Documentary Film in Media Transformation[1]

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New documental forms in a differentiated media system

Nowadays, we encounter innumerable documentary forms in cinema, television or even on the web; a barrage of material that calls into question every conventional definition of the documentary. Since the 1990s in particular, we have seen an unprecedented boom in documentary films, sophisticated news features and reports, magazine programs and »docu-soaps« on German television, particularly reality TV or pseudo documentaries. And we must also consider special practices such as those of industrial films, scientific documentaries in medical contexts, or the practice of recording witness testimonials, for example by the Shoah Foundation. Furthermore, we are submerged by a rising tide of documentary material on web platforms such as YouTube. Given all this, it has become somewhat problematic to find a common denominator for all these different forms of documentary expression.[2]

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1   Translation by Rebecca M. Stuart.

2   In German academic discourse, there exists a threefold differentiation of the notion of »documentary.« I use the terms employed in the following senses: Firstly, »documentary« is used in the sense of the documentary film (*Der Dokumentarfilm*), i.e. a certain type of well-known film mostly shown in the cinema, or on late-night TV. Secondly, the term »documentary film« is employed to describe films which are not necessarily documentaries *per se*, but possess some strong documentary features *dokumentarische Filme*). And, thirdly, what I label »documental«—a more abstract notion which includes all gestures and procedures of documentation (*das Dokumentarische*), i.e. a certain mode of expression.

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This quantitative expansion is accompanied by a change in our basic understanding of what constitutes the documentary form. Is documentary film a genre, a class or category, or is it more of a gesture or a rhetorical figure? Should we define the documental by its intentions or by certain inherent structures?

How do we deal with films that defy traditional classification? What do we do with reality TV formats that do indeed sometimes have a documentary character and, at other times, are scripted reality shows, often without actually informing us of this fact? The lines are blurring and the audience doesn't seem to care. It becomes difficult even to classify documentary films as such when they are seen in different media. At first glance, a movie like Dylan Avery's *Loose Change* (Dylan Avery, USA 2005)*,* about 9/11, seems much like a traditional documentary film. However, the fact that it was distributed via the internet and made for an extraordinarily small budget, as well as the fact that it was subsequently corrected, indicates that it was made less as a documentary film and more as a cinematic form of questioning official positions—a form able to react to criticism of what it depicted by releasing a new version. Web-specific formats, such as that used for *lonelygirl15* (Web series, EQAL, USA 2006)*,* only gradually become recognizable as pseudo documentation. At this point, even films made for traditional outlets such as television—I am thinking here of a film such as *Prüfstand 7* (Robert Bramkamp, Germany 2002)—have become difficult to classify according to familiar criteria (perhaps the best choice would be to call them essay films). So the question is how we can localize the Documentary Film, or how we can map that which is documentary in a film, when the medium and the aesthetic shape are constantly changing.

Consequently, one of the greatest current challenges in any academic examination of documentary film is to describe the dynamics of this aesthetic differentiation, since it evidently no longer conforms to the principles that have, in recent years, been the basis for an academic typology of documentary film.

What I will discuss here is not about replacing the old system of classification with a new one. The issue is rather whether we can discern differ-

entiation in documentary film as a result of the proliferation of media and the concomitant differentiation of our media system, and how we can analyze the structuralization of media that ensues.

Thus my analysis is not directed at re-classifying a variety of phenomena (and, in doing so, abandoning established classifications, which would be unlikely to work). I do not wish to say that those existing, and well-established, criteria have lost all their explanatory validity and power. Nevertheless, I posit, in the context of the current multiplicity of media one can detect differentiations in modern documentary practices in which those criteria are increasingly unfit to provide sufficiently distinctive and valid results.

Hence I intend to provide a modern description of the documentary in the context of an ever-changing, refined media system. My goal is to examine how transformations in media have affected the documentary field. While adherents of semio-pragmatics, in particular Roger Odin, recognized the reading mode first and foremost as the central category for conferring the status »documentary film,« nowadays we should assume a modalization of the documentary's status by the practices of different media milieus.

Beginning in the 1990s, academic discourse on documentary film has grown ever more differentiated. Repeated attempts have been made to determine what defines documentary film, its essence, how it sets itself apart from other forms of cinematic expression, and so on.

It would go beyond the scope of this article to attempt even a conservative inventory of all discussions of the documental that have taken place in that time (never mind the wide range of documentary films themselves). On that score, I would kindly refer the reader to the German Research Foundation (DFG) project, »History of the Documentary Film in Germany 1945–2005,«[3] which is dedicated to a thorough inventory of developments in documentary film and the discourse surrounding it.

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3   See   http://dokumentarfilmforschung.de/dff/cms/?cat=15   and
     http://www.doku-film.medienkulturforschung.de. Accessed April 23,

Even at first perusal of the academic discourse in recent years, certain trends—primarily characterized by a fundamental shift in the appraisal of documentary films—are noticeable. I want to stress that this work's aim can be neither to reconstruct those debates, nor will it go so far as to elaborate on seminal works or tendencies,[4] nor will it dissect important exemplary case studies. Rather, this work wants to provide a brief overview of the field at hand in order to contextualize my argument which, at this stage, can only consist of a brief outline of the most important theoretical trains of thought.

In light of a growing tendency toward what is usually characterized as hybridization, essentialist arguments—that is to say, approaches that attempt primarily to define the fundamental nature of the documentary film—become increasingly irrelevant. On the other hand, studying the context of documentary films increasingly gains in significance.

My argument will consist of three central theses:

1. An essentialist definition of the documentary (for example, as the opposite of the fiction film) leads us into a trap, since such a definition is closely linked to the idea of an inherent structure underlying all documentary film. In the final analysis, that cannot be proven. Or it results in umbrella terms like »hybridization,« which are too broad to describe the situation with any precision.

2. In the theoretical discourse about documentary film, we can see a shift from essentialist definitions to examining the procedures of reading, producing or even distributing the documental. These procedures are also different than those for fictional genres.

3. The central criterion for the documentary is the stability of its reference to reality. Therefore the most obvious way to classify the different

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2013. This work's author heads the project »Themen und Ästhetiken des dokumentarischen Films« (Subject Matter and Aesthetics of the Documentary Film) at the University of Hamburg.

4   See Hißnauer 2011, in which the author briefly introduces the major debates up until 2010.

forms of documentary films is an analysis of variances in this stability due to the interplay of various actors in different media milieus (production, distribution, and audience reception).

Essentialist definition of the documentary film

Essentialist approaches to defining documentary film posit that the documental has characteristic traits; an unavoidable structure, anchored in an objectively recognizable reality, which is a clear indication of the documentary nature of a film.

Within that, we can distinguish between two oft-repeated arguments:

1. The indexical argument assumes the existence of unequivocal signs indicating that a film is of a documentary nature, or at least signaling to the audience that they are watching a documentary film.

2. Documental is the opposite of fictional.

The indexical argument[5]

One of the most popular and well-used arguments for essentialism of the documental is its indexicality. This approach assumes there are un-ambiguous signs or identifiers—i.e. indicators—that make the documental recognizable as such. This argument appears in two variations:

Technical indexicality

This form of indexicality is attributed to the technical production process. It is, of course, indisputable that the process is determined by a chemical reaction that can only be initiated by an external stimulus, particularly in the traditional method of exposing film. And even if that reaction can be manipulated, it is always triggered by a stimulus stemming from external reality, as Siegfried Kracauer described in his theory of film (See Kracauer 1960).

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5   The terms indicator (or indexicality) and reference are not primarily used here in the charged manner common to linguistic philosophy or semiotics (as in Peirce: see. Olsen 2000); their meaning here is to be inferred from the contexts described.

This argument refers to the technical nature of cinematographic material, which is claimed to always display a trace of external reality. In other words, via the manufacturing process, film salvages a reference to an external reality, in the form of an actual trace registered in the film material itself (See Wortmann 2003). This reasoning is meant to prove that documentary film has an essentialist link to reality.

But the shoe does not really fit. First and foremost, in the era of new technological production processes, particularly with digitization, indexical trace is meaningless. Moreover, such a trace of external reality cannot be called representative solely of documentary film, because it is present in both documentary and fiction films (See Latour 1999).

Aesthetic indexicality

The other indexical argument seeks to find specific aesthetic structures that can function as indicators of a documentary film. The assumption is that there are certain aesthetic peculiarities that necessarily signal a film's documentary character. Such an aesthetics would include peculiarities such as imperfect, contorted photography, blurred, out-of-focus or poorly exposed film, and/or poor-quality sound, among other things. This theory interprets such elements as indications of the difficult, and therefore real, conditions under which a documentary film was shot. Even if we assume that such an aesthetics—developed with Direct Cinema and the use of the handheld camera that was so new at the end of the 1950s—exists, it should at most be regarded as a set convention, not as an essentialist trait. Those inherent structures or properties, however, are not real evidence for the documental character of a film. The same structures have been used over and over to undermine established conventions—I would mention here a few films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez, USA 1999)*, Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, USA 2008)*,* or scripted reality TV formats; all of which have lately used the same aesthetic conventions to create a documentary look.

Fictional—Factual

When essentialist definitions come into contact with the actual forms of documentary film, we observe a certain difficulty in providing cogent explanations for the ongoing dynamics of the differentiation of its

forms. We are generally presented with two arguments, both linked to the concept of an opposition of the fictional and the factual.[6]

The first argument implicitly assumes that the factual represents reality. However, the notion of »representation« itself is not without problems because it does not, by a long shot, clarify what reality is actually supposed to be and it remains unclear whether the documental can represent that reality.[7]

However this argument tries to sidestep an epistemological debate about what reality is by simply stating that the factual is the antithesis of the fictional. This is a subtle device used to avoid a definition of reality, but it leads to several epistemological problems.

Regardless of my omitting such debates, this epistemological discourse has certainly been taking place (here I would briefly refer to the works of S. J. Schmidt (Schmidt 1990) and Niklas Luhmann (Cf. Luhmann 2000), among others). The school of so-called Constructivism in particular has taken on a normative paradigm within German media studies discourse, proclaiming that media do not represent reality, but rather create their own reality. Or to put it more precisely—through the act of using a medium, each media user creates his or her own reality. With that, we have launched a debate that will most certainly not be cut short by designating the factual as the opposite of the fictional.

The second argument in favor of an essentialist definition of the two entities is the attribution of the fictional to everything that is made or staged, and of the factual to everything that shows a trace of the material

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6   See Hißnauer 2011, 20. Hißnauer emphasizes a quotidian, pragmatic manner of handling the terms, similar to the manner intended in the semio-pragmatism formulated by Odin.

7   Roger Odin pointed out that the reference to reality is a problematic criterion because one is forced to define how one would like to understand the notion of ›reality.‹ According to Odin, this ultimately leads to a precarious debate about the Real and the Imaginary, the True and the False; in short, to a debate about the status of our model of reality; see Odin 1998.

word. In other words, the fictional is a staged entity, the factual is not. But this thesis may be somewhat weak. As Hißnauer pointed out, no one has ever denied that documentary production has always been staged to a certain degree.[8] Even the choice of *techné*, i.e. the selection of equipment, is a form of molding and staging. Anything recorded and carried by a medium has been transformed by that medium in a specific way. Therefore, staging is not an argument for the fictional, nor is the absence of staging a specific sign of the documentary.

Furthermore, it is highly questionable whether fictional and factual are really opposing entities (is an apple really the opposite of a pear, or just another fruit?).[9] Maybe we shouldn't look at the fictional and the factual as entities, but as two different kinds of cinematographic expression that may even complement each other.[10]

Any film can carry elements of both fact and fiction, and if we talk about a fictionalization of the documentary, we must also concede a factualization of the fictional form—as it can be perceived in many reality TV formats.

Hybridization and contextualization

The difficulty in identifying the borderline between the fictional and the factual has, in the last few years, led to another line of reasoning that either posits a hybridization of fiction and documentary, or at least puts more emphasis on context.

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8   See Hißnauer 2011, 18. Hißnauer's work provides a good overview of the newest discourse on the documental.

9   See Heller 2001; Heller's piece is one of the first academic articles to describe the transitory character of documentary films.

10   The first step towards such a misunderstanding is perhaps the attempt to define the documental and the fictional as inherently opposite, although they actually are only different forms of expression which can also complement each other. This misunderstanding is usually linked to the idea that fictional and documental are characteristics that are inherent to a specific piece of work.

In recent years, the dynamic of the ongoing transformation of the documentary is often explained by citing exceptions or special cases, or by simply enhancing the underlying definition (of the documentary) with the element of hybridization (See Hißnauer 2011; Mundhenke 2010; and also Murray and Ouellette 2008), which seems to have become the favorite go-to argument. The latter idea has even been developed further, as if it were a *passe-partout* to solving the problems of an essentialist definition. Nonetheless we need to ask whether it actually offers a solution, or is just a way of re-fashioning the essentialist definition. The hybridization argument asserts two opposing entities that are now intermingled in one way or another, but a notion of hybridization does not really enable a new approach to the problem. Quite to the contrary: old categories are kept alive by avoiding a definition, or even analysis, of the dynamics of the development.

Indeed, hybridization (as an umbrella term) does not exactly lead away from essentialist reasoning, since any theory of blending implicitly assumes two opposites—and concurrently the purity of each original entity. And this leads us back to the essentialist argument. Only if we consider hybridization in a manner that is more closely linked to the context of production, distribution, and audience, does a new and—in the final analysis no longer essentialist—perspective emerge.

As a rule, however, the hybridization discourse so far has remained on the first level. The normal, conventional use of the term hybridization in the field of aesthetics covers all and nothing, and is no more than an update to the old cliché of an opposition between the fictional and the documental. A wide circle of academics, and even audiences, subscribes to this note. Or, as Annette Hill puts it:

> Hybridity is now the distinctive feature of factuality. The boundaries between fact and fiction have been pushed to the limits in various popular factual formats that mix non-fiction and fiction genres. Popular factual genres are not self-contained, stable and knowable, they migrate, mutate and replicate. (Hill 2007, 2)

In her comparative study, Hill gathered data from thousands of Swedish and British broadcast media users. Her aim was not to predefine the categories used in the study, but rather to examine how people make use of those categories. With this approach, she reproduces conventional, familiar reasoning.[11]

Hißnauer adds, not without irony: Fiction and documentation are ›classically‹ understood as opposites. Even the currently popular discussion about a disappearance of the boundaries between fiction and documentation in docu-hybrids, docu-dramas or semi- documentary film and television productions basically perpetuates that opposition—it reproduces the idea of categories that can be distinctively separated […].[12]

As charming as such a hypothesis of hybridization might be—a hypothesis that takes into account the changing media landscape and its concomitant new aesthetic forms and formats—it fails to provide clarification in the essentialist sense.

Where it gets interesting is the moment in which we expand our view beyond the aesthetic level; when we include other aspects along with hybridization, thus providing for greater context. So far, however, very few authors have suggested such an expansion.[13]

The term hybridization can also be used in a broader sense, as Paul Soriano has proposed in reference to French mediology (Soriano 2007, 5–26). In Soriano's work, hybridization covers not only aesthetic phenomena, but also those aspects of technology, economic strategies, institutional conditions, social structures and/or political issues, which he assumes can all become hybridized.

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11   Hill assumes a set of unquestioned, conventional ideas, which influence the questionnaires. That is to say, she does not address the specific quality of TV formats. Instead, her questions reproduce conventional terminological classifications.

12   Quote translated by Rebecca M. Stuart. See Hißnauer 2011, 17.

13   Until recently, I too subscribed to the idea of hybridization in such an expanded, mediological sense. See Weber 2009.

Once we add the context of audience reception, distribution, and production, including the economic, institutional, social, technical, and material circumstances, a much clearer context for our understanding of the documental is revealed, in particular of the dynamics of new TV and internet formats, which are marked both by new economic capabilities and by new technologies.

So far, these integrative approaches have largely only been paid lip service (See Weber 2008), rather than being actually put into practice. Of late, they have usually been subsumed under one of the aspects listed above. As Hißnauer stresses in his work, particular importance has been attached to the semio-pragmatic approach of Roger Odin (Odin 1998), which draws primarily on the context of the specific »reading mode,« meaning the expectation of the reader. It is thanks to Odin that the discussion nowadays focuses mainly on paratexts and context. The primarily interest of Odin himself is audience reception and what he calls a specific »documentary reading« (See Odin 1998, 286). That documentary reading is programmed by a large number of institutions (See Odin 1998, 294) and the paratexts they produce (See Kessler 1998, 66; Eitzen 1998).

The Analysis of Production approach

While Odin focuses primarily on the audience, the other contexts of production or the often closely-associated aspect of distribution, are often neglected. Work on the analysis of production has become ever more important in recent years and is currently directed at the economic and institutional context, and at specific players.

Production analysis draws on the varying production processes, i.e. the differences between players and their interplay in various production milieus. By production milieu I mean the self-contained and self-stabilizing interplay of players participating in a specific media »production« (in a broad sense).[14] With that interplay, the players create and preserve a

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14   »An institutional framework also imposes an institutional way of seeing and speaking, which functions as a set of limits, or conventions, for the filmmaker and audience alike.« Nichols 2001, 23.

specific milieu, from which the production arises (See Latour 1999, 113–144). A theatrical film is created in a different milieu than, say, a magazine show for TV. Production analysis establishes differences between various modes of production that then become the basis for the differences in production aesthetics. This can lead to either categorization of media entities within a media specific field, or to attempts to derive an essentialist determination of specific forms of aesthetic expression from production practices.

Research on production aesthetics, which has been experiencing somewhat of a boom in the US since the 1990s in the form of production studies,[15] has only in recent years become part of the discourse in Germany, generally via the introduction of English-language discussions (Schmidt 2012). The form the discussion takes in Germany ranges from »making of« studies of theatrical or television film, or field research including interviews, to the analysis of production files, contracts, legal documents and/or production methods.

In Germany, we can identify some early academic work that sought to give more weight to the production conditions of documentaries. Eva Hohenberger, for example, writes:

> At the institutional level, the documentary film differs from the fiction film via alternative economics. It is produced in a less capital-intensive manner, has different distribution channels, and a different public (one linked, for instance, to educational institutions).[16]

Bill Nichols has a set of particularly pertinent ideas.[17] He has commented, »we can get more of a handle on how to define documentary by

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15   See, among others, Mayer et al. 2009 and Vonderau 2010. Since the 1980s, the approach of »new film history« has also had its eye on this aspect in a more general sense.

16   Quote translated by Rebecca M. Stuart, Hohenberger 1998, 20.

17   Nichols 2001. Nichols, who abandons predetermined definitions of the documentary, also highlights another aspect: »More than proclaiming a definition that fixes once and for all what counts and what does not

approaching it from four different angles: institutions, practitioners, texts (films and videos), and audience.«[18] Nichols believes that »documentaries are what the organizations and institutions that produce them make« (Nichols 2001, 22). As a result, he posits »an institutional framework« that imposes »an institutional way of seeing and speaking, which functions as a set of limits, or conventions, for the filmmaker and audience alike« (Nichols 2001, 23).

I do not intend to delve deeper into the methodology of production analysis here. Rather, I would simply like to generally point out that production milieus in documental film show a large degree of fluctuation in terms of how they shape their relationship to reality. They all play with a reference to reality, or more precisely, with at least the expectation or pretension of a relationship to reality. This »reference« to reality is the common characteristic of all documental films—not the »representation« of reality, but the gesture of referring or pointing to reality.

The stability of the reference as the criterion for distinguishing media modality

An analysis that describes the hybridization of its object, or that maintains that context is crucial, can only lead to a continuous changing of the criteria for defining the documentary film. At that point, an essentialist definition is replaced with the threat of a relativism that no longer allows us to discern any stable criteria for defining the documentary film.

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count for a documentary, we need to look to examples and prototypes, test cases and innovations, as evidence of the broad arena within which documentary operates and evolves.« Nichols 2001, 21. Abandoning set definitions can well lead to a felt arbitrariness, which can no longer be described analytically—a problem Nichols does not seem to be aware of. On the other hand, he opens up the discourse for a close analysis of the field in which documentary films are produced.

18   Nichols 2001. In his more recent texts, Nichols no longer addresses questions of definition or process methodology. Instead, he has developed a more heuristically-oriented division into six different documentary styles, which he consolidates under the term »voice of the documentary.«

Thus, when looking at the development of documentary films, it is inadvisable to focus on the perpetual change that becomes an ongoing condition, but rather on what remains stable throughout the transformation processes.

To make a long history short, that stable element is the reference to reality,[19] on which I would now like to concentrate. It constitutes a very large field of the documental, in which various practices of treating the reference to reality cannot be ignored. The reference is preserved at each level of production, distribution, and audience reception, but according to different rules and conventions in each case.

This refers to an allusion to an external reality or, more precisely, the practice of alluding to reality—i.e. the way in which the cinematic treatment and exploitation refers to reality, and whether it steadily maintains that allusion or how it becomes modified. Films can be differentiated by the particular practice they employ to make this allusion. Thus documental and fictional films are not ontological opposites, they just differ in their methods of production.

Here I would like to mention Bruno Latour, whose writing has yet not often been applied to this context. His research into science and technology, however, presents a comparable reference problematic. One could say that documentaries are part of a chain of transformations intended to maintain an unbroken reference to reality. Following Latour,[20] we can say that it is crucial to be able to trace the reference to reality back through each step of those transformations.[21] Latour calls this a

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19   The reference to reality can also be described in terms of various other concepts such as »authenticity« or even »credibility,« which are actually just discursive modifications of the same thing.

20   According to Latour, the truth of scientific discovery can only result from a process, the individual steps of which must always remain both comprehensible and reversible. See Latour 1999, 70–72.

21   The object is »to preserve at all costs the ability to retrace the steps that led to the findings.« Quote translated by Rebecca M. Stuart; Latour 1999, 48.

»circulating reference,« because it can be followed in either direction (Latour 1999, 52).

In the same way in which, say, a scientific reference such as bibliographic entries ought to be made both comprehensible and retraceable, references to reality should be made comprehensible and retraceable within a documentary. All involved parties in a media milieu - authors, production companies, film distribution and/or television outlets, film and TV guides advertising the newest releases, and journalists' critical reviews - work towards a stability of these references; the above-mentioned comprehensibility and retraceability.
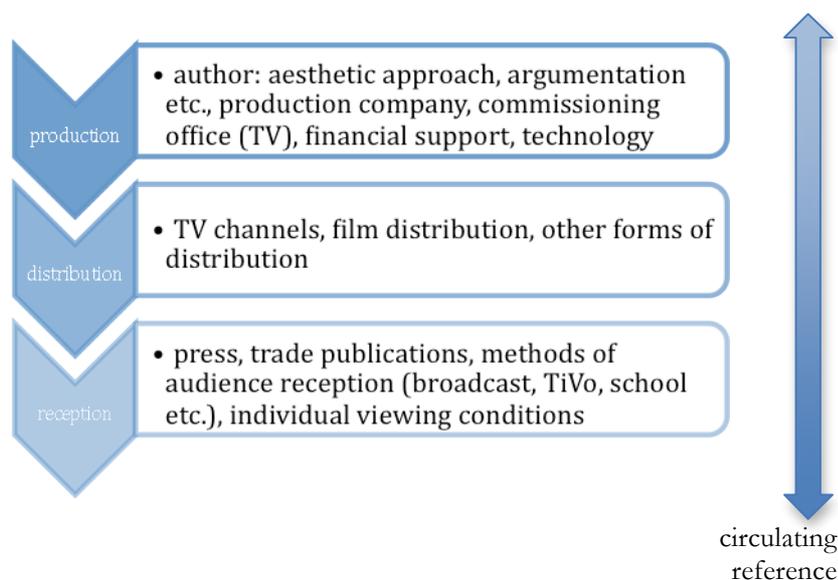
These references not only entail what Roger Odin once labeled ›paratexts‹—elements which surely play a certain role within this reference to reality—but also comprise both discoursive and non-discoursive practices that devise and create such a reference. Odin's point of view therefore would lead to, for example, an interpretation of erroneous TV guide advertisements—a modified paratext—as a modified, altered reading. When analyzing the reference to reality, one should not only

look for reading »modifications« (!) (of an implied reader), but rather for a »modalization« (!) of the documentary based on discoursive, as well as non-discoursive, practices in a media milieu. What changes is not only the reception, but the whole relational system of actors and thus the criteria of credibility.

While a loss of source-traceability in academic works can cause a de-valuation of the underlying work, a lack of stability of a given reference-claim to reality within the documentary field leads to a modalization of documentary film; and here lies an important difference between the field of the documental, and that of the academic world. Modalization means a specific transformation of the reference-claim to reality, which then results in an alteration of plausibility strategies. The form of mo-dalization varies depending on the sort and degree of guarantee for the stability of a reference-claim to reality. When applying Latour to the field of documentary film, I will not focus on his »circulating reference« as a criterion of truth, but rather on a dissection of differences between spe-cific figurations of actors, and corresponding forms of media milieu-spe-cific strategies of authentication and plausibility.

Such differences will hardly become recognizable in malfunctioning ele-ments of the underlying system (e.g. the earlier-mentioned »erroneous« TV guide ad)—but will rather manifest themselves in established prac-tices of a variety of media milieus. From a research-pragmatic perspec-tive, this means that one should therefore focus on the reconstruction of specific media milieus' documentary practices, while simultaneously con-sidering the plausibility criteria that have been applied.

Detached from essentialist thinking, this approach provides a new per-spective and remains open to concrete analyses of historical practices of the documentary. These practices have varied, especially with regard to guarantee of or authority for the stability of their reference to reality.

Therefore, I propose that the stability of any given practice of referenc-ing reality in a field or »milieu«[22] of production, distribution, and audi-

22   The term »milieu« is very broad, because it covers concepts like those of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1984) as well as, with minor modifications,

ence reception be taken as the central criterion for the description and categorization of the documental.

If we apply this approach to the practice of documentary film, we can observe different models of implementing the reference to reality (see simplified scheme below). That is to say, practices to ensure this reference do vary. While references to reality in the field of the fictional remain optional, we see reliable methods in the documental field to ensure those references. Nonetheless, those procedures vary in a deontological sense; differing professional codes and ethics do exist or, at a minimum, a variety of conventions. Modified versions of those codes or conventions are also operative for distribution and audience reception.

Examples for different production milieus	Type of reference guarantee
TV Journalism	binding, editorial, constituent
Documentaries	binding, personal, constituent
Reality TV	non-binding, editorial, optional
Web documentaries	non-binding, personal, optional

The various media milieus evidently cause varying forms of references to reality as a way of enacting media modalities, which in turn cause a change in the degree of the relationship to reality in the course of the production process.

Those media milieus can be differentiated by their differing documentary practices, within which it is crucial to point out the importance of the processuality of production, distribution, and reception as well as the corresponding interplay of respective actors. From the specific manifes-

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those of other authors such as Bourdieu's follower Bernard Lahire (Lahire, 2011). Lahire for example, replaces the idea of the milieu by the stability of the players' actions in a certain field. That is the sense in which I like to use the notion »milieu« in this context—as a self-stabilizing interplay of actors in the practice of production, distribution, and audience reception.

tation of this interplay, the type of realization will later develop, in which the stability of reference to reality will either be guaranteed or modalized.

Here I would like to provide a paradigmatic outline of some of these milieus:

1. Everyone working in TV journalism (at least in an idealized form of TV journalism) is anxious to respect professional guidelines. Authority for the reference to reality stems directly from stringently following those guidelines, and a guarantee for this reference is provided by the institution of the TV broadcaster.

Even if a journalist fails to follow those ethical guidelines, they nevertheless have a normative character, and consequences such as legal action, if necessary, can be inflicted upon those who do not comply by either the audience or by colleagues. A TV feature that does inadequate research or even presents facts that cannot be proven may soon face many problems.[23]

2. The claim of individual filmmakers is comparable to the journalistic deontology. In contrast to TV journalists, though, they do not work with predefined and standardized formats or normative aesthetics. They are bound to finding their own way or method to ensure a reference to reality. The result is an individual aesthetics or style. The reference to reality is not guaranteed by an institution, but by the filmmaker alone. Someone like Michael Moore, for example, is responsible for everything he presents in his documentaries with his name and his crew.

3. In the milieu of the producers of reality TV, reference to reality is an optional aspect of their work. The manner of establishing this reference to reality is neither constitutive for the producer, nor for the commissioning editors, the press, or even the audience. The film's or show's authors may or may not reference reality.

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23   In reality, there may be exceptions. In the last few years, we have observed a certain decline in ethical TV culture at TV broadcasters such as Fox.

Consequently, a reality TV format will not have to fear cancellation because it has been revealed as scripted, and often there are virtually no measurable differences in audience ratings between a format where the public has learnt that it has been scripted and staged or a format that has been shot in an authentic way.

The optionality of this reference to reality does not however mean that there are no examples where either a TV network or general public interest claims or calls for a reference to reality—shows such as *Big Brother* (Season 1, 2000 RTL II, Germany) or *Frauentausch* (Season 1, 2003, RTL II, Germany; the German version of *Wife Swap*), a show which was even advertised as a »social experiment« by the German network RTL II, come to mind. But, nonetheless, this cannot hold true for all seasons of such a show—and on no account for the huge variety of existing formats. Even within *Frauentausch*, the boundaries between unscripted depictions of reality and scripted content become »blurred« (See Weber, 2009), i.e. questions of cinematographic choices should already be seen as »stagings« or rather be perceived as mere »improvements« of what is already happening in front of the camera. These differences become even clearer in fully-scripted formats that simulate recordings of real events, such as *Abschlussklasse 03* (Season 1, 2003 Pro7, Germany) or *Lenßen & Partner* (Season 1, 2003 Sat1, Germany)—where the audience is sometimes informed about the staged nature, and at other times kept in the dark. In short: A reference to reality may be part of a network's strategy but does not have to be, because the reference to reality is neither binding for the reality-TV format, nor is it as constitutive an element as it is, for example, for the News format. 4. By this point, web 2.0, with online video platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo, contains a virtually unfathomable barrage of film and video material, whose origins and production methods can no longer be reconstructed. A considerable portion of that material is of an apparently documental character. But nobody can guarantee its reference to reality. The examples mentioned earlier, *Loose Change* and *lonelygirl15* only serve to emphasize that on the internet, much like in reality TV, the relationship to reality has become optional. At first, *lonelygirl15* was perceived as the true representation of

teenage girl Bree's video diary. Only a few months later did the online-community learn that Bree was a character played by a professional actress, and that *lonelygirl15* in fact was a scripted web series.

Although realized in a different way, the status of the documentary was also employed by the documentary film *Loose Change*. A guarantee of reference to reality was deliberately held back by the producers. Made available online right from the start by director Dylan Avery, the movie, in comparison to other 9/11 documentaries, did not set out to develop its own conspiracy theory, but was content with questioning the officially-sanctioned sequence of events. Corresponding hypotheses consisting of a mélange of speculations and noteworthy questions were intentionally kept open for discussion—so much that the producers—facilitated by the open distribution model over the internet—could react to feedback and critics' objections, which led to multiple re-edits and resulted in four different final cuts of the documentary.

Therefore, the optionality of a guarantee of reference to reality within web 2.0 does not mean that the material provided will not be traced responsibly, and edited in a transparent and reliable way. It only means that - with identities often completely obfuscated in the online world - nobody wants to be held accountable for said guarantee.

Conclusion

The strategy chosen by different media milieus to express plausibility varies according to how they transform documentary material. The same medial mode of expression employed in different milieus may result in different forms of modalization. For documentarists and Cinema Direct disciples such as Richard Leacock, with his 1960 movie *Primary* (USA 1960, R. Richard Leacock; Robert Drew; D.A. Pennebaker)*,* a hallmark of authenticity was shaky, underexposed shots with a correspondingly poor audio track—a sign for the difficult circumstances to which the documentary crew was subjected during filming sessions. In today's reality TV, and in scripted formats in particular, those same elements have taken on a completely different, mostly dramaturgical meaning (See Weber and Elias 2009).

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Only through observation of the specific techniques of transformation will the modalization of the documentary's denotation become apparent. As has been noted earlier, differentiation of the variety of practices suggested here is not aimed towards a new classification of the field, but rather towards an analysis of media modalization for documental films in various media milieus. This results less in implications for familiar forms and genres (insofar as we understand that as a semantically-negotiable term) than it does for our understanding of the documental film's status. Consequently, with an analysis of media modalization, we learn something about the transformation of credibility criteria, implying that we also learn about the cultural value of documentary films.

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