

DOCUMENTARY FILMS TURN MASSES INTO AUDIENCE

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An interview with philosopher **Václav Bělohradský** about documentary film and audiences who respect difference, as opposed to masses who always seek identification, about Guy Debord and his Society of the Spectacle and much more... Director **Vít Janeček** made the interview for dok.revue, a regular documentary supplement of Literární noviny. dok.revue - <http://www.literarky.cz/?p=rubrika&id=dokrevue>

VJ: *Even though this text will still be edited, we should note right at the beginning that we're doing the interview shortly before the paper deadline. I'd really like to thank you for doing this because this issue of dok.revue is dedicated to the Academia Film Festival in Olomouc, that had "to see and to know" as one of its slogans.*

VB: Unfortunately, I didn't get to see a number of important films at the festival because I had a seminar on Debord and I participated in the shooting of a documentary film.

VJ: *That shouldn't matter but I'd like to start by offering the terms visual evidence and knowledge, or documentary film and truth that have been used interchangeably. Is it possible today to still think in this way?*

VB: I'll give you three examples of what "knowledge through documentary film" means today, in postmodern age. First, documentary film stands in opposition to monuments that form a chain, stretching as "a high road for humanity through the ages, and the highest points of those vanished moments are yet great and living for men," Nietzsche wrote in his contemplation on the benefits and risks of history. Yet every such chain of monuments also ties somebody up, makes some into losers and others into winners, some into heroes and others into villains. Documentary film breaks up this chain, gives losers back their dignity, causing a scandal in a society founded on old monuments. Authorities, our past and we ourselves tend to become monuments and use them to compile our History, and to make decisions about what will "last as eternal and righteous." People create monuments in order to face enemy interpretations of their actions, their homogeneity is intimidating. Especially the sculptures of politicians and generals that crowd European cities are invariably monuments that represent a certain status quo in the power structure, a newly established victory over some enemies. Documentary films break up the chain of monuments which we at a certain time use to tie up the bearers of "opposite views", or "the filibusters at our universities," as I call them in my book *Společnost nevolnosti*.

The second example is Zana Briski's famous documentary *Born into Brothels* (2004, the film received the 2005 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature - VJ's note). It deals with the children of prostitutes in Calcutta, born in the prostitution district. The director says that she became a little ashamed of having these children as objects of her filmmaking so she gave them cameras and taught them how to take pictures. The children's relationship to themselves changed dramatically. They started taking photographs of each other, documenting their lives. For instance, one boy would photograph his sister, introduced her in a typical stance and added that whatever her wishes, she'll also become a prostitute. We can see that the view that makes up documentary films is liberating; when you teach somebody how to capture their life, the person also learns to see themselves in a new liberating way, which can at times be a devastating experience as people would prefer not to see themselves through "the eyes of a documentary filmmaker". The documentary eye brings into our life a certain distance from monuments that define our situation in the world; it is, however, no longer simply given but instead, it is at a given time and by given people organized and we can see it through the eyes of those whose voice is suppressed by the monument. The director then manages to get a passport for one of the children, something almost unthinkable for a child born in the red light district, and sends him to a children's photography exhibit in Amsterdam. He points to one of his photographs and says that we must now look at it because it is truthful. The child born in a brothel has grown up.

The third example is Adela Peeva's documentary film *Whose Is This Song?* (2003). It is about a famous song that is considered native by all countries in the Balkan region. The filmmaker travels through the region and finds that the “song doesn't connect different nations but creates yet more hostility.” Albanians claim that the song is Albanian and that it has been stolen by the Serbs, while the Serbs claim the opposite; the song can be found everywhere, each variation having a slightly different rhythm and form. When the director returns to Bulgaria, she visits some sort of a national feast and remarks that the song is not Bulgarian but Turkish, people threaten to hang her. This documentary about a song negates the terrible “claim to be unique” that is present in all national revivals, the worst period in European history.

All these examples clearly show the meaning of “knowledge through documentary film”, i.e., the decomposition of monumentality, documentary process as a liberating view of identity, negation of claims to be unique. This year, Academia Film hosted American documentary filmmaker Robert Rosenstone who is also a history professor. He said that he saw documentary film as a tool to carry out a postmodern approach to history, based on the negation to claim the truth, which is typical for modern historiography. Nevertheless, this negation must not be just “the scream of a victim”. It must also lead the stronger party to an understanding that they don't defend truth or uniqueness but that they're simply stronger! Just as we can see it in Adela Peeva's film.

VJ: *The three examples involve films that had to go through a lengthy production process, yet there is a number of other genres in the mass media, such as current affairs, documentary programmes or debates, that present themselves as 'documentaries'. They have a clear referential relationship to reality but they scarcely offer more general moments of recognition or knowledge that are associated with, let's say, 'arthouse' documentary film...*

VB: I would summarize my philosophical approach to documentary film as follows: documentary film can be considered documentary only as long as it includes and mentions also the view that governs that documentary. In the other cases, we can no longer call it documentary film but various representations of the world that are shaped according to more or less convincing patterns, strategies or preferences that have their own history and reasons. Documentary film is based on the reflection of its own prevailing views and points of departure.

News and current affairs lack that metalanguage even if I can imagine that there could be a current affairs broadcaster - sometimes, some programmes by BBC might come near - that would use such metalanguage. News broadcast is usually compiled according to a preset agenda of specified priorities, there needs to be a 'balance' using explanatory soundbites by left- and right-wing politologists who at any given moment throw up an instant reply to answer questions by journalists. This type of dumb news machine was well portayed in *No Man's Land* by Danis Tanovic, in contrast to the Balkan chaos, strategy and chaos that work with terms such as prime time, are purely absurd.

Italy's current trend is a disastrous version of 'balanced news broadcast', i.e., a report about, for instance, a court ruling that involves a politician would include the politician's soundbite to comment on or dispute the verdict. The trouble is that the verdict and opinion do not have equal value. A court verdict has a different history, different points of departure and a different logic than an 'opinion'; there is a jury that has to take into account a number of contradictory statements, there is some evidence, and so a court ruling cannot be compared with the sentence “judicial power keeps persecuting me, the verdict is not truthful,” even though they are given equal value in a 'balanced' news broadcast.

VJ: *Is it a moment of self-reflection then?*

VB: Or simply reflection, that's the core of postmodern documentary film. A scene from your film *Rules of the Game* (2005) comes to mind. In this scene, you ask a staff member from the press centre of the NATO summit whether she trusts NATO Secretary General George Robertson and she says 'yes'. Then she replies 'no' to your question whether she knows him but adds that since he was installed in the job, he no doubt has all the qualities that make him

a trustworthy person. This scene sharply reflects on the non-reflective nature of our trust of authorities - we accept roles just based on the fact that some other authority defined them. This, in my opinion, is an example of reflection in documentary film or by a documentary filmmaker.

VJ: *On a much broader scale, we had an opportunity to follow this theme in Czech TV's recent live broadcast from the presidential election. Once the vote became public, the live broadcast became almost an essay on the definition of authority, however presented within an audiovisual structure that had its own fairly fixed rules...*

VB: I've watched a short behind-the-scenes clip from the presidential election on YouTube. We see Bursík, Schwarzenberg, Langer and some other ODS member just as Langer scolds Bursík for refusing to vote for Klaus. It is a very reflective scene that allowed the reality of this sad farce to emerge; it became clear that the elected president would not be a monument, but a guarantor of certain interests and power status quo, affirming the continuity of certain claims and privileges asserted by oligarchy, shaped in the 1990s.

VJ: *I would like to go back to the dichotomy of documentary vs monument. Many documentaries do serve a monumental purpose...*

VB: True, the element of monumentalization becomes foregrounded if the documentary is made as a commission or as part of a strategy, to fulfill a given assignment or as "a reminder that during WWII the Czechoslovak army was active also on the Western front." If Czech soldiers fought at Tobruk in extreme conditions, it is possible to monumentalize them as heroes in a documentary, that's a job well done.

Yet there always has to be a way back, a good documentary must always maintain the knowledge that it is merely a construction, that it is sewn together from selected statements, documents, traces. Everything is sewn together, everything serves one purpose or another. That's why I agree with prof. Rosenstone who said in Olomouc that "objective data exists but means nothing... the past is dead, there's only the present, all that's left of the past is traces, sculptures, newspapers, paintings." Documentary film is a certain ethic, an attitude towards the world and life, based on the awareness that the past is recreated by reading some traces face-to-face with tensions of the present.

VJ: *Yet these seams and alienating form of editing, camera, etc. are least visible in so-called fiction film. Is this the reason why, in the economy of attention, feature films beat documentaries?*

VB: I think that a good documentary – this sets it apart from other film genres – must constantly remind the audiences that they're only audiences, that they must not become an audience mass that generates a uniform reaction. Art tries to rid the public of their authority, and tries to challenge their mastery by tearing it down, by abolishing any viewer distance so that they forget they are merely an audience who can leave without believing. Audience masses identify with a single interpretation, with the prevailing meaning of what is read or seen. The specific strategy of documentary film is that it reminds the mass to remain an audience, to retain their authority and distance over texts and images.

As opposed to the masses, an audience is made up of people who are interested in why each of them gives a different meaning to what they've seen, why there are different interpretations. For example, Mr. XY interprets the same film as me, yet from a completely different angle. Why is Mr. XY's interpretation different from mine? That's what the audience is interested in, provided they remained an audience. Differences in our interpretation of images we all saw are a constitutive experience of the audience, only by sharing different interpretations do we become an audience.

Documentary filmmakers don't work with the same goal in mind as other artists. They don't try to strip the viewer of their freedom and distance. Instead, documentary filmmakers teach an audience to remain an audience, to avoid becoming an audience mass.

VJ: *Olomouc hosted a retrospective of films by Guy Debord whose Society of the Spectacle has recently been published in Czech. Forty years ago, the book described the so-called spectacularization of all life expressions, including social critique. Could this process be far more advanced today, neutralizing all the potential of documentary film that we've been talking about?*

VB: The initial thesis of Debord's books says: "In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation." It's a variation on Marx, with the word 'commodity' replaced by 'spectacle'. His thesis is that the exchange value of goods became a spectacle that has fully subjected their use value that's still part of our lived world. "Starting out like a condottiere in the service of use value, exchange value has ended up waging the war for its own sake." Debord uses the thesis of commodity fetishism; we can no longer see our work, relationships or potential in the goods but a foreign power. We buy products not because they're useful but because we want to play a part in a spectacle with whose protagonists we identify.

According to Debord, the spectacle exists in concentrated and diffused form. The concentrated form is Stalinist, the spectacle is focused on a single individual or oligarchy, a centre, such as in the final scene of *The Fall of Berlin*. The diffused form is typical for a consumer society. Its main sign is that fringe protests - from the ones down below - become part of the spectacle, dissatisfaction itself becomes a profitable commodity. Simply put, it's the Che Guevara on t-shirts.

We can sum up the question of what lies behind the spectacle's ability to change every form of critique into a spectacle as follows: "What appears to be a new antagonist of the spectacle turns out to be an old spectacle of antagonism." *Polemos* is the mother of all spectacles. He who fights the spectacle, gives rise to a spectacle that is profitable and so takes part in the overall spectacularity of the system.

Postmodern documentary film keeps reminding us the power of the spectacle, which lies in its ability to transform any opposition, criticism, discontent or alternative once again into a mere spectacle. It reminds us that we are an audience and that there is no escape from this state. In my opinion, documentary film is the most important genre of the present and it's the only way to achieve emancipation in the society of the spectacle.

VJ: *Even if documentary films had this emancipatory potential, they must necessarily be - being a spectacle of its own kind - part of the system in order to get to audiences. Can we avoid it in any way?*

VB: There is no way to escape it, that's what documentaries have to keep reminding us! Guy Debord has never taken part in any public discussion, he even sent his wife to deliver manuscripts to the publisher; he would only write letters. He also made his so-called "anticinema", but that's a topic for another debate. His close friend Raoul Vainegem refused to attend *Academia Film* and in his letter he gave the following reasons: "Due to my personal resistance to all forms of spectacular interventionism, I choose not to attend any discussion or any public demonstration... Writing is the only form through which I stand up against commodity-based spectacular world, in favour of a better awareness of the lived world." However, the written text is also a spectacle! A person who acts like this in fact only delegates the spectacle of the text to others. We had a seminar in Olomouc dealing with Debord's texts, we were therefore delegated to make a spectacle from his text. Unavoidably, every text is a spectacle and documentary films have to keep reminding us of this vicious circle. We are always spectators of a spectacle, or else we're one of its parts, that's inevitable. We also say: Is it still faith when I know that I believe? Maybe, but it is not as enslaving as when we don't know that we believe.

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