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The variational mode: three cases about documents, artworks and animation

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Epilogue

Pure Documents

1.

Throughout this dissertation, I have adopted a definition of ‘documents’ based on the interaction between an object and a narrative. An object (a contract, a photograph, a fingerprint, a digital record, etc.) is animated by a narrative ‘intensity’ (an alibi to prove in a courtroom, the proof of a purchase in a store, etc.): the existence of documents is entirely defined by such ‘use’.²⁶⁷

If we accept this definition based on interaction, we may try to envision *liminal* examples of documents. Liminal examples may be conceived within a hypothetical situation, where one of the terms of the interaction (‘object’ or ‘narrative’) is absent, yet it keeps the interaction alive *through its absence*. So, considering the two polar opposites, two different kinds of liminal examples may be envisaged:

1. a document consisting of a narrative investing an *absent* object;
2. a document consisting of an object invested by an *absent* narrative.

Let us envision the first case. One could try to visualize it as a piece of legal evidence devoid of any material form, unembodied in any tangible object. Such a document would be constituted by a narrative investing an object that *is not there*, but whose presence still affirms itself through its absence. A similar paradox may be better grasped through an example.

William Faulkner published *Smoke* in 1932. The short story relates the homicides of both Anselm Holland and Judge Dukinfield, the magistrate charged with validating Holland’s will. Granby Dodge, a cousin of Holland’s sons, ultimately is revealed to be the culprit in this tortuous mystery. He had engaged a “thug” from Memphis to kill Anselm, and intended to murder his son Virginius as well in order to take control of the family farm. During the inquest, prosecuting attorney Gavin Stevens establishes that the killer smoked an unfamiliar and easily identifiable brand of cigarette right after having shot Judge Dukinfield. The judge’s servant recalls sniffing the smoke when he discovered the body, and he also remembers closing the small metal box that the judge used as a paperweight when it “jumped off the table” in the room filled with smoke. During the trial, investigator Stevens argues that, if his version is true, the metal box will still contain that specific smoke. Dodge, the cousin, gives himself away when he starts up and flaps at the fading smoke that emerges from the box when Stevens opens it. Stevens then acknowledges in front of the narrator and other

²⁶⁷ Such use-based definition coincides, in part, with Ferraris’ concept of ‘social objects’, which includes documents *and* artworks. As stated above, social objects “exist only in so far as there are men thinking that they exist”. Ferraris, Maurizio. “Social Ontology and Documentality”, 84.

members of the jury, that he had manufactured the smoke in the box – that is, the supposed evidence – in order to trigger a confession.

Faulkner's story presents a liminal case of a judicial procedure. A puff of smoke used as evidence produces a powerful example of the literally evanescent condition of the document. What is considered a document is almost a pure performance. As the smoke vanishes, the piece of evidence loses its material substrate altogether. It serves its purpose – it performs – and then it disappears forever, without leaving a single physical trace. Nonetheless, as a legal bluff, as a trick, it works perfectly. The manufactured evidence activates the production of truth in the judicial theatre supposed to host it: the smoke triggers a public, legal confession.

Using the words of literary scholar Michael Lahey,

An issue that immediately arises out of the story is the presentation of law and legal technique as dubiously self-legitimizing, self-authorizing. As a provisional fiction attempting to establish first itself as authority and then what it hopes to explore as factual, objective, the logical product of considered procedures, legal technique in *Smoke* exposes itself by exposing the difference between law and ethics, practice and aim.²⁶⁸

Smoke provides with the paradigm of a '*pure document*': a piece of evidence that performs only when it is considered – *used* – as such. Evidence, in this case, is only smoke: it is nothing more than the fact itself of its contemplation. As a document, Faulkner's smoke is almost a purely narrative intensity; it is virtually *nothing more than its performance* – its use. And, once used, it disappears forever and it is nowhere to exist again. In this sense, it can be properly considered a liminal example of documents: an ephemeral animation of a fading entity. In Lahey's words:

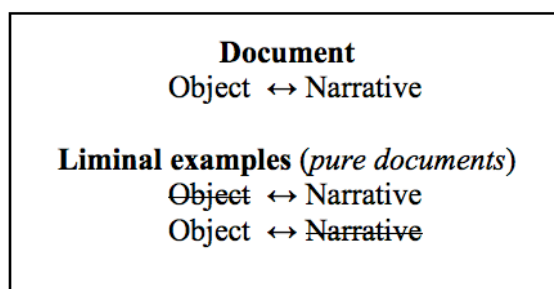
The greatest test of evidence is to verify whether in fact there is any. To conduct before trial such a test of the possibility of smoke in a sealed brass box is to destroy immediately the evidence, or its *possibility*, by *looking*. [...] The exploration of how justice can or cannot achieve itself – or how justly justice is pursued – and how, possibly, the legal system seems capable of collapsing in on itself to achieve its ends, or, conversely, to produce itself in order to produce its by-products of verdict and seeming catharsis, are, I think, the story's fascinating concerns.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ Lahey, Michael E. "Trying Emotions: Unpredictable Justice in Faulkner's 'Smoke' and 'Tomorrow'", in *Mississippi Quarterly* n. 46, iii, Summer 1993, 447-462, <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Trying+emotions%3A+unpredictable+justice+in+Faulkner's+%22Smoke%22+and...-a014696161> (accessed 29 March 2019)

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

2.

Let us now consider the other pole of the interaction. The idea of a ‘pure document’ may be tackled from the reverse perspective: not as a narrative investing an absent object (as in *Smoke*), but as an object that acts as a document even in the absence of any narratives to convey, prove or validate.



But how can an object act – be used – as a document if it has *nothing to document*? How can the narrative intensity that defines a document continue to flow, in the absence of a story to invest the object with? These questions, which may appear as pure speculation, have operated as a guiding light for the ‘research in and through art’ that I have tried to outline in this dissertation. My practical investigation into an alternative, variational, non-institutional use of documents ultimately led me to a working hypothesis, which I will attempt to sketch here.

In his *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*, Walter Benjamin refers to violence as “a ‘pure means,’ namely, a means that appears as such, only insofar as it emancipates itself from every relation to an end. Violence as pure means is never a means with regard to an end: it is attested only as exposition and destitution of the relationship between violence and juridical order, between means and end.”²⁷⁰

Considering the structural connection between documents and power highlighted in the previous chapters, we may regard a document as a ‘means to an end’. In its standard mode of existence, a document is defined precisely by its use, that is, by the fact that it is invested with a narrative aimed at validating a specific truth: the ‘end’ to which it is ‘means’. However, following Benjamin’s line of thinking, could one conceive a document as “a means that, while remaining such, has been emancipated

²⁷⁰ Agamben, Giorgio. *The Use of Bodies: Homo Sacer IV*, 2 trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 269.

from the relation with an end”²⁷¹ As a means that “shows itself as such in the very act in which it interrupts and suspends its relation to the end”²⁷²

Coming back to the aforementioned definition of documents by Suzanne Briet (“any concrete or symbolic indication, preserved or recorded, for reconstructing or for proving a phenomenon, whether physical or mental”),²⁷³ one could propose the paradoxical hypothesis of a document that does not have anything to reconstruct or prove. How to imagine a document that *does not document* anything? How to imagine a document in the absence of any narrative to prove, any hypothesis to validate, any truth to confirm? What would remain of such a document?

One option would be to describe such *document of nothing* with the same words used by Scholem in a well-known letter to Benjamin: “it does not signify, yet still affirms itself by the fact that it is in force”²⁷⁴. A document is invested by an *absent* narrative, and yet it still affirms itself as “in force” in its documentary mode – it still affirms its narrative vocation to document, albeit devoid of any narrative to convey or to document. Even if devoid of anything to document, an object would still carry an ineradicable narrative core – an intrinsic vocation to be used as a narrative artifact.

Still, such definitions keep seeming paradoxical: how could an object act as a document if it does not have anything to document? I will propose an answer. It does so through a *gesture*. Just like in dance, when

the movements usually directed at a certain goal are repeated and exhibited as such – that is, as means – without there being any more connection to their presumed end and, in this way, they acquire a new and unexpected efficacy, [...] to the extent that [they] expose and render inoperative [their] relation to that purposiveness.²⁷⁵

If Agamben defines a gesture as a “special activity through the neutralization of the works to which it is linked as means (the creation and conservation of law for pure violence, quotidian movements directed at an end in the case of dance)”²⁷⁶, we may

²⁷¹ Agamben, Giorgio. *Karman. A Brief Treatise on Action, Guilt, and Gesture*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 81.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁷³ Briet, Suzanne. *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?*, Éditions documentaires, industrielles et techniques, Paris, 1951.

²⁷⁴ Benjamin, Walter and Scholem, Gershom. *Briefwechsel 1933-40* (Frankfurt am Main 1988), 163. “In a letter to Benjamin dated September 20, 1934, Gerschom Scholem defines the relation to law described in Kafka’s Trial as “the Nothing of Revelation” (*Nichts der Offenbarung*), intending this expression to name “a stage in which revelation does not signify [*bedeutet*], yet still affirms itself by the fact that it is in force. Where the wealth of significance is gone and what appears, reduced, so to speak, to the zero point of its own content, still does not disappear (and Revelation is something that appears), there the Nothing appears” (Benjamin and Scholem, *Briefwechsel*, 163). According to Scholem, a law that finds itself in such a condition is not absent but rather appears in the form of its unrealizability. “The students of whom you speak,” he objects to his friend, “are not students who have lost the Scripture ... but students who cannot decipher it” (*ibid.*, 147).” Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 34-35.

²⁷⁵ Agamben, Giorgio. *Karman. A Brief Treatise on Action, Guilt, and Gesture*, trans. by Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 81-82.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

try to conceive a *pure document* as an object whose documentary purpose (to reconstruct or prove a phenomenon) is suspended, “exposed” and “rendered inoperative”. A *pure document*, as a gesture, is “an activity or a potential that consists in deactivating human works and rendering them inoperative, and in this way, it opens them to a new, possible use.”²⁷⁷

3.

In this dissertation, ‘research in and through art’ has been regarded as one possible way to open up and envision such a ‘new use’ for documents. This research mode is capable of producing a resonance between the concepts of ‘artwork’ and ‘document’: the hypothesis of *pure documents*, seemingly so remote and paradoxical, may find a possible actualization right in that resonance. In the perspective of ‘research in and through art’, an object (for instance, a narrative artifact like a puppet play) may exist (and be used) at the same time as an artwork and as a document. The two modes of existence co-inhere in it. In order to clarify how I attempted to explore this resonance of artworks and documents within my artistic practice, I will refer to three pieces I have described before.

- I. The re-enactment of the puppet play about Simone Pianetti (*Il Vendicatore*), performed by Giacomo Onofrio in the village square where Pianetti killed some of his victims, was regarded by me and Andrea Morbio as the paramount occasion in which a document and an artwork could be embodied in the very same narrative artifact (the puppet play). This artifact, moreover, was to be presented in the very same location where the events it narrated (the killings) took place, about a century before. So, it seemed like a perfect occasion for a reflection on the status of documents, carried out through an artistic practice.

However, that re-enactment did not live up to our big expectations. It did not trigger any major reaction from the (scarce) local audience; it was not the occasion for a reconciliation – or a conflict – between past and present mindsets. It ended up being perceived ‘only’ as an artwork: a simple puppet show, devoid of the theoretical superstructure we wanted to impose on it.

- II. The performative workshops I organized in France and Italy, based on documents and records connected to the Augusto Masetti case, and aimed at enacting a trial that never took place, worked on multiple

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

levels. First, they functioned as an occasion to read, activate, *use* documents from the past in a way that they had never been used, therefore hinting at – and reflecting upon – their unexpressed political potentiality.

Second, the collective and unrehearsed performances that the workshop participants presented, functioned not only as a reflection on documents and historical records, not only as educational gatherings, but as live performances, artworks in their own right – narrating past events but also embodying and animating their traces in the here and now. For me, these performances were an example of the potential documents might express when used within an artistic practice, a use alternative to that of official, institutional validation procedures.

- III. The *The Variational Status* solo exhibition, which I presented in Bolzano and Reims in 2016-2017, was conceived in order to produce resonances between the concepts of ‘artwork’ and ‘document’. Such an attempt received a mixed reception. As an exhibition to be experienced alone, or in small groups, I received disparate feedbacks from different visitors. Some would tell me that they could follow the display as if it was a performance, in which artworks and documents were ceaselessly moving on and off the stage in a continuous narrative path. Some visitors told me that the exhibition engaged them insofar as it questioned the boundaries between artwork and document, which jointly inhabited the same narrative platform, throughout the exhibition space. Such comments were in line with my claim that art has the potentiality to propose an alternative use for documents: the comments described such a use. They also confirmed that my will to construct an exhibition as an overall narrative artifact, a ‘cutaway view’ of a puppet show exploded in space, actually went through.

However, other visitors told me that their experience of the exhibition was that of a disparate array of objects (puppets, props, reproductions of books, photographs, posters, etc.) that did not relate to each other very much, apart from a superficial aesthetic kinship and a common connection to a vague idea of ‘animation’. To them, the different objects did not come together as a single narrative artifact, but were displayed in a conceptual grey zone between ‘artwork’ and ‘non-artwork’, therefore rendering their visit an uncomfortable and unsatisfying experience. To them, the displayed objects were not situated in an aesthetic or conceptual framework that would allow them to be ‘read’ in a clear way.

I believe that all of these experiences were an essential part of the research project described in this dissertation. More than to propose a one-size-fits-all demonstration of the research hypotheses I started with, I believe that ‘research in and through art’ has the potentiality to present different results to different experiments, accounting for both attainments and failures – as it should be when one deals with a study anchored in practice, and even more, in an artistic practice.

Addenda

- Endplay. A recapitulation
- The Theatre of Sleepwalkers. Conversation with Andrea Cavalletti
- Glossary