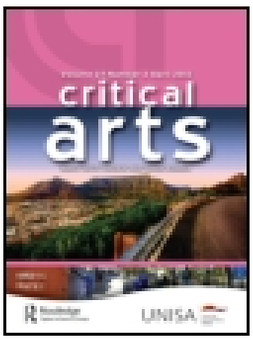

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Critical Arts

South-North Cultural and Media Studies

ISSN: 0256-0046 (Print) 1992-6049 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcrc20

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To cite this article: Thomas Bellinck & An van Dienderen (2019): "That's My Life Jacket!" Speculative Documentary as a Counter Strategy to Documentary Taxidermy, Critical Arts, DOI: 10.1080/02560046.2019.1627474

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2019.1627474

CRITICAL ARTS
https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2019.1627474

"That's My Life Jacket!" Speculative Documentary as a Counter Strategy to Documentary Taxidermy

Thomas Bellinck and An van Dienderen

School of Arts, KASK & Conservatorium, Ghent, Belgium

ABSTRACT

Despite the socially committed attitude many documentary artists take, documentaries often end up underpinning a large-scale epistemological enterprise linked to global capitalism and Western colonialism (H. Steyerl, "Documentary Uncertainty," Re-visiones (2011) www.re-visiones.net). Ai Weiwei's Human Flow (2017), an award-winning documentary about the "refugee crisis", provides an insightful case study. The film's well-intended activism becomes a mere trope that does not prompt any change. The formal strategies deployed do not address the power differentials between the filmmakers and their subjects, so that neither subjects nor viewers are left with any form of agency. In contrast, this article argues for embracing a speculative form of documentary which puts the messiness at its heart that is typical of the relations between representation and reality, between the West and its constructed "others". Acknowledging the impossibility to access the real in an unmediated manner, the authors believe in the intertwining of ethics and form; and in the transformative potential of art. Inspired by the pioneers of documentary art and drawing from their own practice-based research as film and theatre makers, the authors hope to offer an insight into some of the speculative documentary's possible counter-strategies to go against the grain of taxidermic, image-positivist mainstreams.

KEYWORDS

Speculative documentary; practice-based research; Ai Weiwei; documentary pioneers; cross-disciplinary research; taxidermic documentary; documentary theatre; documentary film; visual economy

Introduction: documentary taxidermy

In the winter of 2017, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei premiered his documentary *Human Flow* at the Venice International Film Festival. In sweeping terms, the film's synopsis states: "Artist, activist and director Ai Weiwei captures the global refugee crisis—the greatest human displacement since World War II—in this breathtakingly epic film journey" (Magnolia Pictures 2017). The film generally received raving reviews. "Ai Weiwei's refugee documentary weighs on your heart like a cannonball"—*The Telegraph* (Collin 2017); "This is angry, thoughtful, straightforward activist journalism: blunt, simple and impossible to ignore"—*Time Out* (Calhoun 2017); "Ai doesn't castigate or preach. He doesn't have to. The facts, the images, speak for themselves. Instead, he bears witness"—*Boston Globe* (Feeney 2017). The film was screened at numerous festivals; it received several prizes, and was shortlisted for an Oscar. Running for nearly two-and-a-half hours, the film sees

CONTACT An van Dienderen anvd@telenet.be

Ai Weiwei visit more than 20 countries, including conflict zones such as Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, border-zones like that of the United States with Mexico, and numerous migrant camps in Turkey, Greece, Lebanon, Kenya, Germany, and France. More than 200 crew members and 25 cameras were needed to make this high production value film, which was praised for its engaging combination of cinematic quality, social criticism, and powerful activism.

But is this really the case? As documentary artists, we, filmmaker An van Dienderen and theatre maker Thomas Bellinck, want to argue that *Human Flow* does not address the power differentials between its maker and its subjects—despite its use of formal tropes to reassure the audience that we are dealing with an activist and critical documentary. The film actually underscores the problematic dominant imagery of migrants as helpless victims. Confirming the status quo, it immobilises both its subjects and its viewers, while taking the possible breadth of change out of both positions. As such, it turns its subjects into taxidermic objects.

In her description of the romantic conservatism of Robert J. Flaherty's (1922) *Nanook of the North*, media scholar Fatimah Tobing Rony brings up the term "taxidermy".

> The metaphor of taxidermy—a form of representation which is infused with an acknowledgement of death, but also a desire "to be whole"—describes a plethora of technologies popular at the turn of the century used to represent the human body, including photography, film, and wax figures. (Rony 1996, 244)

Documentary filmmakers are notorious for such dissecting methods. As early as 1887, the Lumière brothers completed the Village Ashanti series, which featured 12 short dances performed by women of colour. Yet the fact that the series was filmed at the Lyon World Exhibition suggests an entirely different story, one wrapped up in colonialism, imperialism and exploitation (van Dienderen 2008). Such documentaries are the result of a delicately obscured "taxidermic operation". The "objects" of interest, these *human* beings, are carved up and presented as stereotyped distortions, as there is no room to weigh in on how they are represented. Moreover, "viewers", missing crucial information about its production process, have no point of reference in order to assess the programme's relation to reality. Unaware of the taxidermist at work, they judge the film's objectified "others" as such. In this way, taxidermic documentary images, representing clichés, stereotypes and established values that are part of a cultural hegemony, help to maintain a certain balance of power.

What is at stake when watching Ai Weiwei's *Human Flow?*

The life-jacketisation of migration

Like so many other contemporary documentaries—from award-winning films such as Gianfranco Rosi's *Fuocoammare* (2016) and Gabrielle Brady's *Island of the Hungry Ghosts* (2018) to some of our own work—*Human Flow* is part of a flourishing visual economy engrafted onto the illegalisation of certain forms of human mobility. As artists, we unavoidably play a role in, capitalise on and bear responsibility for this visual economy. Its most iconic and lucrative topos is without doubt the Mediterranean Sea. On a daily basis, European citizens consume night shots of wet people helplessly stretching out their hands to

their white saviours, top shots of chock-full rickety dinghies and side-views of dead children washed ashore. As anthropologist Ruben Andersson writes:

> The images […] depicting a "sea of humanity" without a past, fix the notion of the clandestine migrant as a helpless, nameless body, sinking into the dark waters. In rescuing this drowning body a virtuous circle is born, where the tasks of patrolling, caring for, and informing on clandestine migration blur into one another. The production, distribution and appropriation of images—in short, the visual economy of clandestine migration—mirrors and even facilitates this mixing of roles … (Andersson 2014, 193–194)

The past few years Ai Weiwei has created an expanding body of work on the so-called "refugees crisis", re-enacting iconic media pictures and fashioning sculptures out of *objets trouvés*: a contested re-enactment of a picture of the dead body of Aylan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler who washed up on a beach near the Turkish town of Bodrum in 2015; floating lotus flowers made of life jackets scouted on the beaches of the Greek island of Lesbos; a 60-metre inflatable raft made of the same manufactured rubber as that of the vessels that carry people across the Mediterranean. Rather than appropriating these objects and destabilising the relationship between signifier and signified, Ai Weiwei literally inserts pieces of reality into these artworks, granting them an aura of authenticity and buttressing his status of "artivist". During the shooting of *The Miracle of Almería*, a three-part TV series about the intertwining of industrial agriculture and migrant labour in the Spanish province of Almería, filmmaker Moon Blaisse and Thomas Bellinck discussed a series of pictures of such "artivist artworks" with two of the actors. Both actors had migrated from Mali to Almería. The images included a picture of Ai Weiwei's covering of the columns of the Berlin concert hall with 14,000 life jackets. Suddenly, one of the actors half-jokingly cried out: "Mais ça c'est mon gilet de sauvetage! Qu'est-ce qu'il foute avec mon gilet? Il faut qu'on lui demande de retourner mon gilet!" [But that's my life jacket! What on earth is he doing with my life jacket? We need to ask him to return my life jacket!].

Unsurprisingly, *Human Flow* too opens and closes with images of the Mediterranean Sea, beginning with a sequence of well-composed, meditative shots of an unfathomably blue body of water and dinghies passing by. Cut to an image of Ai Weiwei crouching in the verge, filming. Cut to a chaotic, hand-held shot of a rescue mission. Cut to Ai Weiwei, sporting the archetypical aid worker's yellow Day-Glo vest, as he supports an exhausted, shaking young man, wrapped in an equally archetypical golden emergency blanket. In one of the very first spoken lines of the movie, we hear the man thanking Ai Weiwei, who touches the man's cheek and replies: "You are a good man." The reproduction and circulation of aquatic emergency and rescue images—that we once heard sociologist Emmanuelle Hellio describe as "the life-jacketisation of migration"—goes hand in hand with a whole series of water metaphors that have come to lodge themselves in common parlance. As such, the title of Ai Weiwei's documentary, *Human Flow*, perfectly links up with the US embassy's leaked cables detailing the "waves of migration" arriving in Greece ("US Embassy Cables" 2011), with the European Commission's desire to "channel" and "stem" "irregular flows" (European Political Strategy Centre 2017) or the BBC's "stream" of migrants "flooding" trains in Italy (Bell 2015). As sociologist Marc Bernardot (2016) points out, such aquatic metaphors dehumanise migrants by portraying

individuals as an ever-moving, undifferentiated mass, as an elementary force of nature in need of hydraulic control.

We do not wish to diminish the tremendous suffering of those who make the passage overseas in any way, but we cannot help but wonder who stands to benefit from the over-exploitation of such sea emergency imagery. Especially when we consider that migrants arriving in Italy between March 2016 and January 2017 indicated witnessing more than double the amount of deaths in Libya or the Sahara Desert (Brian 2017) or that the majority of illegalised migrants living in Europe have never set foot on board of a dinghy, but are actually visa overstayers (Andersson 2014). To what extent does the life-jacketisation of migration, framing migrants as passive objects of humanitarian care, underpin the humanitarian rationale and rhetorics of the EU migration apparatus that is tasked with "hydraulic control"? It is certainly worth taking a closer look at the online communication of Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Despite its role in mass surveillance, migration enforcement and return operations, Frontex' visual communication readily makes use of aquatic emergency stereotypes, making their Flickr account at times virtually indistinguishable from that of search and rescue NGO's or some Pulitzer prize winning humanitarian photojournalists.

Activism as a visual trope

From the opening scene of aquatic rescue onwards, Ai Weiwei proceeds to assume a plethora of roles. He plays the aid worker, dragging shipwrecked people ashore. He plays the volunteer, grilling sausages on a makeshift barbecue in a migrant camp. He plays the therapist, running for a basket in which a woman can vomit while he caresses her hair, telling her "It's OK". He plays the empathetic foreign correspondent, interviewing numerous specialists from UNHCR or readjusting the lapel microphone on their clothing. He plays the world-renowned artist, talking to a group of young Palestinian women, one of whom is holding a 60$ art publication entitled *Andy Warhol & Ai Weiwei*. But above all, he plays the activist, having his hair shaved in a migrant camp until only his bald head remains. His haircut seems to symbolise his engagement, his activism, his companionship. By shaving his head he puts himself on a par with the surrounding migrants, with whom he is often said to identify because of his own history of dissidence, imprisonment and exile. As he states in the press notes of the film: "I see those people coming down to the boats as my family. They could be my children, could be my parents, could be my brothers. I don't see myself as any different from them." Throughout the film, Ai Weiwei constantly aligns himself with the migrants he puts on the screen: he positions himself (visually) next to them. He participates in their agony by being filmed himself while he is filming them with his smartphone, just like youngsters who are filming a concert in order to participate in the event. He is filmed while holding a piece of paper that reads "#Ai Weiwei stands with refugees". The audience needs to be convinced that Ai Weiwei is committed, that he really cares for the migrants, that he shares their anxiety and misery and that with this film he will make a difference.

This mechanism of identification is carried to an extreme during a scene in which Ai Weiwei trades his passport for that of the Syrian Abdullah Mahmoud. After trading some jokes about swapping nationalities, Mahmoud says: "If you want to take my tent … " Ai Weiwei replies: "Then you have to take my studio in Berlin. I have a studio in Berlin."

Then, the symbolic reversal of positions is over. We see them swapping their passports again as Ai Weiwei adds: "I respect the passport and I respect you." Quite unintentionally the scene lays bare one of the most painful discrepancies of the film, the power differentials that exist between Ai Weiwei and the migrants whose humanity he wishes to portray. While Ai Weiwei and his film crew travel to more than 20 countries, the migrants are stuck in front of fences, in migrant camps and crappy tents. As Ai Weiwei with good intentions appropriates their misery, there is no critical reflection on the different position he holds as an internationally celebrated artist who has seemingly unlimited access to funding resources for his high production value film. As T.J. Demos (2018) writes:

> … the filmmaker's position functions as a blind spot that remains largely unexamined, for Ai's appearances throughout the film evidence another kind of human flow that receives no comment: that of the privileged tourist or artistic nomad, a figure who has the means to travel with relative ease, owing to elevated economic and cultural status and the right kind of passport. In other words, the film's condition of possibility owes to the very expanding inequality—as between tourist and asylum seeker—that is symptomatic of the causes of migration in the first place.

Nowhere does Ai Weiwei address this notion of privilege and inequality. Yet, it is the maintaining of such privileges and inequalities that lies at the core of Western "migration management". It is precisely this privilege that connects Ai Weiwei to the policymakers that he interviews, to *Human Flow*'s opening night audience at the Venice International Film Festival, to us.

The question of agency

Ai Weiwei's activist hyper-agency contrasts starkly with the lack of agency of both his objectified subjects and his viewers. *Human Flow* creates a worldview that confirms the existent image production of dominant media in which migrants are nameless, even powerless victims who follow the rules and demands of static geo-political forces that largely remain unidentified. For, although the film seemingly makes use of different "authoritarian strategies" of the documentary regime—"voices of authority", facts and figures, headlines from respected newspapers—there is no insight into the real causes of the humanitarian crisis on display. Such documentaries do not challenge the existing paradigm, but maintain a common-sense frame of reality. Likewise, other than a superficial complaint about global warming, *Human Flow* offers no real lead into the specific conditions and structural geo-political powers that have led to this so-called "refugee crisis", the gargantuan scale of which is constantly stressed. There is a crisis. This a static given, without any possibility of change.

This numbing stasis most notably infects the way the on-screen identity of migrants is constructed and communicated. Whereas the classic expository "voices of authority"—experts such as doctors, aid workers, policymakers, and even an astronaut and a Jordanian princess—are always credited with their name, surname and job description, the film's migrants have no names or job description. Only in the final credits do their names appear, all together, as one faceless mass of interviewees. Thus, they remain anonymous, homogenised victims of unclear geopolitical forces. Whenever they speak, they are granted only a couple of brief sentences in the edit. At times, their words are not even translated, but merely subtitled with "speaking in Arabic". Whenever the experts

address the migrants' condition, they identify them as "them", "they"; never with names, never implying any agency. It feels as though there is no other room for migrants in the film than as executors of a static worldview that cannot be altered or challenged.

This attributed lack of agency on the part of the objectified subjects coincides with an induced lack of agency on the part of its viewers, who cannot but consume the static worldview that is presented. Of course, the overwhelming vastness of the suffering at hand—the causes of which are outsourced to geopolitical power games and incomprehensible evil—makes us feel sympathy, but it does not make us feel we have agency. It invokes in us a self-deceptive kind of pity that distracts from our own responsibility and part in the structural violence that the visual economy of the illegalisation of migration professes to denounce. Essayist Susan Sontag (2003, 102) most eloquently phrased this myopia: "So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence."

Recalibrating the distribution of the sensible

Human Flow is part of a massive market of liberal-humanitarian documentaries consumed on different platforms. According to Steyerl, these mainstream documentaries often criticise unfair power structures on the content level, but fail to do so with regard to form and power differentials. As such, they underscore a large-scale epistemological enterprise that is closely linked to the projects of global capitalism and Western colonialism (Steyerl 2011). But, as T.J. Demos (2018) stresses,

> rather than simply dismiss *Human Flow* as only the most recent in a long line of liberal humanitarian portrayals, which, in playing to its viewers emotions and empathy do little to address the massive challenges of the situation, we should ask how might we work toward progress otherwise?

In our own respective practices, we want to (and must) ask how we can critically question the power structures inherent in documentary making. How can we deal with our own inevitable blind spots and positions of power? How can we undermine the documentary's authoritative claim to knowledge and truth? How can we subvert and unravel the market-driven taxidermic and forensic formats of certain documentary mainstreams? How can we recalibrate what philosopher Jacques Rancière calls "the distribution of the sensible", the implicit set of rules that determine what can or cannot be perceived, seen, heard, said, thought, made or done (Rancière 2000)? Interestingly, Rancière stresses the importance of the notion of "dissensus" over "resistance":

> I would rather talk about dissensus than resistance. Dissensus is a modification of the coordinates of the sensible, a spectacle or a tonality that replaces another […] That's one way of keeping one's distance from the shopworn affect of indignation and instead exploring the political resources of a more discrete affect—curiosity. (as quoted in Carnevale and Kelsey 2007, 259–261)

Pioneering clumsiness

Hoping to strengthen the continuous search for dissensus in our own work, we wonder if we can draw inspiration from the work of the pioneers of documentary film, photography

and theatre. For, even though historically, the documentary has often been associated with objectivity and truth, at the same time the documentary tradition has always been anchored in uncertainty, dispute, and contamination (Balsom and Peleg 2016). At around the same time that Robert J. Flaherty was spearheading the taxidermic format with his first feature *Nanook of the North* (1922), other artists were experimenting with new forms of representing the real through the creation and manipulation of documents, blurring the lines between art, archivism, journalism and ethnography. Rereading the descriptions of such documentary pioneers as Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), Maya Deren (1917–1961), John Grierson (1898–1971), Jean Painlevé (1902–1989), Erwin Piscator (1893–1966) and Jean Vigo (1905–1934), one discovers a great openness, messiness, clumsiness and befoggedness in their early conceptions of the documentary gesture. Despite many differences in form, context and contents, we will attempt to describe some salient features of their work, as we believe they propose an altogether different possible reading of the documentary gesture.

In 1926, reviewing Flaherty's third film *Moana*, filmmaker and critic John Grierson was one of the first to name and define the emerging "documentary" genre, which in his view involved "a creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson 1926). Interestingly, Grierson borrowed the term from the French denomination for colonial travelogue films of the time (Youker 2018). So, from the outset, the genre was fraught with questions of ideology and representation. Around the same time, theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht responded enthusiastically to director and producer Erwin Piscator's radical experiments in "political theatre" with an article that hailed "the creation of a great epic and documentary theatre which will be suited to our period" (Squiers 2014, 59). In the theatre, the documentary was heralded as an avant-gardist art form challenging bourgeois, immersive dramatic conventions. Heavily influenced by Dada and soviet agitprop, it was marked by experiments in collective creation, the blurring between art and life, photomontage, collage and mixed media. If some form of "documentary theatre" had existed since the end of the nineteenth century, it was Piscator and Brecht's application of the term, together with Grierson's definition, that advanced its widespread circulation (Youker 2018). Later, Grierson would note that his definition was wanting: "Documentary is a clumsy definition, but let it stand" (Grierson 1932–34). Although Grierson ultimately underscored the more expository form of documentary we wish to critique, we do find inspiration in his choice of the word "clumsy". In our own work, we rekindle the notion of clumsiness as an antidote to the taxidermic fetishisation of certainty, truth and objectivity.

"Showing has to be shown"

Today, the idea still persists that images represent "the real" without any censorship or manipulation whatsoever. This proclivity can be termed "image positivism", i.e. the positivist or naturalistic belief that what is being represented unquestionably refers to what has been experienced (van Dienderen 2008). Even within our own artistic projects we have had heated debates with colleagues postulating that "the camera never lies". As filmmaker and writer Trinh Minh-ha (1990, 83) states:

> At the core of such a rationale dwells, untouched, the Cartesian division between subject and object that perpetuates a dualistic inside-versus-outside, mind-against-matter view of the world. Again, the emphasis is laid on the power of film to capture reality "out there" for us

"in here". The moment of appropriation and of consumption is either simply ignored or carefully rendered invisible according to rules of good and bad documentary.

However well or badly hidden, however conscious or not, documentaries always comprise a maker's position towards the philosophical question of how they perceive reality and what paradigm of reality they relate to. After all, the paradoxical starting point of any documentary gesture is that whenever one observes reality, it mutates or vanishes into thin air (van Dienderen 2017a). Instead of pretending to ignore this given, it is more interesting to reflect on this aspect of the documentary and to relate to this (im)possibility to access the real in an unmediated manner. Brecht was very much aware of this when he called his theatre "non-Aristotelean", rejecting ancient philosopher Aristotle's premise of an unproblematic relationship between reality and our observation and representation of it (Youker 2018). Highlighting the importance of "complex seeing", Brecht wished to dismantle hegemonic forms of representation and stimulate the audience to critically analyse what they were dished up as reality through techniques of estrangement, the purging of the stage of all illusion, the juxtaposition of different representations of the same facts and a rendering visible of all theatrical machinery and artifice. According to Brecht, this required a completely different style of acting: "the actors must invest what they have to show with a definite gestus of showing." (Brecht 2000, 439) Or, as goes the title of a famous poem by Brecht, "Showing has to be shown".

Changeability and transformative potentiality in contrast with positivist paradigms and dominant formatting

Likewise in contrast with the aforementioned positivist rationale and the Cartesian dualism pointed out by Trinh, are the writings of theorist and filmmaker Jean Epstein. From the 1920s onwards, he ceaselessly stressed the need to cultivate what he called cinema's "photogénie", the medium's inclination towards the indeterminate and the permanently moving and changing, contradicting all knowledge systems based on the establishment of stable rules (Balsom 2017: 10). His insistence on movement and the perpetual possibility of change was shared by Brecht, who emphasised that human nature is not fixed and humankind is changeable and able to change: "Briefly, the Aristotelian play is essentially static; its task is to show the world as it is. The learning-play is essentially dynamic; its task is to show the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed)" (Brecht 2000, 297–298). To him, this was the *sine qua non* of contemporary representation: "the present-day world can only be described to present-day people if it is described as changeable" (Brecht 2000, 727). Such was the aim of his epic style, to "arrive at a point where spectators no longer see the persons on stage as unchangeable, closed off to influence, helplessly resigned to their fate" (Brecht 2000, 347). In Brecht and Piscator's mobilisation of theatre as a tool for social transformation, Grierson's definition of documentary as a "creative treatment of actuality" takes on an almost surgical meaning. "Piscator saw the theatre as a parliament, the audience as a legislative body" (Brecht 2000, 330). Even though it was disputed whether Piscator really managed to reach the proletarian audience that he was seeking to involve in his parliament-theatre, his and Brecht's epic theatre put the question of spectatorship, participation and handing over control of part of the production process at the heart of the documentary gesture, even up to a point of aspiring to "remove the spectators and tolerate only practitioners" (Brecht 2000, 286).

Albeit not from a cultural materialist position, the belief in transformative potentiality also formed the root of poet, photographer, ethnographer, filmmaker and impresario Maya Deren's sense of cinema. According to Bill Nichols, Maya Deren radically transformed film's understanding, practice, theory and distribution against the grain of dominant practices and formatting (Nichols 2001). For Deren, cinema was a medium based on the combination of discovery and invention: this balance of fact and fiction also informed her sense of the mystical. The filmmaker is like a magician who must convince the uninitiated of the existence of an alternative universe through the filmed concrete details of conventional reality, rather than through fanciful themes. So, the reality that Deren performed in her films was one that perhaps did not exist in real life (yet). Seeing cinema as a means to create a reality that can illuminate viewers, Deren earnestly sought to convince us that an alternate universe is true (Fischer 2001). As scholar and critic Erika Balsom wrote, this transformative potential was also one of the hallmarks of cinema according to film theorist Riciotto Canudo (1877–1923), who claimed that the mandate of cinema is the

> transcendence of such surfaces to reveal the *invisible*, to communicate the immaterial 'soul' of people and things […] Canudo asserts that cinema's specificity lies not in its mechanical automatism—its ability to produce high definition likeness, images "cut out" from reality, to paraphrase him—but rather in the possibility that the machine might be marshaled by a creative agent who would transcend banal objectivity and illuminate inner truths. (Balsom 2017, 77)

Despite their many differences and internal contradictions, a rereading of the work of these pioneers of the documentary avant-garde reveals a whole other possible paradigm of representation. Going against the grain of taxidermic, image-positivist mainstreams, they manifest a fervour to challenge dominant formatting, an acknowledgement of the impossibility to access the real in an unmediated manner, a belief in the transformative potential of art, an insistence on the intertwining of ethics and form, on the training of complex seeing, a desire to produce unsharp, blurry images that challenge static paradigms and an urgency to reflect on existing power differentials, both geopolitically and in artistic processes. Inspired by these attributes, we feel the urge to put forward a different contemporary model of documentary, that of the "speculative documentary". Below, we will expound this speculative model and touch upon some strategies we explore in our own practice.

Speculative documentary

In 2018, together with photographers Michiel Decleene and Max Pinckers, we founded The School of Speculative Documentary, the ~~manifesto~~ of which can be found further in this volume. The speculative documentary gesture that we practice, is based on conjecture rather than knowledge. As filmmaker, writer and visual artist Hito Steyerl (2011) writes, uncertainty underlies the contemporary documentary genre:

> The perpetual doubt, the nagging insecurity—whether what we see is "true," "real," "factual" and so on—accompanies contemporary documentary reception like a shadow. Let me suggest that this uncertainty is not some shameful lack, which has to be hidden, but instead constitutes the core quality of contemporary documentary modes as such […] The only thing we can say for sure about the documentary mode in our times is that we always already doubt if it is true.

We openly embrace this perpetual uncertainty, as well as the befoggedness, clumsiness and messiness, which are all typical of the relations that in the course of the centuries have developed between representation and reality, between the West and its constructed "others" (van Dienderen 2017). This jumble of links, associations, and paradoxes, in which artists incorporate their uncertainty about these relations, contrasts sharply with the illusion of the dichotomous relation between the "us" and "them" that Flaherty and many other taxidermic documentarians present (van Dienderen 2017). Clearly, this type of messiness does not want to create confusion for the sake of aesthetic confusion *an sich*. It is a productive strategy that is simultaneously bound up with the complexity of relationships between the West and its constructed others and with an aesthetic category defying classic formats in which ideological connotations are assigned to the constructed other.

This idea of messiness is taken to its extreme in An van Dienderen's film *Letter Home* (2015), in which she exploits it as a formal principle (to view the film: https://vimeo.com/221426457). Filmed in Japan, the idea was to degenerate generic tourist images, in order to dwell on the sensoriality of impressions that one experiences when living in a place where one does not understand the language. For this purpose, van Dienderen processed her original material, recorded with a camcorder, by confusing algorithms. This positions the materiality, the texture of the electronic image in the foreground. The resulting film is literally messy, evoking a chaotic mosaic of colours and impressionistic pixels. We see the world as through a window filled with water splashes, which distort every move, or appears suddenly stiffens as frost. In a way, *Letter Home*'s blurriness is reminiscent of pictorialist photography of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Balsom 2017, 80). These blurring aesthetics, with their entanglement in ethical and ideological values, go against the belief that images can simply reproduce reality.

As speculative documentarians, we are duly aware that the multiple and mutable realities that we engage with and create, are marked by gaps. It seems these gaps are inevitable, if only because, as philosopher Slavoj Žižek points out, we can never look from a distance at an objective reality, for we are always incorporated in the image that we create (Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011). We ourselves are our own greatest blindspot. Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg stress that documentary is not a neutral picturing of reality, but "a way of coming to terms with reality by means of working with and through images and narrative" (Balsom and Peleg 2016, 13). The speculative documentary revolves around this notion of "coming to terms". Indeed, the question is not how to stop the gaps, the question is how to accept them and enter into negotiation with them.

This coming to terms with an unstoppable gap was at the heart of the creation process of Thomas Bellinck's *Simple as ABC#2: Keep Calm & Validate* (2017), a documentary musical about the digitisation of migration management (to see some pictures: https://www.thomasbellinck.com/simple-as-abc). Made in the same year as *Human Flow*, about a similar topic, the difference in paradigm of reality could not be bigger. During a first research phase in 2016, Bellinck travelled to the Greek island of Lesbos. For months, Lesbos had dominated international headlines as the epicentre of the European migrants reception crisis. But quite contrary to the aquatic emergency imagery in *Human Flow*, there had not been a single boat in sight for days. Everybody was speculating wildly about the how and why, but nobody could come up with an adequate explanation. The same happened in Eidomeni, a little town on the border between Greece and Macedonia, which is

also featured in *Human Flow*. For months, buses with thousands of migrants had been coming and going. But upon arriving in Eidomeni, all Bellinck encountered were brand-new, deserted camps and aid workers, lounging about, smoking. Once again, nobody could come up with an adequate explanation. This triggered a shift away from the stereotypes of the visual economy of the illegalisation of migration, allowing him to scrutinize the borderscape in all its infrastructural nakedness. The happenstance gap was painfully echoed in Bellinck's interviews with several border managers, working for different EU institutions and agencies. In the latter's mental landscape migrants seemed equally missing—not as homogenised objects to be managed, of course, but as thinking, speaking, acting subjects. *Simple as ABC #2: Keep Calm & Validate* arose from these gaps, these different forms of nonappearance and disappearance: the glaring absence of those who are managed created an opening to focus on those who manage and how and why they do so. Rather than being deflected by myopic sympathy for drowning bodies in need, this left him and the audience to reflect on their own privilege and their own position within and responsibility for the apparatus of Western migration management.

In a wholly different way, An van Dienderen's film *Lili* (2015) also investigates white-centric power dynamics and its inherent privileges (to view the film: https://vimeo.com/136103027). The film turns its attention to the phenomenon of China girls, images of Caucasian women used in cinema history to calibrate the colours of the camera. The visual format is quite simple: a woman is filmed with colour-grading cards. This image is then edited within the reel leader of the film, addressing the technicians who use these colour-timing strips to create visual continuity between shots and scenes filmed in different lighting conditions or on different film stocks. few authors (except Roth 2009; Yue 2012, 2015) have mentioned the problematic factor that the women—although referred to as Chinese—were almost always white or Caucasian. The Caucasian skin is used as a reference for the grading of camera and printing, ultimately excluding people of colour, as they do not conform to this implicit norm. The China Girls practice started in the 1920s, but is still in use to this date, each time reintroduced in new technologies. With *Lili*, van Dienderen questions the construction of the white-centricity of the photographic media, which, as stated by film scholar Richard Dyer (1997), already assume, privilege, and construct whiteness. To that end *Lili* mixes fictional and documentary codes, constructing a fictional voice-over, which blends with archival images and re-enactment. The film offers to set in motion the normative powers of technological development resonating a critique on chromophobia in Western culture as an invitation to challenge dominant formatting (van Dienderen 2017).

In our attempts to come to terms with our own blind spots and the unstoppable gaps in reality, speculation often occupies centre stage. We believe in the imaginative power of the utopian potential mood, in "what if", rather than the mimetic "as if": I am not saying something is true, real or possible, but what if it were? In his practice, Thomas Bellinck often works with pre-enactments, reconstructions of an (im)possible future. For instance, in *Domo de Eŭropa Historio en Ekzilo* (2013–2018), an immersive installation disguised as a historical museum, Bellinck looks back on the collapse of the European Union between 2008 and 2023 from the point of view of the distant future. To a certain extent, one might also call the closing scene of Bellinck's *Simple as ABC #2: Keep Calm & Validate* a pre-enactment. In this scene, the idea of the gap is literally deployed as a speculative narrative device. The audience is asked to imagine that one night the entire border

management infrastructure disappears. This time, not those who are managed disappear, but rather the management armamentarium. Entire floors disappear from glass skyscrapers, surveillance planes dissolve into thin air, all management activity grinds to a fabulous standstill. What remains, are thousands of delicate bodies in an empty field, a little dazed by their accidental proximity. Those who used to manage, look as unsettled as those who were on the road. Through this surreal disappearance a new potential "space of appearance" arises. This space of appearance is defined by philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt as a space where people appear to each-other as thinking, speaking, acting subjects, a space where, as equals, they can negotiate a world that did not exist before.

In his latest project, the audio performance *Simple as ABC #3: The Wild Hunt* (2019), Bellinck tries to dig deeper into this field of tension between visibility and (imposed) invisibility. However, this time, he embarks on an act of speculation together with a team of paid experts who, in the dominant visual economy of the illegalisation of migration, are too often confined to the role of objectified subjects. All experts have been invited to participate on the basis of their intimate knowledge of the dynamics of present-day human hunting, of what it means to be physically and psychologically subjected to the EU external border, which Bellinck as an EU citizen, helps to construct on a daily basis. Together, they fantasise about what would happen if they were to build a human hunting museum: what would it look like, who would be in there, what would hang on the walls? On stage, the resulting museum consists solely of subtitled sound snippets. As their bodies are held up at some EU border, through their voices alone the co-curators/co-creators guide the audience through an imaginary collection of hunting scenes that is momentarily conjured up—invisible images that could not or were not allowed to be made, but that the experts feel should be seen.

This desire to co-create, to share authorship, is also at the basis of An van Dienderen's ongoing film project *PRISM*. For *PRISM*, van Dienderen departs from the perspective that the photographic media are technologically and ideologically biased, favouring Caucasian skin. *PRISM* uses a co-creative strategy in which power differentials are distributed among several filmmakers coming from and living in different areas, so as to create multichronotopic links between different geographical and cultural groups (Shohat and Stam 2003). She invited Rosine Mbakam (from Cameroon, now living in Brussels) and Eléonore Yameogo (from Burkina Faso now living in Paris) to work together on a film in which the differences in their skin colour serves as a departure to explore their different experiences with the biased limitations of the medium. Their different filmic gestures create a Gesamtkunstwerk in which their distinctive approaches unite, offering a varied palimpsest of reactions and explorations of the relation between skin and cinematography. (More info: http://www.anvandienderen.net/prism-2019/) Experimenting with formal strategies, such as collaborative and self-reflexive filmmaking, offers ways to challenge mainstream ideologies (Balsom and Peleg 2016).

This article builds on the insights developed in the articles on the ethnographic turn in contemporary arts, which were published in Critical Arts previously, questioning Hal Foster's (1995) infamous essay by providing practice-based artistic research (Rutten, van Dienderen, and Soetaert 2013a, 2013b). Compared to traditional research, practice-based research in the arts seems to be unable to go beyond the single case it describes. Yet this is exactly what Patricia Leavy (2014, 417) in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative*

Research contradicts: "Although the knowledge claims produced in this kind of research practice are intended to be ambiguous enough to allow for multiple, multidimensional, complex, dynamic, intersubjective and contextual interpretations, this is also their strength." It is only by looking specifically at practice-based research that we have been able to highlight the aforementioned speculative documentary strategies. Such messy, phantasmagorical, collaborative strategies, "make us doubt and reconsider the world and its representations not as givens, but as complex, vague and unfixed" (Beugnet, Cameron, and Fetveit 2017, 10). Through them, we hope to modify the coordinates of the sensible and reclaim the documentary gesture from the manifold formatted, taxidermic mainstreams, exploring its full capacity to resist, to challenge, to subvert dominant epistemologies that are still rooted in colonialism and global capitalism.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Souleymane, Sidi, Moon Blaisse, Michiel De Cleene, Emmanuelle Hellio, Max Pinckers, Esther Severi and Emile Van Binnebeke for their generous and inspirational input. This article is part of the research project "Simple as ABC: Speculative Documentary vs the Western Migration Apparatus", initiated by Thomas Bellinck, running from 2016 until 2022. It is also part of the research project "China Girls and the Color Genie. A multichronotopic research", initiated by An van Dienderen, running from 2015 until 2019. Both research projects are affiliated with KASK&Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent and funded by the University College Ghent Research Fund.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by KASK&Conservatorium, School of Arts Ghent & the University College Ghent Research Fund.

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