

Historical and Sociological Aspects of Documental Pictures

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Introduction

Although the history of film begins with non-fictional recordings of everyday life, in comparison with classical Hollywood movies, documental films are underrepresented in scientific research. This is true not only of film and media studies but, with some exceptions, sociology and the humanities. So far, both disciplines lack a systematic examination of documental film as regards form and style as well as regarding insights it might provide into the (audio)visual reproduction of social and historical truths. Since the invention of film, only ethnography and visual anthropology have used it as an important methodological tool of social and cultural observation and have discussed its role as such at any length (see Schändlinger 2006, 350). In this context, the social scientist becomes the filmmaker and has to deal with the requirements and demands of film production (see Kurt 2010) without, however, claiming to be a »cinematic artist.« And in general, these are commonly called scientific or sociological films (see Reichert 2007; Kaczmarek 2008; as well as Schnetler in this issue). However, aside from analyses of film as a method, the relevance of documental pictures, from a sociological and a historical perspective, to public cultures of communication and media is often neglected (see Heinze 2012a). Even though there is some overlapping of visual anthropology and film as a method with public cultures of communication and media, there are still some very important differences regarding the goals of these distinct conditions of production.

The lack of interest can, on the one hand, easily be explained from a sociological point of view by the marginal role documental films play in cinemas in comparison with Hollywood films. This, however, is a blind

spot in the discourse of media sociology, as realistic/documental forms of communication such as photography and documental film are an important component of societal communication. Realism, as an artistic principle, is itself a changing historical phenomenon that plays a major role in the imagination of reality in modern rational societies (see Heinze 2012b). On the other hand, empirically-oriented social sciences are always loath to use resources not based on personally conducted surveys. In both qualitative analysis and in media analysis, about 90% of all studies are based on oral surveys (see Ayaß 2006, 63). As a rule, the possibilities offered by other media analysis techniques are neither being exhausted, nor are the inter- or trans-disciplinary approaches of visual and film studies being exploited. Finally, sociology—as a science that relies mainly on the written word—finds it difficult to evaluate pictures and films for a further gain in sociological knowledge. Film sociology and visual sociology are exceptions to this rule (see for example Heinze, Moebius, and Reichert 2012; Winter 2010, 1992; Schroer 2007; Winter and Mai 2006; Raab 2008; Schnettler and Pöttsch 2007), although here too the genre of documental film is seldom a topic. Within the sociology of media and communication there are some works about the current documental phenomenon of reality TV (see Reichertz 2011; Keppler 2006; Göttlich 2008, 2004, 2001, 1995), but the history of this format is strongly attached to the medium of the television (on television documentary see Hissnauer 2011).

In the field of history, film is a controversial source. In contrast to sociology, however, there has been epistemological interest since the beginning of film history (see Riederer 2006, 98–99). There is less controversy about the fact that films *are* useful historical documents than about *how* to unlock their potential as a source (see Wilharm 2005). In this discourse, documental film is regarded as more trustworthy than fiction films as it promises to be more authentic and nearer to the historical truth (see Riederer 2006, 100). But Post-structural debates and the »critique of Representation« (see Sandkühler 2009) have steadily taken their toll on this trust. Recently, new television formats with historical content have increasingly become the focus of discussion in light of the rise of

numerous hybrid mixes such as docufiction, essay film, compilation film or historical infotainment (see Fischer and Wirtz 2008; Elm 2008; Hohenberger and Keilbach 2003). This new manner of mixing fictional and non-fictional film sequences is most likely increasing uncertainty as to how to handle history in film, at least for those who see documental films as a reflection of reality. An analysis of different forms of documental film sheds light on the way history is portrayed and dealt with in film. Historical themes as well as historical truths are not only a favourite topic in motion pictures, but also of documental films in a variety of forms. The importance of film as a key medium for the production and distribution of historical themes is currently also being discussed in the context of the culture of remembrance as a media practice (see Lüdeker 2012; Erll 2008; Kaes 1987).

Both sociological and historical work on documental films has to answer a variety of questions such as: What are documental films? What demarcates them from fictional films? How can documental films themselves be differentiated, how broad is the spectrum of their formal language? What does the documental style of a film reveal about the handling of social and historical truths (for example Claude Lanzmann's rejection of archival images in his major documental work *Shoah*)? Which communicational functions and tasks are and were being fulfilled by documental films in recent and previous societal media cultures? Which *Bilder des Wirklichen* (Images of the Real—Hohenberger 2006) are cultivated by different forms and styles of documental film and which social discourses are these based upon? Which fundamental sociological and historical epistemological values can be derived from documental films? How are documental films embedded in social contexts and in discourses on sociality and history? Which institutions are responsible for production and distribution, and how is and was the reception? What pictures of society and history do documental films create, what notion of the social do they deliver? How do documental films treat society and history, what is their socio-communicative function? And finally, how can we deal with a documental film aesthetic from a sociological or historical point of view? Which sociological and historical insights can be

won from the way in which different styles of documental film handle social and historical realities? This essay takes up some of these questions and presents preliminary ideas on documental film from a sociological and historical perspective. First, however, I shall attempt to give documental film a framework with regards to definition and theory.

What are documental films? Theoretical remarks on documental film styles.

Theories of documental film look into its epistemology and try to determine or to question its phenomenology. Answers to the question of what a documental film is, what documentaries are (and are not) allow for further conclusions about practical implementation and documental styles as forms of social and historical reality.¹ Eva Hohenberger (2006, 28–30) identifies three theories of documental film² as regards history and theory which she categorizes as *normative* theories of documental film, *reflexive* theories of documental film, and *deconstructive* theories of documental film. These are actually not detached from one another, but are rather chronologically overlapping theoretical approaches to and attempts at theorization. Normative theories focus on the documental film's desired state. These are descriptions of the subject matter, formulated in the main by documentary filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov, Paul

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- 1 The individual strands of discussion are often quite perplexing, as the following description by Klaus Kreimeier (2004, 439) illustrates: »More than other film genres, documentary film perseveres in the search for self-definition as if to repeatedly assure itself of its existence not only through its production practice, but also in the strict eyes of theory. Documentary film continuously asks: Do I exist? And quite often the famous theory debates tangle into a knot which discussants try to escape through the same hair-splitting which got them into their predicament in in the first place.« (This and all other translations from the German are by Audrey Terracher-Lipinski and Sara Harould unless otherwise noted.)
 - 2 Her anthology speaks of »*Dokumentarfilm*« (documentary) and not »*dokumentarischer Film*« (documental film) which limits the term to a historically central, but special form of documental film. The fields of television-specific or journalistic forms are not subsumed under this terminology.

Rotha, John Grierson, Ioris Ivens, and Klaus Wildenhahn (see Hohenberger 2006). These theories are characterized by their focus on media and social politics and distance themselves deliberately from the »bourgeois theatre of illusions.«³ Reflexive theories take up and discuss aspects of normative theories, without however questioning the status of documentary film as a genre. Within this discourse, the discussion concentrates less on the filmmakers themselves, but rather on film and media scientists who endorse text-centered approaches (see Hohenberger 2006, 29–30). At the level of the documentary films themselves, self-reflexive explorations of the genre show up quite early. For example, the camera itself temporarily becomes an individual, autonomous protagonist in Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929); slow-motion and stills are other filmic techniques used by Vertov to highlight the craftsmanship of his fact-based method. In essay and compilation films, in Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema, as well as in newer hybrid styles of documentary film, we find self-reflexive hints at the instability of the genre, without however rejecting it as an independent phenomenon (see Meyer 2005). Finally, *deconstructing* theories question the genre as such. These approaches deny that there is an ontology of documentary film (see Hohenberger 2006, 30). Basically, these approaches assume that the film itself provides no information as to its documentary or fictive status, that the documentary is rather utilized and viewed as a stylistic effect, or that there is a hybrid form which does not allow any specific classification (nevertheless, the difference between documentary and fictive is still maintained).⁴ In the

3 This declaration of principles is formulated nowhere as succinctly as in the manifestos of the Russian Kinoki group centered around Dziga Vertov. In *We. Variant of a Manifesto* he writes: »We are cleansing kinochestvo of foreign matter—of music, literature and theatre; we seek our own rhythm, one lifted from nowhere else, and we find it in the movements of things.« (Vertov (1973 [1922], 7). This media-political challenge is later taken up and pursued by Klaus Wildenhahn in his criticism of the »synthetic film« (see Wildenhahn 1975).

4 Pseudo documentaries or mockumentaries have shown that the documentary can be a stylistic staging as in *The Blair Witch Projekt* (1999), *This is Spinal Tap* (1984) or *Man Bites Dog* (1992) (see Heinze 2013, forthcoming). Conversely, the fictive has always been marked by documentary

end it is impossible to say where film images come from and this creates a »hyperreality« (Baudrillard 2010). Deconstructive theories also include those approaches that conceptualize documental films as a specific type of communication between film and spectator in which specific documentalizing and authenticating codes evoke mental associations of the real. These codes vary throughout history, so that perceptual relationships also become flexible. The definition of the documental is thus dependent upon what is understood as documental film at a specific point in time; from the perspective of the recipient and as regards the context in which the films are produced. The documental element of documental films thus results, according to these theories, from the viewer's perception and the film's communicative surroundings.

What, however, defines documental films? Which criteria and material attributes set them apart from feature films? As a rule, in the production and reception of films, a distinction is made between feature films (non-fictional or popular film) and documental films (non-fiction films or, in a narrower sense, documentaries).⁵ Whereas a feature film is rarely an-

stagings. *Citizen Kane* (1941) is a prominent example (see Roscoe and Hight 2001 and Rhodes and Springer 2006 on the problem of fake documentation; also interesting in this context is Izod, Kilborn and Hibberd's (2000) anthology on the evolution of the documental *From Grierson to the Docu-Soap*).

- 5 There is almost no consensus in the literature about the application and differentiation of terms. I would therefore like to stress the difference between »fictive« and »fictional.« The latter refers merely to the actively designed, whereas the former means freely invented. If documental films are perceived to be without artistic elements, then they are non-fictional and non-fictive. Assuming, however, that *every* film has artistic elements—and this is meanwhile accepted as common sense in the theory—documental films can be fictional but not fictive (see Arriens 1999, 37). It is understandable why fictional motion pictures are classified as popular films (even though there are unpopular motion pictures). It is equally understandable why documental films are classified as not popular, as it is often, but by no means always, true. Michael Moore's documental films for example should certainly be categorized as popular films. To date, there is no terminology that clearly delineates the two sides. At the same time it would be neither acceptable nor empirically

nounced as such, the assignation of a film as »documentary« is common on announcements, in reviews, and on posters. These textual attributes channel the attention of the spectators and influence their attitudes. A »documentalizing« reading results in a different mind-set than a »fictionalizing« reading (Odin 2006; also see Hissnauer on the semio-pragmatic approach 2011, 61–63). The film's narrator as well as the people and situations it portrays are then regarded as »real.« Guynn (1990, 229) describes this difference as follows:

The spectator who goes to see a documentary is quite aware that the film is not designed to provide the same experience as the fiction film. Normally, he/she has not chosen the film as a leisure-time activity whose goal is to activate the pleasures of the imaginary. The spectator is, rather, conscious of an overriding seriousness of purpose defined, at least in part, by special conditions of consumption.

On the socio-communicative level, where documental films have a specific communication function within societal media cultures, they at first sight differ from feature films (see Nichols 2010, 7–9; Hohenberger 2006, 20–21). From these viewpoints, documental films are committed to conveying knowledge and information about the real social and historical world; they enlighten, inform, and provide insight into (previously) unknown topics. The events captured and shown by documental films would have occurred (perhaps with minor changes) without the presence of the camera. They originate from social reality and are not fictive. John Grierson, however, in his well-known first description of documental film, points out that it is a »creative treatment of reality.« Thus the staged and open character of documental films is intimated at in a very early stage of documental film history.

correct to ignore the different characteristics of fictional and documental films. Therefore Heller (2001, 18.) suggests speaking of a relationship of difference rather than of opposition, which takes on a different shape at varying points of time in film history.

The people in documental films are real people and enact themselves; they act within their social roles. As regards perception and reception, documental films activate a perceptual framework for perceiving reality. Spectators recognize that these films are about, and make an argument about, the real social and historical truth. Finally, documentaries in the narrower sense have a much smaller budget than feature films (see Hohenberger 2006, 20–21).⁶ As we can see, all attempts to define documental films rely heavily on their relationship to non-filmic or rather pre-filmic reality⁷ as well as the perceived authenticity and credibility of the events shown (see Hattendorfer 1999). These attempts at clarification mislead us into thinking that documental films reproduce real pictures of reality, allowing an undisguised view of real events captured by the camera. This opinion is anchored in realistic film theory (see Elsaesser and Hagener 2007, 10), of which Siegfried Kracauer is perhaps the most important sociological representative. In contrast, formalist film theories focus on the constructive and representative aspect of film production (ibid.). They highlight those aspects which give form and thus the medial transformativity of *each and every* film shot. Formalist approaches oppose the concept of pure mechanical reproduction of pre-filmic or non-filmic reality and accentuate the artificial/artistic conditions of filmmaking (as

6 In the next section I will say more on the job market for documentary filmmakers and the market for documental films.

7 Eva Hohenberger (1988, 26–28) describes the medial transformation process in which documental films emerge and are perceived as different levels of effect (with regards to the implications and critique of this model see Hissnauer 2011, 46–48). The *non-filmic* reality is reality sui generis. It is the all-encompassing reality of the world and ultimately only to be ascertained philosophically; it cannot and will not be filmed. The *pre-filmic* reality is the selected extract that is recorded in front of the camera at the moment of recording. The *reality film* denominates the contextual surrounding of the film production. This entails distribution, rental, funding, and advertising, but also editing. The *filmic reality*, however, is the reality the viewer is confronted with in the film. This is the finished film in which the previous levels are incorporated, but cannot or only rarely be seen. Finally, post-filmic reality describes the reception of and discourse on the film and all related discussions.

an art form) and the materiality of the film (see Arnheim 2003 [1932]). Recently, Bruno Latour's actor network theory has been discussed as a method for delineating the practices of the creation of documental films (see Weber in this journal). Thus documental films can be discussed on the level of content, form, and production.

Currently, there is such a variety of styles and forms of documental films that is difficult to maintain an overview. These different styles and forms are marked by different ways of dealing with pre-filmic reality. Whereas some documental styles share characteristics with auteur films (see Felix 2007 on auteur film),⁸ most current forms and formats come from television, where the author usually disappears.⁹ Hissnauer (2011, 19–20) points to the fact that within the documental television formats of the past few years, there has been an explosion of different names for sub-genres:

Documentary, documentation, feature, documental play, docu-drama, docu-soap, docu-thriller, docu-satire, docu-comedy, report, *living history*, event or adventure documentation, essay film, documental essay, documental story, reconstructions, reenactments, docu-fiction, faction, real-life-soap, reality soap, Reality TV, fake-docu, *mockumentary*, pseudo-docu, *factual entertainment*, fictive docu-

8 The Russian film theorist B. M. Ejchenbaum (2003 [1927]) discusses the »problems of film stylistics« as the director's process of creation, looking at the creative process of filmmaking from the point of view of a subject acting artistically. Behind the terms »form« or even »format,« the handwriting of the creator as subject increasingly disappears. In formulaic television, the individual creator loses his significance. But in spite of the »death of the author,« (Barthes), auteur cinema is still an important category of analysis within film theory and is still discussed as auteur film by the audience (see Felix 2007, 13). Within the field of documental film, authors such as Michael Moore, Ulrich Seidl or Michael Glawogger are certainly amongst the most important representatives of documental auteur film, and their productions exhibit a signature style.

9 However there are documental TV-film authors who have defined styles, for example Hans-Dieter Grabe, Georg Troller, Egon Monk or Klaus Wildenhahn, whom I mentioned above.

mentation, fictionalized documentation, *scripted documentary*, et cetera. [emphasis in original]

This list could be expanded many times over. Additionally, there are sub-genres such as the »educational film« (see Ahnert in this journal). This large spectrum of documental forms demands additional and intensive theoretical discussion. Due to the importance of documental styles and forms as a socio-communicative genre, there is further need for an exhaustive theorization and systematic analysis of the complex epistemological status of documental filmic images and their formation, taking current developments into account. Equally important is the inclusion and differentiation of the societal and cultural contexts in which documental films communicate. The main question is always the way in which social and historical realities are dealt with and staged on the visual and auditory levels, as well as the interplay of sound and image and the spectators' perception and classification of the film as a »social experience« (Schändlinger 1998). Is it the original soundtrack or is there off-screen commentary? Are all images observing events, or are there other documental materials such as photos, documents, and animation? Which approach has been chosen to handle the topic in terms of content and form? Can we call an animated film a documental film (on animadoc see Hoffmann 2012)? Another central question is the handling and staging of time; is it the observed time of the events or a time period created by edited images? The key question of the »authenticity« and »truth« or »truthfulness« of documental film (see Arriens 1999) can either be dealt with by making the production process invisible or, as in artistic engagements with documental materials, self-reflexive by questioning the material as »documental« (see Knaller 2010 and Seider in this journal). For example, journalistic formats stage themselves as reasonable, factual, truthful, and objective, while the author usually disappears; whereas in documental films, subjectivity, argumentation, and selectivity predominate and an issue is presented from a specific point of view (see Niney 2012, 152–154). Finally, if we are to learn to comprehend historical differences, we must continually review the shifts in, interrogations of, and dissolution of fact and fiction as documental film practices in order to

understand how media/cultural and reception-oriented perspectives on documental »reality« also change. With all this in mind, I would like to make some short remarks on sociological and historical aspects of documental films.

Notes on documental film and sociology

From a sociological point of view, documental films have a central significance. They are audio-visual recordings of people, bodies, locations, interactions, and social events in temporal and spatial motion, and as such provide realistic material for societal analysis. Documental films enable social interactions with the world which, in contrast to other media, are realistic (but do not reproduce reality!). This distinguishes film from all other forms of depiction such as the written word or static image. Due to its genre-specific aspiration to deal with non-filmic or pre-filmic realities (no matter the form), documental film always refers to real social and historical realities;¹⁰ they are embedded in and emerge from specific media cultures: there is a central connection between society, culture, and film. Documental films promise enlightenment, knowledge, and information—even if they pursue a self-reflexive and deconstructive critique of representation by means of irritation and playing with media frameworks and codes, with documental styles and forms. On the one hand, the ability to record makes film a tool of scientific observation (*film as method*), on the other hand documental film is a central communication code within public media cultures (*documental film as part of media cultures*). Within this range, a large variety of documental styles, forms, and formats have developed—from artistic critical argumentations to entertainment and objective/documental depictions. Before I quickly review some common sociological views of films in order to transfer them to documental films, a short excursus on the history of documental film shall show its significance for the history of society.

10 This is of course also often true of fictional films, which also even use the same or similar methods.

Excursus

A brief look into the history of documental film shows that films that aim to portray social reality have been utilized in many different ways as media of communication and have therefore fulfilled different socio-communicative tasks. The large variety and different uses of documental films cover such a broad spectrum of content, styles, forms, and formats that it is nearly impossible to examine in its entirety. The disparity of its utilization is mainly a result of the degree of institutional embeddedness, the conditions of production and reception, as well as the development of new technologies and media experiences.

Documental depictions are shown in different societal contexts and go hand in hand with social, cultural, economic, and political communication.¹¹ The first non-fictional films showed different scenes of everyday life as »attractions« (Gunning 1995) or »living photographs« (Loiperdinger 2005) and were shown at fairs, in shops, at vaudeville shows, and so on for the pure fun of motion. During the First World War, the power of documental film as a propaganda tool was discovered on both the German and the Allied side (in the form of filmic depictions of successful battles to reassure those at home). The 1920s are marked by a manifold diversification of documental film. This is the first peak of industrial films, cultural films, educational films, ethnographic films, avant-garde films, advertising films, and many more; they are screened at educational institutions, industrial sites, and cinemas or for political agitation. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the time of the Second World War, documental pictures served as propaganda and to spread (ideological) views of the world (newsreels). In the USA as well as in continental Europe, films were made that aimed to influence and collectivize the

11 See Barnouw (1993) and Ellis and McLane (2009) for the history of documental film in the English-speaking world; for the German-speaking world from 1895–1945, see the three-volume standard work by Jung et al. (2005). Silberzahn (2009) also provides a good concise overview of this period.

public consciousness.¹² After the Nazi seizure of power, propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels nationalized the entire German film industry and created, alongside entertainment films (the majority of all productions between 1933 and 1945), approximately 100 documental films (see Faulstich 2005, 89–91). In Britain, John Grierson created industrial and political propaganda films for the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), which was supported by the state and later called the General Post Office (GPO). These films promoted the preservation of democracy against the background of economic crisis and the danger of war. Grierson realized that state-supported documental film was an opportunity to engage the participation of the masses in public affairs. His readiness to simplify topics to make them compatible for mass consumption was later the cause of much criticism, despite the significance of his work for the development of the genre (see Aufderheide 2008, 35–37).

In the 1950s, documental film enjoyed a boom thanks to the spread of television as a new leading medium. New contexts emerged for the production of documental films, allowing them to reach a larger public and increase sales. The 1960s were marked by important technological developments resulting in the creation of Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité, styles that still influence the common idea of what makes a documental film (in contrast to a motion picture).¹³ Whereas American Direct Cinema has its roots in journalism and produced a specific idea of objective filmic observation, Cinéma Vérité is based on social and ethnological studies and aimed to trigger reactions and social interactions by means of

12 The fact that even staged propaganda films such as *Der ewige Jude* (1940) by Fritz Hippler (the placard clearly labelled it as a documentary) did *not* have the hoped-for radicalizing effect shows that the manipulative effect of (documental) film is relative.

13 Although neither style understood itself as political, they nevertheless both used the new technological possibilities to take up social and political topics in order to challenge the hegemony of TV by presenting alternative modes of portrayal (on Direct Cinema see Saunders 2007; Faller (2007, 43) remarks on the »counterculture« environment of Direct Cinema).

the camera's intervention and provocation (see Beattie 2001, 83–85). Both forms would be unthinkable without the technical developments in camera and sound technology (lighter cameras, synchronization). The ongoing technological evolution towards smaller and more complex technologies and thus the new possibilities of filmic observation have nowadays created a new use for government-funded films: public surveillance (see Aufderheide 2008, 76–77). This new area of documental film production, government surveillance of public places, is currently being intensively discussed and criticized—although not in the context of documental film theory (see Kammerer 2008).¹⁴

Since Germany introduced a dual broadcasting system in the 1980s and opened the television market to private channels, the concomitant commercialization of television resulted in an increased differentiation of documental styles, forms, and formats and more mixing of non-fictive elements with entertaining and fictive elements. In this context there has been much talk of hybridization, referring not only to the film itself, but also to its contextual conditions of evolution (see Weber in this journal). This opening is accompanied by a change in the institutionalization of documental film towards more outsourcing of production to a broader basis of small and very small companies as well as the creation of an oligopoly of just a handful of large broadcasters (see Lingemann 2006).¹⁵

14 At the 29th Kassel Dokfest in November 2012, Michael Palm's film *Low Definition Control* was screened. This film deals with this topic in essay form.

15 This institutional change has led to a precarization of documental film producers. A recent study by AG Dok shows that producers in the documental film branch work for under €10 per hour. What is more, all preparations for the realization of a documental film have to be taken on by the producers themselves, which means approximately 4 months of unpaid work each year: »The effect of this often inadequate monetary compensation is an *very poor income and living situation for authors and directors. Of these, 85% must earn additional income*, as the remuneration from their work as author or director does not secure their livelihood. Even so, *18% have a net monthly income below €636*« (Langer 2012, 20; emphasis in original). Paradoxically, these jobs in the creative and cultural sector are supposed to serve as a model for future employment in other branches

The orientation of documental television towards the lowest common denominator of mass taste and the difficult situation for many small companies in this market have led—some critics say—to a dumbing-down of documental film styles and forms in favor of a streamlined format as regards both time and content (for an overview see Wolf 2003; Zimmermann and Hoffmann 2006). Contemporary postmodern media culture is dominated by hybrid styles and blurred borders, so that in the field of media studies, questions are again being asked about the origins of documental film and traditional demarcations (see Springer 2006).¹⁶ For example, the current variety of documental film styles and forms allows us to recognize a trend towards infotainment. Yet—on a formal level—the irritations of this manner of playing with reality (see Hoffmann, Kilborn, and Bard 2012) hint at a growing media sensibility as regards claims of realism and objectivity, today considered outdated. Forms such as pseudo-documentaries, mockumentaries, and other hybrids of fictive and fictional productions have shown (in spite of all criticism) that no conclusion about the origin or status of images can be made solely from the way in which they are portrayed. This can be seen as a positive effect, or at least a step towards media democracy and media competence.

End of the excursus

Against this background, the history of film—especially documental film—has been strongly neglected by sociology. The reason for this neglect might be a rather competitive relationship (see Winter 2012; Schroer 2012). Film and sociology (as institutionalized disciplines) arose at approximately the same time; both deal with the depiction, represen-

as regards their flexible conception of working and living (see Manske and Schnell 2010).

16 The traditional differentiation made of the origin of film history—the non-fictive films of the Lumière brothers and the fictive films of Georges Méliès—can no longer be upheld: even the short films of the Lumière brothers were highly staged and skilfully captured scenes of everyday life.

tation, and observation of social reality with their own specific methods.¹⁷ Nevertheless, for a long time sociology has dismissed film as a marginal topic or relayed it to the verdict of industrialized and ideologized mass culture (see Horkheimer and Adorno 1969; Prokop 1970). Early attempts to broach film from the viewer's perspective and to delineate their social structure remained isolated (such as the well-known study of the Mannheim cinema audience by Altenloh (1914), who was the first sociologist to highlight the aspects of both production and reception). Probably the most significant sociological approach to connecting film, culture, and society is realistic film theory, most prominently represented theoretically and empirically by Siegfried Kracauer (1960; 1964). Due to the fact that Kracauer puts film ontologically in the same category as photography he imbues it with genuine qualities, arguing that it is »the redemption of physical reality.« (1964; Surprisingly, Kracauer, who subordinates the documental film to the factual film, only deals with the former on a few pages.) There are also early anthropological conceptualizations of the documental film that touch on questions of the sociology of film (see Morin 1958; 2010) and also affect the field of ethnological and scientific film. Even though there has been neither a systematic debate on what specifically a sociology of film is, nor a compilation of original texts on the history of the sociology of film,¹⁸ there have been considerable stimuli for the preoccupation with film from the field of Cultural Studies, motivated by an interdisciplinary perspective (see Winter 1992; 2010; 2012). The significance of this approach as compared to earlier ones, such as Critical Theory, is its radical contextualism, its focus on the audience as the generator of meaning, the potential of film as a means of intervention in educational work, and the concentration on different forms of reception, resulting from the polysemy und timeless availability of films. Recently, research on the audience has

17 Fritsch (2009) shows, that there are many parallels of social individualisation processes and the cinema as a disposition on the writings of Georg Simmel.

18 Dieter Prokop (1971) edited an interdisciplinary anthology on the aesthetics, sociology, and politics of film.

been rather empirical whereas earlier sociological works on the reception of the film audiences relied more on the structure of media texts (see Winter and Nestler 2010, 99). For documental films, this work has concentrated mainly on reality TV and its reception by adolescents (see Prokop and Jansen 2006), but there has also been interview-based research on the reception of motion pictures (see Geimer 2010). In this way a sociological approach to film differs from purely semiotic models that deal solely with the inner structure of cinematic signs and treat a film as a closed system (see Mai and Winter 2006). This sociological approach, however, concentrates strongly on (post)modern and (post)narrative Hollywood mainstream cinema and television. In general, documental film still plays a minor role or acts as a contrast to motion pictures (Winter 2012, 55; Winter and Nestler 2010, 105). But it is a further paradigm of Cultural Studies that make documental film interesting for sociological research: Cultural Studies assumes that media communication can never be understood as a »harmless« site of communication, but always takes place within a political power structure where questions of identity such as class, gender, and race are central to media presentation and representation (see Marchart 2008, 33–35). This means that media communication is embedded in a cultural and societal context and reflects a negotiation process between hegemonic and subversive interpretations of social reality. The subversive and interventionist, but also system stabilizing potential of documental films is well-known historically (see Roth 1982). Following Siegfried Kracauer, Rainer Winter points out that films quite often contain criticism (of society) which needs to be deciphered (see Winter 2012, 56–57). This is particularly explicit in documental films—on the level of content as regards choice of topic as well as on a stylistic and aesthetic level thanks to the »creative interpretation« of social and historical realities« (Schärdinger 1998, 302). An educational or socially critical intention can be found in many documental films that have not emerged within the context of documental television.

Films address central fields of society and handle them in their own way (see Schroer 2007). With the increase and affordability of audio-visual

technologies, the boundary between production and reception becomes blurred, we live in »filmed societies« that know film not only as a scientific survey tool or popular mass entertainment, but also as lay productions (see Schroer 2012, 16). These lay productions made in people's private lives are in the focus of a visual sociology of knowledge that examines the medial organization of social (viewing) experiences (see Raab 2008, 169–171) or tries to implement film as a method. Including this field of lay production—where documental forms dominate in the recording and observing of family celebrations and other social events—in theoretical considerations of documental film means opening up completely new areas for the sociological examination of the documental as a form of seeing, looking, and receiving; especially against the background of the YouTubeization of society. Research on the broad field of the internet as a possible distribution platform for documental films and the significance this might have on the conditions of production and reception is yet to be done.

Professionally produced documental films also focus on everyday life as a central site of social experience. Everyday life is staged not only in reality TV and home movies, but daily routines in all their facets also take center stage in documental films and, more narrowly, in documentaries. Whether work, urbanism, economics, food, youth cultures, biographies, music, environment, family, spare time, culture or politics—documental films deal with all aspects of societal life. Long-term projects give a unique insight into the developmental processes of people and society as hardly another medium or research tool. Winfried and Barbara Junge's film *The children of Golzow* (1961–2007)—one of the longest project in film history—is an important document of a GDR generation that grew up during the 1960s, experienced the fall of the wall and reunification, and had to cope with the new circumstances. The resulting collective and individual portraits from 1961 provide an insight into individual and collective biographies and life courses, into the everyday life of different people in diverse circumstances and stages, into success and setbacks, but also into the historical and political situations and their contingent metamorphoses. At the same time, the Junge couple staged the protago-

nists' viewing of earlier material and thus created complex temporal levels of self-reflexiveness. For instance, protagonists comment on earlier film recordings of themselves and so position themselves in relation to their image within the image. Michael Apter's *Up* series and Rainer Hartleb's *När Jag Blir Stor* are projects with a similar motivation. Such long-term observations now have numerous successors.

Only few sociological analyses are dedicated to the possibilities and potential of gaining knowledge about society through documental films and establishing a boundary between film as a method and film as a part of public media culture (see Rubelt 1994). Robert Schändlinger (1998), one of the few sociologists to have dealt comprehensively with documental film and its foundation, conceptualizes film as the most important form of social experience. Taking this argument to the extreme, this would mean that without documental films, access to events in the world would be strongly reduced or even impossible (for more on realism as a means of the medial configuration of reality see Heinze 2012). Within this area, the boundary remains indistinct between the scientific film as documentation of an observation process and the artistic and aesthetic work of documental filmmakers, who have a societal, but not a scientific agenda (which does not mean that they are less »sociological«). In order to make a sociological observation film, as Kaczmarek (2008) points out, scientific training is required which documental filmmakers from public media cultures usually lack. In his view, the main difference is that social scientists strive for objectivity and neutrality so as to gain »unadulterated« recordings of social situations. This approach is informed by the concept of an (naive) omnipotent technical apparatus that reproduces reality, a theory long since abandoned in media studies. Documental film *artists* such as Klaus Wildenhahn or John Grierson have an educational background in sociology or political sciences, and thus understand documental films as a tool. Nevertheless, Klaus Wildenhahn, as a practitioner, contributed to awakening ideas about the possibilities of realistic filmic accounts of reality—by politicizing documental film and by his clear rejection of »synthetic« films (resulting in the well-known Wildenhahn-Kreimeier debate (see Aitken 2013, 1006)). He is thus understood

as the last representative of an »indigenous« approach to documental film, his works remain *artistic* cinematic representations of social events.¹⁹ A new reading and re-evaluation of the early theoretical works by Vertov, Grierson, and Wildenhahn on documental film is necessary from the perspective of a sociology of film, media, and communication. This could free these disciplines from semiotic approaches that conduct epistemologically correct theorizations, but lose sight of the societal effectiveness and communicative reality of documental films. Bringing together style, forms, formats, *and* topics or rather content and putting them into a societal and cultural context—from which they arise and in which they are discussed—would be an important task for the sociology of film, expanding current debates in media and film studies. History, in my opinion, faces similar challenges, as I shall go into briefly below.

Notes on documental film and history

History is relevant to documental film in many ways: as documental historiography of film, as historical source, and as a (sub-)genre of documental films. The historiography of film as part of media and film studies deals with the historical evolution of films and their complex cultural, economic, and aesthetic contexts of creation and reception (on this see the standard work by Nowell-Smith 2006). Film history is closely linked with questions of style, form, and format from different time periods, provides insights into thematic genres, technological development,

19 A cautious thesis might be that Wildenhahn set important filmic stimuli in a historical and political context (1970s) in which the mere suspicion of an aesthetics or of aestheticizing would have been rejected by politically critical media and film workers. Although his films show an eminently artistic aspect and Wildenhahn himself has looked into the theory of art in his papers, he was classified as an ontological theorist and finally abandoned. It seems to me that this is a misunderstanding of his approach due to the time period, or is at least a very narrowing view of his work. The fact that form and content are placed in an artistic tension and that on top of this he develops a societal perspective on documental films makes him, like the whole of Direct Cinema, interesting for a sociology of film that is not purely post-structural or deconstructionist.

all aspects of filmic narrative and representation, and much more. According to Faulstich, film history can be told in many ways and covers different aspects, however its main focus is on fiction films (see Faulstich 2005, 7). As a historical source, film has to be (critically) evaluated with regards to its testimonial value for a specific period, as films are used as »pictorial evidence« in order to (re)construct history and historical events (see Arnold 1998, 48). However images are considered unreliable sources, as the semantics of images and films are not explicitly determined, but rather ambiguous (polysemous). Films allow different readings and points of access, depending on the point in time and the viewing situation. Therefore, images and films first obtain sense and significance from the communication and utilization contexts into which they are put and from which they are disseminated. These may vary historically and diverge culturally. Documental films as well, with their claim to referencing reality, do not transport unambiguous mirrors of social reality but are bound in the complex context of their dissemination and communication. Their functions include information and illumination, proof, evidence, education, and propaganda.

History differentiates between primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are contemporary recordings of events and therefore historically generally more reliable than secondary sources that emerged later, possibly much later than the historical event (see *ibid.*, 44–45). Documental films of different eras are *primary sources* as long as they are understood as recording and observation tools and create »views« of political, social, economic and cultural events. The excursus on the history of documental film above considers it to be a primary source which can be utilized for research on historical usage and contextual embeddedness and thus on the importance of documental film at a certain point in time. Such historical reflection not only allows insight into changes as regards production, but also into what is understood as a documental film at different points of time. Contemporaneity, however, is not an explicit criteria for or proof of the »authenticity« of primary sources: documental shots may have been staged and events re-enacted, falsified or produced for a

special purpose.²⁰ Documental films are secondary sources if they deal with history from some time in the future. This is true for documental films when they reconstruct or reflect on history. This form of handling, recreating, and staging history is nowadays popular in documental (sub) genres, forms, and formats such as docufiction/docu-drama, compilation films, historical infotainment, biopics, films with contemporary witnesses («oral history» or »talking heads«), living history, and the likes. (These films can, in the future, be used again as primary sources on the handling of history by documental films of a certain period). Whereas film history and the use of primary sources in historic sciences may be similar in their focus, the critical debate on secondary sources and the development of hybrid history films and television formats with history as their topic will be an interesting new field of research as this area of documental film production is very popular in today's media cultures and is highly successful nationally and internationally.²¹

The question of whether images have an epistemic value for historical sciences can be answered with a clear »yes«: they may be used for historical research but should not be seen as a copy of the represented (see Talkenberger 1998, 83). Rather, following Panofsky, history uses iconographic or iconological techniques (on film see Panofsky 1971) in order to deal with pictorial material or applies semiotics or communication theory. The latter connects analytical questions about content and form and thus assign images to a historical communication context. This

20 Georges Méliès for example staged the coronation of Edward VII before it even happened. Other documental films were also staged by Méliès at this early stage of film history. Even the probably most important film for the history of documental film, *Nanook of the North* (1922) by Robert Flaherty, is to a large extent staged (see Ellis and McLane 2009, 12–14).

21 Buzzwords like »public history« (see Bösch 2009) or »history goes pop« (see Korte 2009) exemplify this trend. In this context the aim is not only an accurate appraisal and reconstruction of history but rather (postmodern) medial processes of reflection which seek to delineate the limits and possibilities of representability within the universe of signs in film and television. On this see the new anthology *Spiel mit der Wirklichkeit* by Hoffmann, Kilborn and Barg (2012).

accommodates the medial inner logic of film and images. In contrast, »naive« theories of reproduction are being rejected. Reception-oriented approaches deal with the perception of pictures by the observer (see Talkenberger 1998, 86–88). With regard to documental film, questions arise as to what has been understood as documental film at which time, about the context in which documental films appear and what they were to communicate.²² The historical sciences thus have many methods at their disposal to investigate the specifics and the meanings of different documental film styles, forms, and formats. When documental films are looked at not only as pure reproductions, but also within the context of their symbolic meaning and communication contexts, the question arises as to how history is staged and depicted in film and its collective generation of meaning. This is the subject of current works on medial memory where film is seen as a new key medium (see Erll and Wodianka 2008). In German film and television productions, documental films about the contemporary and ancient history of Germany are booming.²³ The current boom of history films and history television (in Germany) stems fundamentally from societal historical navel-gazing. This can be seen for example in films such as Heinrich Breloer's docu-fictions/docu-dramas on central topics of German contemporary and cultural history (*Speer und Er*, *Die Manns* or *Todesspiel*). Documental films as a secondary source thus contribute to a great extent to the constitution of contemporary commemoration cultures, a lively and controversial debate

22 Kerstin Sutterheim (2012) submitted interesting research on the display of the occult ideology of National Socialism in documental films of the Third Reich. In these films, the genre's ostensibly educational function is not fulfilled, rather films such as *Wintersonnenwende* (1936) work on the creation of a myth.

23 In the meantime, whole series deal not only with recent German history (as in the popular Guido Knopp broadcasts), but go back to the beginnings of German history as in the TV productions *Wir Deutschen* (2006) or *Die Deutschen* (2008).

within the field of history.²⁴ Especially the use and staging of contemporary witnesses is an important and at the same time critically viewed form of the realization and conservation of history in film (see Sabrow and Frei 2012; Keilbach 2010; Elm 2008; Fischer and Wirtz 2008). The question of the adequacy of historical reconstruction, authenticity, and historical truth of the topics depicted in such productions will remain subject to discussion.

There are very different ways to work on and to authenticate historical topics in documental film. Basic problems arise from processing history in film and television, including personalization, de-contextualization or rather de-historization, and dramatizing and emotionalizing events; to this the economic pressure of ratings must be added (see Wirtz 2008). This has resulted in the now wide-spread »discomfort of historical sciences on the popularization« of history in film (see Crivellari 2008, 161), a development welcomed by veterans of Postmodernism. In their view, parting from the meta-narrative of history opens up vistas on the fragmentation and fragility of historical realities and experiential contexts (see Jaraus and Geyer 2005). The variety of ways of illustrating history in documental films challenges the concept of history itself. At the same time, the different film forms and formats underline questions about the complexity and accessibility of the past.

Aufderheide (2008, 91–92) pinpoints three main difficulties faced by documental filmmakers when dealing with a historical topic: 1) The existence of (audio-)visual material on the topic: the use of different sources of images and sounds such as archival films, photographs, pictures, re-enactments, expert interviews, typical music, contemporary witnesses, off-screen commentators, etc. These materials are brought into context through the montage of image and sound without claiming that they are history. 2) The filmmaker is usually not a historian. Although historians are often asked for advice and support in historical

24 In the future, documental films will have an important place in the mediation of audio-visual presentations of history and will become a central part of our transformed medial memory.

documental film productions or historical knowledge is incorporated, the dramaturgy of time and content follows rules other than those of the historical sciences. This may lead to intentional omissions, ambiguity, and difficulties in interpretation. In addition the filmmaker has another methodological approach towards his topic; usually he incorporates stylistic or film aesthetic traditions. Especially the staging of the image and the montage as an aesthetic element of design provide information about the strategies of documental filmic realization. The aesthetics of the documental film image already offer a range of important information on the chosen approach to the topic, and thus the attitude and perspective of the filmmaker. 3) The realistic impression produced by documental film makes it difficult to develop alternative perspectives on history within documental films or to question the reality suggested by the images through alternative illustrations. It is just as difficult to make it apparent to the spectator how much interpretation has been created through the choice and montage of the material. Documental film forms and formats activate different techniques in order to conceal or dismantle filmic historic representation. Depending on their strategy, documental film images may be suggestive, reflexive or deconstructive.

Finally, I would like to go into three different formats for dealing with history in documental films: docu-fiction/docu-drama, essay film, and living history. All three forms differ in essential aspects and are more or less popular in film and television.

Television made docu-fiction/docu-drama a well-known documental format. It usually targets historical events that have an inherent dramatizing potential (see Barg 2012, 324). Over the past years, it has become one of the most successful and at the same time most contested forms of reconstructing history, utilizing both facts—documental recordings, expert interviews, historical findings—and fiction/fictionalization, that is animation or re-enacted scenes of real events by actors when no pictorial material is available. Docu-fiction/docu-dramas are

filmic reconstructions of documented or lived reality of people or events with the claim to documenting past events in a way that gives the impression of authenticity and truth (...). In order to re-

alize this, re-enacted dramatization of documented reality, usually actors or lay actors are engaged (Behrendt 2007, 148).

The key narrative elements are the personalization and dramatization of individual events and destinies, as well as their (melo)dramatization in order to increase suspense. The re-enacted scenes make their narrative elements not unlike those of fictional film (see Beattie 2001, 19). Historic structures and long-term societal developments, however, are less represented. In the German context, there are docu-fictions/docu-dramas on eventful topics, historic personalities, situations of radical change or selected stages of German contemporary history (see Steinle 2012, 306). These dramatizations of an event (and thus the attribution of importance) in their most pointed form are part of a medial staging often framed by television broadcasts and round tables, and accompanied by paratextual internet and print media announcements. The event is then not only the inner-filmic staging, but the complete orchestration and marketing strategy in TV media and commemorative culture. National Socialism and the GDR are popular topics, as well as catastrophic events in recent history. The objective of the fictional and documental elements is to be as near to reality as possible and seemingly authentic. At the same time, spectator interest, historical discourse, and filmic plot have to be taken into account in order to make such programs attractive. Docu-dramas play an important role in the current cultivation of commemorative culture. We can observe the following as regards collective memory and commemorative cultures from the staging and success of docu-dramas: an on-going interest for historic topics with a nostalgic impetus (or cathartic intent); the mixing of entertainment and information, whereby the ratio of the mix varies greatly; a tendency to put historic tragedies and conflicts into a formula in which—thanks to the pointed modulation of the characters in the fictional re-enactments—the viewer is offered the perspective of the victim in order to encourage identification (conversely, the perpetrators are de-realized and unreal, see Jureit 2011). As regards the integration of interviews of contemporary witnesses, one criticism made of current productions is that all witnesses, regardless of their experience or fate, are given equal footing without any historical

commentary (see Bösch 2008, 68–69). On the other hand, depictions of the GDR are loaded with stereotypical, clichéd symbolic associations that suggest the GDR as a state was doomed from the beginning (see Steinle 2012). In this way, docu-dramas/docu-fictions intervene prominently in the interpretation and classification of historical periods and events, and should thus be critically scrutinized as regards their perspectives and possible interpretations.

Like docu-fictions/docu-dramas, essay²⁵ and compilation film works with fictional elements of motion pictures and with documental filmic recordings. However, unlike the docu-drama, this documental film form is *not* an easily consumable product; one reason why these productions often quickly disappear into the collective »non-memory« (Scherer 2001, 14). Essay films often work with realistic artistic conceptions (see Heinze 2013). They scrutinize the possibilities of an artistic-medial access to reality, and interpret the latter quite subjectively. They do not use the above-mentioned documental material to affirm and increase the authenticity of the material, but rather in a self-reflexive and deconstructive manner.

Documental methods in art work with texts, pictures, and objects of different semiotic structure and type: trace, evidence, index, recording, copy, certificate, chronic. Generally determinant of the document is the truth attributed to it, the key questions therefore determine place, time and form of certification, guarantee by authorities (witnesses, detectives, scientists, artists), media (photography, film, text) or facts/objects. The document is always preceded by fact and is itself a fact. It refers to facts and—as it stops doing so—becomes a fact itself, embedded in a certain practice. In this dual function the documental has a huge artistic potential, encompassing epistemological and ontological considerations and socio-critical functions. It can create a discussion about concepts of real-

25 The differences between essay film, film essays, and essayistic film will not be further developed here. See Scherer (2001:22–24) On essay film see also Kramer and Tode 2011; and Blümlinger and Wulf 1992.

ity, temporal forms, models of truth and discourses on authenticity. (Knaller 2010, 175)

Thus all documental elements of cultural memory can be used to reflect on media. Essay films refer, within themselves, to knowledge of cultural memory and bring their work about the past to the light of the present; they unite art and mediality. They work with visual and auditory alienation in order to provoke irritation and reflective processes within the audience. Whereas the docu-drama focusses essentially on suspense and emotion and easy consumption through dramatization, essay films promote the viewers' reflection on that which they (do not) see—the absent and forgotten. Thus there is a tension between the showable and the not-showable. Essay films create inter-mediality between literature, painting, music, and photography. They work associatively and bring the dream closer to commemorative work. Commemorative work is thus not dealt with on a topical level, but also on an aesthetic level. It is a filmic attempt to give memory a visual equivalence. Essay films follow an open style of depiction and focus on self-reflexiveness and enquiry about the limits and possibilities of documental depiction:

A constitutive characteristic of the essay film is raising the issue of and staging the subjectivity of the gaze or, rather, the subjective view of the world. Dreams, imagination, experience, and memory are central topics. It also distinguishes itself through self-reflexiveness and self-referencing: the aesthetic possibilities of film are reflected in the film. This is accompanied by the articulation of doubt about images and the filmic reproduction or rather representation of conditions. Knowledge of the tentative nature of realization is constantly present in the essay film; it concentrates on the provisional (the attempt), on processuality, blurriness, the not-clearly-defined (Scherer 2001, 14).

In contrast to docu-dramas, the aim is not an authentic and appropriate depiction of extra-filmic historical events, but possibilities of raising these issues within the film and questioning them in a self-reflexive manner. In this epistemological context, self-reflexiveness means a consciousness of being subject and object of a commemorative and thus

perceptive process at one and the same time. In order to critically reflect his own position and the conventions of documental film, the filmmaker uses filmic means of expression (see Meyer 2005, 52). In the history of documental film forms, this self-reflexive filmmaking is rooted in the 1920s avant-garde (see *ibid.*, 61–63) and, unlike docu-drama/docu-fiction, is usually not geared towards a mass audience. The essay film is less committed to the »what« than to the »how.« It thus fulfills important epistemological functions and is committed to reflection of the conditions of the constitution of cultural memory. This makes it an awkward form that is often only viewed by a small audience.

Living history, lastly, is a form of TV documental history where the viewer himself actively turns into a historicized protagonist. »Living history formats are two things: a game of history and a mirror of the present. The simulation of the past serves as a kind of experiment on crises: the sudden absence of daily routines in historical settings expose that which we take for granted in our present everyday lives« (Hißnauer 2009, 120). These reality experiments are thus closer to the docu-soap. In living history formats, people intentionally take on a bygone way of life, follow the rules, and allow themselves to be observed. The historical setting can be in any era: *Abenteuer 1900—Leben im Gutsbaus* (2004; Adventure 1900—Living at the manor) takes the actors back to rural life around the turn of the century with its strict hierarchical regime, whereas *Steinzeit—Das Experiment—Leben wie vor 5000 Jahren* (2007; Stone Age—The experiment—Living like people 5000 years ago) immerses the protagonists in an era that is hard to grasp. These historical plays are less documental and more experimental. They are meant to display human behavior in unfamiliar extraordinary situations, to rouse emotions and to dramatize events (see Hoffmann 2012b, 171). Alongside providing shallow entertainment, living history—which has in the meantime disappeared from TV broadcasts—discloses another dimension that asks the more basic question of what audiences might find interesting in historical documental film formats. Perhaps a contemporary affinity to nostalgia hides behind the »allure of the historical« (*ibid.*, 169), a conservative/conserving attitude that promises, through historical retrospect,

support and stability at a time when traditions and things previously taken for granted seem to disappear. The collective observation of history is possibly an illusionary remedy against individualized drifting in the »Risk Society« (see Beck 1986) or »World Risk Society« (see Beck 2008). The boom of historic documental film forms can possibly be explained by its function of stabilizing society and providing a collective orientation and thus fostering, as Jan Assmann (1997) described, the solidarity of the group as societal collective.

Docu-drama/docu-fiction, essay film, and living history offer three different possibilities of dealing with history in film in a documental way. All three feature history in an entertaining, investigative, self-reflexive, structured, and compassionate manner. All three should be treated critically by historians. Sociological as well as historical perspectives provide a platform for the further analysis of such forms and formats. These documental forms and formats can be seen as part of a postmodern media culture, because their staging and configuration of history suggest an open and ambiguous handling of history. Early representatives of documental film would not have dared to dream that documental films would be placed in, and discussed in, such a context.

About this journal

This journal provides insights into the styles and developments of documental film. Bernt Schnettler's contribution deals with the tradition and present-day use of film as a method in the social sciences and visual anthropology. Informed by the sociology of knowledge and by anthropology, his article highlights the use of film as scientific tool of observation and reconstructs its origins in visual anthropology. In doing so, the potentials and limitations of the medium for sociology and anthropology are disclosed.

Laurel Ahnert deals with the use of documental film in the early 20th century and discusses the educational use of instructional films as a neglected documental form between the »view aesthetic« and the documentary proper. She works in the main with the conceptualization and historicization of documental films in Bill Nichols' work. She thus high-

lights a form that has been neglected in the historiography of documental film.

In his contribution, Thomas Weber traces contemporary tendencies of documental film forms and formats. He deals with the difficulty of contextualizing documental films and their medial environment. His proposal breaks with earlier models of documental film theory and leans on Bruno Latour's sociological actor network theory.

Tanja Seider examines the essay film using Philip Scheffner's *The Halfmoon Files* as an example. This film centers on a forgotten topic from the time of the First World War. Her contribution illustrates the possibilities of this documental film form to approach the past with different materials in a self-reflexive manner. This reveals layers of history that have an important epistemological function in the debate on history in the documental film.

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