political decision, conscious or unconscious. I agree when you assert that we all question dominant narratives in our work, and, I'd add that we often do it in part through the use of formal or narrative displacements. However, as a counterpoint, I immediately think of Gus van Sant's "Milk". In the end there are these photographs of the "real" historical protagonists and you notice how similar the actors look in his film. Obviously van Sant wants this truth-claim. He wants to reach a largely straight audience and have them identify with the queer protagonist Harvey Milk. To do so he enters heteronormative culture, uses its tools, but then repurposes them for a queer political agenda. "Milk" was a very effective use of what normally is considered problematic ten-

dencies within commercial cinema, such as identification, empathy and excessive emotionality.

VON WEDEMEYER: Even if he wouldn't have shown these photographs at the end, people simply would have looked it up online anyway.

JAFRI: Yes, but he deliberately reveals them at the end, as historical documents.

KARMAKAR: But this strategy is also used by Spielberg in the same way. It's part of popular culture, totally common. For me it even has *haut goût*. Van Sant uses these photographs for his film to appear more authentic.

PETERS: Yes, it is a rhetorical device to show this footage, it signifies authenticity. Anyway, to discredit the mainstream in this way for me is always a bit unsatisfying. Don't you see any critical potential in popular culture to counter dominant historical narratives?

KARMAKAR: Popular films are part of the reception of history, of course. But this focus on the cinematographic in my view is a purely academic concern. There is a whole meta-discussion about the media of history. But does this really have to do with history?

VON WEDEMEYER: I think it's an important topic, because there are facts for sure, but there is always quite immediately a crystallization of fiction or imagination. In your case, you rediscover real documents like sound recordings or protocols which lead to a great clash between times when restaged. But when the original files are missing, there is a grey zone. When, for example, Marco Polo went to China, one could not trust his reports. Today it is of course much easier to keep record, but in return questions of editing and filmic narratives come into play. Nowadays everybody runs around with a camera. In "La Commune" Peter Watkins speculates about a film-team present at the Commune in Paris. I like it exactly

because it is questioning the role of the reporter in different eras.

PETERS: Maybe by way of preliminarily closing this debate, we should talk about the notion of reenactment which surely is the most prominent trope used with regard to contemporary art's take on "history". What's your take on it?

KARMAKAR: In case of "Himmler-Project" there's the actor shot in a studio, the most artificial setting imaginable. I think that the more artificial you get, the closer you are to your subject. And for me the delivery of the Himmler speech is a true reenactment. But there are different ways to do it, of course. If somebody who made a film on the demonstrations in Leipzig twenty years ago, gives a radio interview today, for me this is a reenactment, too. He is telling from today's perspective what he thought twenty years ago. It's all about the formalization of memory.

PETERS: Reenactments then are repetitions that produce difference. In your new work, Clemens, you refer to how the alleged group of stone-age people was audio-taped in their cave. When rereading the transcript you had the impression that it was like a rehearsal in the very beginning. In "The Fourth Wall" you consequently produced a big rehearsal on a theatre stage at the Barbican centre, doubling a reenactment in itself, if you like.

VON WEDEMEYER: I read the audiotapes that were translated, transcribed and printed for the book about the Tasaday and it immediately felt like a theatre play. The author formatted it in such a way that real persons came across as "characters". I therefore asked a play writer to pen a theatre piece based on these transcripts. We decided that the actors should go into isolation inside the cave of bourgeois culture, so to speak, like a group in the jungle, disconnected from the rest of the world. 26 actors and non-actors from London on the Barbican theatre stage, surviving on what the

audience left for them to eat. Not really a reenactment, I think, maybe a hybrid.

BARTANA: In my case the method is really about creating historical mirrors by way of repetition. It's about displacements, about how the same act takes on different meanings when moving to another geographical area. It is also about nostalgia, not in the sense of a passive emotion, but as a way to enable an alternative thinking. What does it mean to build a kibbutz in the area of the former Ghetto of Warsaw today? The new kibbutz was erected on the site where the future Jewish Museum of Warsaw will be built. But for me this project is not about memory and musealization, but about establishing a relation to contemporary Israeli politics. Jews coming to Poland today would not constitute a Diaspora anymore, but would be closely linked to a specific nation state, to the militaristic rhetoric and politics of Israel. That's why the "The Jewish Renaissance Movement" in Poland even has a flag combining the Polish eagle and the Star of David. The film is also anchored in historical ideas and proposals for Jewish autonomies outside the land of Israel. In the past, a proposal for a Jewish settlement in Uganda, Africa, was introduced by the first leader of modern Zionism, Mr. Theodor Herzl. Another example is a Jewish settlement established in the Soviet Union during Stalin's regime. The reverse perspective on history, which the film is set to explore, positions it on a new, subversive track.

JAFRI: I work with adaptation rather than re-enactment. "Death With Friends", a film I'm currently working on in Mumbai, is based on the diaries of Babur, the first Mughal emperor of India. Written between 1494–1529, "The Baburnama" is the first known instance of autobiography in Islamic literature and is much debated by both historians and literary scholars. I utilize a voice over, reading excerpts from the diary, accompanied by filmed sequences of actors on a highly theatrical, geometric set, a set that resembles both a physical space and a diagram. The reliability of the

narrator is sometimes undermined by the filmed material, other times reinforced, still other times reframed in order to produce multiple meanings and tease out hidden layers in the text. Much of the diary takes place in what is now Afghanistan/Pakistan and one of the challenges is how to deal with the numerous and overlapping voices that have already laid claim to representing the region, its people and its history – Mughal miniature paintings, Bollywood costume epics, War on Terror news reportage etc. As we discussed earlier, one has to be aware of this pool of reflection and mediation.

LAURENCE A. RICKELS

LONELY GHOSTS

On the Sense and Direction of “Reenactment”



Reenactments are mainly discussed using the concepts of difference and repetition. Until now, art theory has not had much to say about the psychoanalytical potential this genre could bear.

As a specialist in revenants of all sorts as well as in psychoanalysis and contemporary art, Laurence A. Rickels has formulated a proposal in this regard for “Texte zur Kunst”. Based on the question of why reenactment has gained importance in art and popular culture since the 1960s, he discusses its claims against the background of Melanie Klein’s concept of “integration”, using the works of Mike Kelley as a starting point. What follows thus is the event of an encounter between Rickels, Kelley and Klein.

The problem of reenactment is older and runs deeper than you think. Genealogically or more specifically, the relationship to reenactment in contemporary art encircles a recent past in the chronicle of pop culture, an era from which, at that time, art itself was missing in acting out, but onto the record of which art in the 1990s began to project itself. What was new in high art in the 1960s was the performance that, always only happening in the moment, remained resolutely off the record. Can we understand “reenactment” as the supplement of recording set adrift in contemporary art in the 1960s by the advent of the “event”? Its adventure was at the same time everywhere waiting and watching in the wings, notably in “reenactments” of Civil War battles that entered the stage left behind by the arts beginning in the 1960s. Once again at the same time, the Disney imagineers developed the