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Comrade Fear: A Strategy for Shifting Truths

Alfredo Cramerotti

“This documentary will change your perception of media material. It will show you the true and unspoken reality of the media war. To comprehend the work you need to watch it in its entire length.”

The Subject

Thus begins Part 1 of the short film *Comrade Alfredo Neri*, produced in 2006 by the artist Khaled D. Ramadan and the writer of this article. The film is a constructed documentation, with real interviews and footage, about the life of Alfredo Neri, the spokesman of the Italian fraction of the Skinhead movement. The skinheads are affiliated with the neo-Nazis and are active in the EU countries as well as in the former East Block. Alfredo Neri is the representative of the Italian division of the skinheads, their international affairs and events; therefore, he is a sign of the state of fear that envelops civil society.

In the documentary, he explains how the movement changed its strategy to suit contemporary global political tendencies. Today, its members operate as invisibly as possible and infiltrate the political and economic structure in Europe and beyond, with the ultimate aim of ruling in an enlarged Europe. This escalation is unparalleled and constitutes a phenomenon involving individuals, organisations and parties operating within the democratic spectrum. They work underground and are directly affiliated with the neo-Nazi ideology. As Ramadan pointed

out in his text for the presentation of the film: “Is history about to repeat itself, changing only the outfit?”

The documentary is based on the question of psychological manipulation and reminds the viewer that appearance is not the same as identity. The authors met Alfredo Neri during his visit to Scandinavia, on his way to Helsingborg, Sweden, for the annual gathering of the neo-Nazi movement.

The Idea

In fact, the film is about visual manipulation; it aims to demonstrate how any form of moving image might lead us in or out of a state of perceived fear, affecting our emotions and shaping our opinions. The approach used in artistic productions that address this ubiquitous state of fear (while being inspired by what media practices have done for a long time but without reducing a complex issue down to twenty seconds of “news”), successfully participates in shaping our political worldviews, precisely through the use of an induced fear of the Other. This sort of creative propaganda, whether about neo-Nazi adepts, Islamic fundamentalists, gypsies, or other groups, poses a paradox for art practitioners themselves: How can an art-activist approach engage the issue critically while using the very mechanisms that actually produce what they intend to critique?

In other words: if the notion of truth has shifted from the realm of the news media to the realm of the arts, how can the latter retain its critical potential, while using when it uses exactly the same means as the former?

The cosmos of mainstream media has always been indulgent with its own instruments and aims. TV, radio and press, be they private or public, rarely embark on self-critique; rather they use their potential to further endorse ideologies, self-promotion and marketing campaigns, based on sponsors’ and spectators’ responses. Independent documentary making is also affected by what mainstream media want, and by what they exclude, as television is the principal funding system, and distribution platform, of the documentary format itself. Consequently, contemporary production of documentaries is basically more in line with the

notion of “documentary performance” as in the case of *Comrade Alfredo Neri*. Such an artistic approach is a reflection on media “art and industry,” and its position with regards to objectivity and independence. It is liable to be believed or not when distributed by mass media such as television, radio or even the Internet, but if it is shown in critical forums such as art biennials, socio-political exhibitions, political contexts, and so on, it is meant to be truer, or at least more reliable, than the “usual” media product. This results from the paradoxical nature of docu-art investigation.

The Context

The film *Comrade Alfredo Neri* goes beyond the Skinhead movement. It might be about how mainstream media in Europe, and in the West in general, have decided to ignore their own right-wing radicalism, which is on the march, and focus instead on other radical groups from around the world (from Islamic fundamentalists to Soviet nostalgia and EU-nomadic ethnicities). The use of an artistic approach in both film and documentary making can also be a powerful tool for exploring possible futures. It poses a very different set of challenges compared to making realistic documentary or straight drama. In his insightful piece “When Is a Documentary? Documentary as a Mode of Reception,” filmmaker and theorist Dirk Eitzen embarks on defining documentary by using receptive criteria, that is based on what viewers expect and actually conclude from it.

All documentaries—whether they are deemed in the end reliable or not—revolve around questions of trust. A documentary is any motion picture that can be subjected to the question “Might it be lying?”

A certain type of artistic film—like those “engaged” films which address socio-political issues—questions reality and the canon of documentary film itself. In docu-fiction films, where the documentarist approach is subsumed to elements of fictional creativity, Eitzen’s interrogative should be re-phrased, asking whether what is seen on the screen could actually have taken place. Following Eitzen’s reflection, a docu-artistic film is successful when it is able to combine both the appearance of historically accurate elements, and present believable situations of perceived alarm through a false lens, leading the audience to question the reality of

what they are seeing. Inverting the question, asking whether a documentary might be telling a possible truth rather than a possible lie, becomes relevant in defining the hybrid genre of constructed 'real' narrative, which primarily depends on the viewer believing its hypothesis. The genre of docu-artistic work aims at presenting a convincing story through the use of credible documentary tactics: the aim is usually to serve a purpose of a political, or activist nature.

In the above-mentioned cinematic context, the strategy of fear is used to induce a feeling of apprehension and menace—the same technique used in the world of news, which eventually shapes the world itself.

The Work

At every point in the research process for *Comrade Alfredo Neri*, the question we posed to ourselves was: who will watch this production, and who can believe this film? Precisely because the documentary portrait is effective thanks to the use of personal tales, it claims the truth of a particular position from which the world is considered; therefore, it increases questions about the reality one thinks one knows, who tells it, and why. One limitation in this form of narration is the need to justify whatever source is chosen to dramatic effect. In this case, we decided to rely on news footage and amateur photography. To generate a combination of impressions, the documents were carefully selected and manipulated to look real and made to relate to Alfredo's visual appearance. In the editing process, only footage suitable to convey one specific message was selected, while all other images were left out. The film had to be a statement about its projected world, just like a traditional documentary can refer to the actual world. Alfredo Neri did not learn his lines by heart; rather, to get the spontaneity and the feeling of a real interview, he immersed himself in the world of his character, learned every aspect of his life and role, and answered genuine interview questions. Alfredo Neri is not a real person.

The short film had to keep a balance between the real (the uneasiness towards the Other) and the projected (the inducement of fear), allowing the viewer to openly question what he or she is watching. A docu-art can challenge traditional documentary's truth-mechanisms,

without having to actually surrender to them. It gives the audience the confidence to question—through the film narrative—the way things are presented and to wonder, in fact, if they should be taken for granted. Fear included.

The Presentation

Comrade Alfredo Neri is screened as part of a documentary project, in a cinematic space or an auditorium. The moving image is presented as Part 1, right after Khaled Ramadan usually lectures about the video and its content, the neo-Nazi ideology and how it is growing and marching around the Western world, especially in Europe, without being detected by mainstream media.

The question lying beneath the multiple formats of presentation is: How does the Western media regard the Skinhead movement and the neo-Nazi ideology? Nationalistic, transversal, fragmented? According to the “culture of fear” theory, which includes thinkers like Frank Furedi, Noam Chomsky and Barry Glassner, to name but a few, a universal sense of fearfulness pre-exists and fortifies the daily inducement to be afraid by media and politicians, which is to say, they might strengthen the sense of imminent menace, but do not constitute its cultural production. Furedi in particular extends the charge of fear-inducement to anti-establishment voices, which he considers as complicit in the exploitation of fears (ecological catastrophe, biopolitics, cultural dominance) as those in charge, who more commonly benefit from the culture of fear.

Nevertheless, docu-art films, and their forms of presentation, are dealing directly with the importance—and the making—of history and public memory, and with the subjectivity of those who witnessed or participated in that history. Here the project stretches to its limits. Among the audience usually the author of this article sits unnoticed. He is the artist who plays the role of Alfredo Neri, the official spokesman of the Skinhead movement. After fifteen to twenty minutes of lecture, Khaled starts taking questions from the audience, including Alfredo who enquires about the documentary and the purposes behind it. After a while he is asked to come out, in front of the audience, and they both reveal the nature, making, and motivations of the film, which in reality is a “mockumentary.” The audience expects Part 2 to come after the

debate; instead, the audience itself becomes Part 2, the discussion and the sparking of stimuli injected by the film (Part 1). Audience members usually ask a lot of questions, and want to be more persuaded by the project, because it is perceived either as ethically disturbing (since it can be read as giving credit to right-wing extremism for its strategy), or creatively misleading (since it is not clear if the film is about extremism, or rather the media representation of it). Strong criticism of the film has undoubtedly created more interest in it, an effect of the deployment of what filmmaker and critic John Grierson called the “creative treatment of actuality.” Shaping and treating 'actuality' in order to arrange those observations to reveal the 'real', typically generates a broad range of questions surrounding actuality itself.

The Strategy

How might the above-mentioned structure of lecture-screening-performance contribute to a critical transformation of the common approach to moving images?

An artist's response to the increasingly ubiquitous state of fear, which pervades our lives, might take different directions. In the case of film and documentary making, the critical potential lies in the subversion of its cinematic elements of construction—and this causes a paradox in the artistic practice: embracing the supposed objectivity as a formal instrument to deliver a highly subjective view is exactly the mechanism used by media and politicians to deliver the right amount of fear, indispensable to ensure seamless policy-making. Today we live in a situation where we “expect the unexpected,” where a collective anxiety about imminent threats and catastrophes is absorbed daily through media and politics (but not exclusively) and is successfully replacing the cold war with a sort of cold panic. Fear establishes itself as a technique. Nevertheless, it has to be taken as an opportunity. That's the renegotiation part, which will constantly be necessary, case-by-case, to appropriate the tools and attempt to use them the other way round. The presentation format we have just exposed underlines, for instance, the importance of a culture of presence (where the discussion is taking place) as opposed to one of absence (from where opinions are formed, usually the distance of TV), and the need to instigate, through “misleading” and “unethical” content, self-interrogation about what is experienced through moving images. These should be exposed as campaigns of

fear that, in time, have changed our actions and thoughts.

How can the fear approach embodied in the short film be renegotiated into a reflection on the state of fear?

First, in the not-absolutism of film itself: it is never shown by itself without an introduction, and more importantly, without the final discussion and “performance.” Secondly, in what might be called the “witnessing” process: to watch a film about a political or social issue, made by an artist, documentary or media maker, is quite different from witnessing the same event in the form of participation (Part 2) and being able to actually recognize the fact that real people are actors, too, and not only vice-versa.

The limit to this kind of approach lies, obviously, in the possibility of a large distribution of the project and its strategy: a self-contained film can be burnt on DVD, sent by post or via the Internet, screened everywhere and whenever possible, while a project requiring a performance is slow, physical, and expensive because it involves an organizational aspect, and presupposes an active audience that actually shows up and participates in the event.

One thing is clear: the viewer-witnesses become more aware of the mechanisms of art and media strategies, since they are clearly unveiled in the discussion session. A luxury, in the age of electronic communication. Or, maybe, an option to consider.