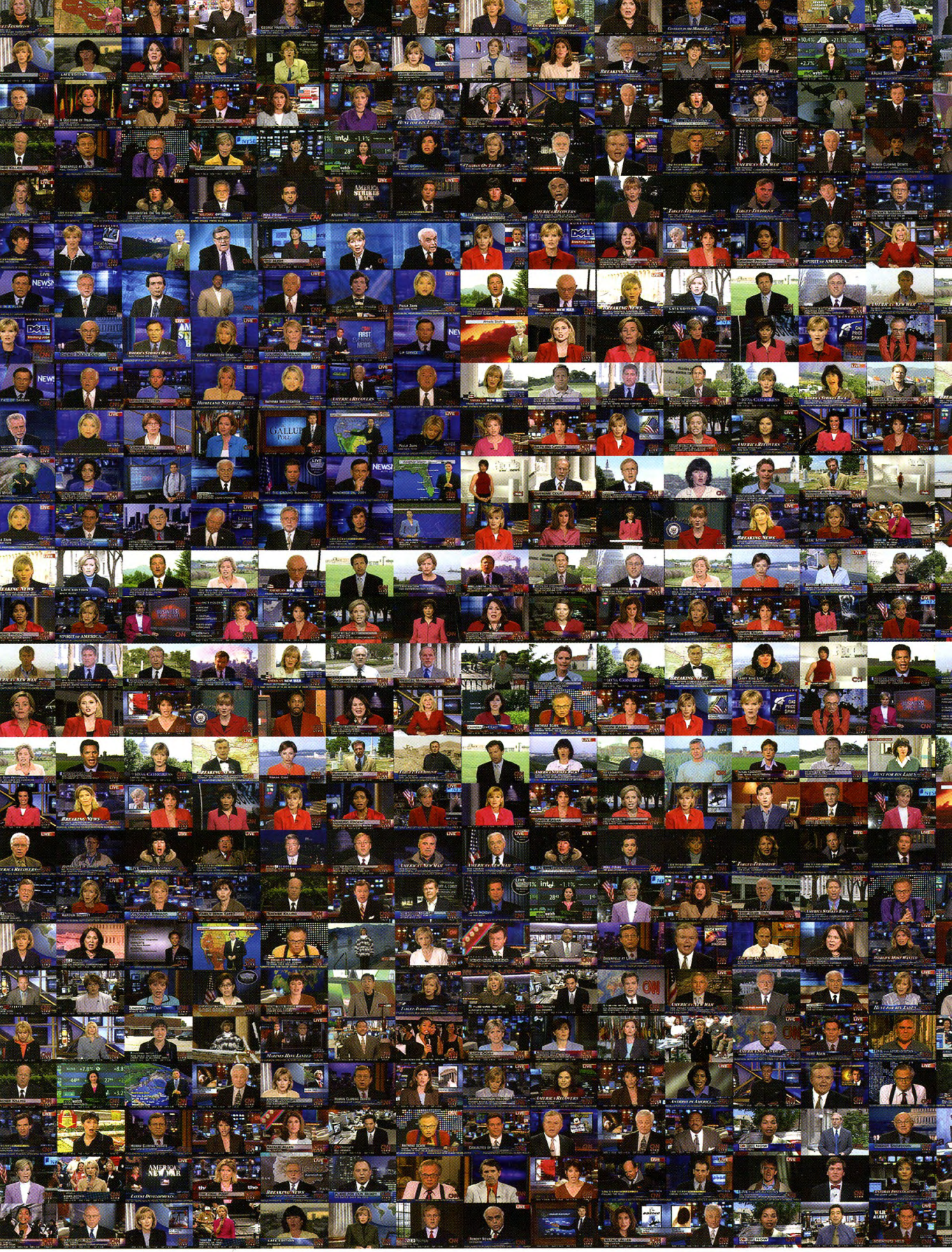

Omer Fast, *CNN Concatenated*, 2002, single-channel SD video, 18min. Poster made for 'Downtown for Democracy', 2004. Courtesy the artist, gb agency, Paris, Postmasters, New York and Arratia, Beer, Berlin

Omer Fast: When Images Lie... About the Fictionality of Documents – Maria Muhle

Oh my God, they use a history that repeats itself...
– Anonymous

It is remarkable that in one way or another, more or less directly, the videos of Omer Fast all seem to deal with key historico-political topics: from the Shoah in *Spielberg's List* (2003) to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in *Take a Deep Breath* (2008) and the Iraq war in *The Casting* (2007). Even his more 'intimate' work, *De Grote Boodschap* (*The Big Message*, 2007), which looks at life within four private rooms in an apartment building in the Netherlands, touches upon questions of racism and fear in times of the 'war on terror'. But, crucially, rather than dealing with these topics, Fast adopts them as a foil against which to investigate the status of the image, and does so in a very peculiar way: his work doesn't so much address a specific historical situation, its internal tensions and its mediation by images, but instead tackles the moral issue of what images can or cannot make visible. His works propose an investigation that takes as both its focus and it starting point images understood as things, that is, images in their materiality, interfering in real life, influencing it, even transforming it. And, by addressing the image in its materiality, as an object of the world – and not as a reflection or representation of it – Fast undermines the distinction between the factual and the fictional, and reveals the equally artificial nature of both. In this sense, Fast's work exemplarily follows Jacques Rancière's dictum that 'writing history and writing stories come under the same regîme of truth', so that, in order to properly understand it, we as viewers must go beyond the distinction between the truth told by history and the lies told by stories, beyond the hierarchical order established between fact and fiction.[1]

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Despite initial appearances, Fast does not make videos about political issues: *Spielberg's List*, rather than being about the Shoah, is about the social and political impact of a fictional narrative – Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* (1993) – and the private lives of those who took part in its filming. The video shows interviews of the extras of Spielberg's film without indicating whether the Polish actors are telling stories about the fictional reality of the movie or the historical reality of the 1940s. Only slowly does the spectator realise that both levels intertwine, that those speaking don't make a clear distinction between the two experiences: they speak about the horrors of war and what is staged in the film, blurring the 'correct' attribution of speaking positions. The witnesses we see are extras from Spielberg's film, and, even though they mix their 'real' memories of the German occupation with those of the shooting of the film, none of them was ever detained in a concentration camp, and none of them is thus 'legîtimised' to speak about something they witnessed only in fiction or stories (not in history); their experiences are not 'authentic' in relation to the historical events. By showing their testimonies, Fast subverts the logic of the witnessing itself.[2]

1 Jacques Rancière, 'The Partition of the Sensible', *The Politics of Aesthetics* (trans. Gabriel Rockhill), London and New York: Continuum, 2004, p.38. And he continues: 'This has nothing to do with a thesis on the reality or unreality of things.'

Similarly, *The Casting* is not a denunciation of the situation in Iraq following the US invasion, but, again, a reflection on the construction of specific narratives and their effects. This is made explicit towards the end of the video, when Fast himself explains that he is interested in 'the way that experiences turn into memory, and the way memories become stories, mediated, they become recorded and broadcasted and things like this'. But as we later realise, this sentence is a montage of film shavings spliced together – a sentence constructed with words that are taken from other sentences. By using this technique of montage to render his own explanation unreal, Fast creates a parallel between the subversion of the logic of witnessing and the subversion of his own position as author, questioning his entitlement to adopt a transcendent position, to place himself on a higher level from which he is able to explain to the actor he is casting – and therefore to the spectator – what the work is about. The director's comments, then, acquire the same status of indiscernability as the words of the witness, positioned between fiction and life, between truth and lie.

Omer Fast, *Spielberg's List*, 2003, two-channel SD video, 65min. Photographs taken by an extra during production of *Schindler's List* in 1993. Courtesy the artist, gb agency, Paris, Postmasters, New York and Arratia, Beer, Berlin

At stake in these videos is the circulation of stories and images in their materiality and the effects this has. On the one hand Fast offers a genealogy of this circulation by investigating how images are produced and what status they have – how experiences become memories, that is, mental images, and what kind of experiences produce 'true' images. On the other, he asks what kind of effects they create as a result of different registration and reproduction techniques. In a way, his work could be characterised as a technical-aesthetic investigation, one which asks what kind of medium the image is, and what happens to the image once it is transferred from one *dispositif* to another. But, even though Fast says that he does not look for the 'political angle' in his work – meaning that he does not understand his work as a critique of actual political events – there is another fundamental aspect to the videos that might be deemed political, and that is their questioning of the 'truth' of the image by referring it back to the status of reality itself. How experiences turn into memory and how these memories, stories or images are put back into circulation are political issues, dealing directly with the status of reality in its potentiality, affected by history, stories, images and words.

Fast explores these conditions of transformation through a strategy that is widespread in recent contemporary art: the documentation of reality through re-enactment, that is, though fictionalisation. In an interview with the artist, Sven Lütticken relates this artistic strategy to the non-artistic re-enactments of historical battles, and compares it to the *Nachleben* of nineteenth-century historicism: re-enactment is 'historicism set in motion'.[3] He continues by pointing to the peculiar temporality of re-enactment, since in it 'dramatic time is short-circuited with historical time', the ambiguous present of re-enactment encountering the apparently necessary past of re-enacted historical facts.[4] Re-enactment, one could say with Walter Benjamin, is the 'image ... wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation'.[5]

Following Benjamin's path, re-enactment is a way of 'quoting without quotation marks', something that is not to be said but simply shown, a 'literary montage'. Or, in other words, a *documentary montage* that, as Fast says in the interview, uses images and sequences as material objects, *objets trouvés* or ready-mades. But the crucial difference between Benjamin's approach – where found objects ('rags, litter') equal found footage – and Fast's own lies in what he adds to the documentary montage: Fast's work employs a form of narration that does not only arise from the images and their interconnection or juxtaposition, but is purposely produced in the form of an articulation and a story by him. Re-enactment is thus not the arbitrary combination of images, things and significations in a 'constellation like a flash of lightning', neither is it the pure

2 The film is also an important addition to ongoing discussions about the representation of the Shoah, and the question about the possibility of witnessing. For further reading on the status of images of the concentration camps, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2004; as well as Gérard Wajman and Elisabeth Pagnoux's response to Didi-Huberman's text on the exhibition 'Mémoires des camps' (Hôtel de Sully, Paris, 2001) in *Les Temps Modernes* (LVI, no.613, 2001). On the question of the possibility of representing an event such as the Shoah, see Jacques Rancière: 'Are Some Things Unrepresentable?', *The Future of the Image* (trans. Gregory Elliot), London and New York: Verso, 2007, pp.109—38. And regarding the impossibility of witnessing, see Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen), New York: Zone Books, 1999.

3 Interview with Sven Lütticken, in Matthias Michalka (ed.), *Omer Fast: The Casting*, Vienna and Cologne: MUMOK and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008, p.34.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [written 1927—40, published 1982] (trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin), Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press, 1999, N2a,3, p.462.

Steven Spielberg

VIRGINIA GAZETTE.

Omer Fast, *Godville*, 2005, two-channel SD video, 51min. Production photographs taken in Colonial Williamsburg. Courtesy the artist, gb agency, Paris, Postmasters, New York and Arratia, Beer, Berlin

imitation of reality in (living) images. It is the reproduction of the meaning of an action or event and its translation into the present: its re-actualisation, in the same way Aristotle says that art imitates nature not by means of copying it but by reproducing its sense.

The strategy of re-enactment is present in two forms. In the first place, Fast adopts it as a theme. This is especially the case in *Godville* (2005), where re-enactors of the Colonial Williamsburg living-history museum in Virginia describe their eighteenth-century characters' lives in a way that makes them interchangeable with their actual lives; and, in a broader sense, in *Spielberg's List*, where the testimonies of the extras from Spielberg's film blur the difference between what happened in the 1940s and what happened in the early 1990s. But, Fast also adopts these strategies for his own film-making: in this respect *The Casting* is the re-enactment of the memories of an actor-soldier by other actors through tableaux vivants; *Take a Deep Breath* is the re-enactment of the imaginary filming of an impossible real event. Whereas *Spielberg's List* is set in the reality that the artist shares with the spectator – i.e. in the reality of a traditional documentation that differentiates between narrated events and narration through voice-over – Fast's more recent works seem to abandon this distinction and locate themselves more explicitly in the interstice between fact and fiction. And while *Spielberg's List* points at the indistinction between fact and fiction through the witness accounts of the extras, and thereby maintains some traditional documentary features, the more recent works have abandoned those features and become instead fictional documents.

This shift is reflected in the videos, which now expose their own making. In *The Casting*, for instance, the actual casting of an actor functions as a *dispositif* from which the story unfolds and in which the material nature of Fast's work is reflected. The video, a four-channel projection on both sides of a screen, reflects the process of construction of images and stories through improvised memories from a US soldier's past experiences. On one side of the screen the spectator sees the casting (by Fast) of an actor for the soldier's role. The uncertainty about whether he is an actor or a real soldier is resolved when he is asked to improvise the story of a soldier who shot a young Iraqi by accident, and a traumatic affair he had with a self-harming German girl while stationed in Bavaria. The actor switches constantly from one story to the other. On the other side of the screen, different actors performing *tableaux vivants* accompany his narration, documenting the events in sync with the passages from one story to the other. The stories are constructed around the same elements: a road in Bavaria, another in Iraq; the violence of war and that of the girl on herself; the girl's car that stops after going off the road and the tank that stops in front of the attack; the red-haired German girl and the Iraqi woman with blood all over her face. They are almost parallel stories of different modes of experiencing complete strangeness: the strangeness of the foreign soldier, the strangeness of war and the strangeness of the girl's self-harming tendencies. Through the common elements, the two stories are interwoven and the passages are dissimulated in the narration of the soldier, who passes from a cold night in Bavaria, when the girl takes the soldier home on Christmas Eve, to the hot, sticky night in Iraq, when the soldiers get out of the plane. As in David Lynch's film aesthetics, one story collapses into the other and the tableaux vivants follow the narration with a slight delay, obliging the spectator to catch up. (Besides this weaving together of the two stories, another, more subtle montage is at play in Fast's video at different moments – for example, when he explains his own intentions, or when the soldier tells about the self-harming girl. At these moments, the narration is interspersed with short cuts that seem to glue together bits of images and words. Like in an old-school ransom letter, Fast cuts words out of the film, and puts them together in order to construct a story, to invent an 'untruth'. By doing so, he fictionalises the most 'realistic' documentary practice there is: the interview.)

As in the rest of his work, documentary techniques are employed only to be undermined: the apparently truthful documents of the Iraqi situation, or the photographs or vignettes of the (more-or-less quotidian) incident on the road are not to be trusted, and the tableau vivant is exposed as the lying image par excellence. It doesn't fix a real event in time but is time itself, and therefore cannot claim the neutrality of technical reproduction. There is no truth or lie, there are only stories made out of words and images that are linked together by a narration whose truth status is at best uncertain. The improvisations of the actor meet the improvisations of the artist and blur any evidence that could be taken as criteria to distinguish fact from fiction.

In a recent book, Hito Steyerl discussed what she calls the 'uncertainty principle', or the uncertain relation between representation and truth, as the fundamental determination of modern documentary practice: 'The perpetual disbelief, the gnawing uncertainty about whether what we see is true, faithful to reality or factual, accompany documentary images as their shadow. This doubt is not a deficiency ... but the basic attribute of contemporary documentary images.'[6] To exemplify this principle Steyerl uses images from the war in Iraq taken with a mobile phone: these are documentary images, documents of war, even though they only show spots of light in the dark. These images are backed by their technical origin, which renders them neutral and dead, but since they do not show anything recognisable, they could actually show anything.[7] This radical uncertainty is reflected in Fast's works, but not through the blurriness of the images. On the contrary, it is constructed through a delicate and subtle work of montage, of slight variations introduced between the lines, of cutting and putting together different layers of historical, filmic or artistic reality, and therefore through a genealogy of the image.

top and middle
Omer Fast, *The Casting*, 2007, 4 channels, 35mm transferred to SD video, 14min. Production photographs by Nicholas Trikonis

bottom
Omer Fast, *The Casting*, 2007, 4 channels, 35mm transferred to SD video, 14min, still. Camera by Lisa Wiegand. All images courtesy the artist, gb agency, Paris, Postmasters, New York and Arratia, Beer, Berlin

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In *The Casting*, the genealogy of the image relies on another, quasi-anthropological investigation into how fictions can become memories and 'falsify' personal experiences – an investigation which also is at the core of *Spielberg's List*. This two-channel video explores the genesis of Spielberg's Hollywood production about the historic events that took place in Kraków and the adjacent concentration camp of Płaszów. Fast interviews the Polish extras, visits the film locations and asks people about the economic impact of the making of the film (the production company became the most important employer in the city during the shooting). The interviews are interwoven with a few of the most memorable images of the movie (the smoke of the candle in the first shot recalling the smoke coming out of the crematoriums in the extermination camps; the girl in the red dress...), images of Kraków and the locations, such as the still-intact reconstructed camp.

Fast's video thus reflects on a triple reality that is constantly being woven together: the historic reality (1943), the reality of Spielberg's film (1993) and the reality of Fast's video (2003), the three of which merge into a zone of indiscernability. The interviewees mix their memories of the filming process with stories of the Nazi occupation, without even seeming to notice. The first level of historic reality seems to be absent from Fast's video, or at least in terms of the images. There are no 'authentic' sites left, the remnants of the Nazi terror are fictions, and both the silhouette of the camp and the scenery of barbed-wire covered by snow – which recalls classical documentaries on concentration camps like Alain Resnais's *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955) – seem part of the film set. The memories are also fake: an old lady's haunting account of her being loaded along with the other prisoners onto trucks and beaten up by the SS officer refers to her part in the film; the 'Semitic features' mentioned by the witnesses are what the film team were looking for in the extras. However, the 'selections' made by the film crew for the casting reverberate strangely in this context.

Fast's video mimics the pseudo-documentary style of Spielberg's production (the black-and-white footage disrupted by the image of the girl in red crossing the frame on her way to the camp), but it does so *en passant*. The problem is not Spielberg, nor Hollywood; the actual question is that of the reality at stake in Fast's own video, which is the documentation of a fiction of a reality – a reality in which is inscribed the problem of its own representability. Through slight variations in the subtitles on the left and right projections, Fast introduces a parallelism based on the homonymy of the word 'to shoot': to shoot someone, to shoot a film. The factories become the film set, the machine gun becomes the camera, taking people becomes taking pictures, Amon Goth becomes Spielberg. To make a film (or to shoot a movie) about a concentration camp is thus a violent act that has to deal with a reality that withdraws from representation. The search for authenticity, for historical details (the photocopies of the 'authentic' lists) or for a 'true' image condemns Spielberg's attempt to failure. The faithful reconstruction of the scenery and the attempt to reach authenticity produce, as Fast shows, perverse

6 Hito Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit*, Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2008, p.9. Author's translation.
7 The most striking and politically scandalous example of this are the images presented at the United Nations by US Secretary of State Colin L. Powell in February 2003 to justify the intervention in Iraq: images that supposedly showed the sites where weapons of mass destruction were being made, but which were false.

effects on reality.[8] The question *Spielberg's List* raises is thus not the question of the admissibility of the representation, but of how the material reality of the film – its settings, the extras and the fact that the production employed many people in Kraków – interfered with the everyday reality of the city. The filmic reality gains its own reality that is documented by Fast: the question thus is what this becoming real of a filmic reality does to the historic reality.[9]

In the film *The Last Bolshevik* (1992) about the Russian filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin, Chris Marker answers this question beautifully: there is no 'real' document. The image of the storming of the Winter Palace in 1917 reproduced in almost every book on the history of the Russian Revolution is not a picture taken during the storming, but during its re-enactment in 1927 for Sergei Eisenstein's *October*. As Marker puts it, this is 'the biggest lie in the history of images'. Therefore history and stories, documentary images and staged images, documentary interviews and staged or invented dialogues are each part of the same regime of truth – a regime of truth that does not aim at the (impossible) mimetic reproduction of reality but at the problematisation of the notion of reality itself.

The strategies of re-enactment and the logic of the documentary adopted and analysed in Fast's videos are necessarily interwoven with the question of realism – they could even be considered forms of '(hyper-)realism'. It is remarkable how topical realism has become in recent years.[10] Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that the term seems able to tackle the question of how art can be critical or political: since realist art refers to a reality that is necessarily structured in political terms, realistic representation is as such political. This nonetheless implies a notion of representation that draws a clear dividing line between facts (to be represented) and images, words or fictions (that should truthfully represent these facts). The criteria of realistic representation would thus be the truthfulness of its image vis-à-vis its referent. For an analysis of works such as Fast's, however, where the focus is on the indistinction between fact and fiction or fiction and life, this model does not work. According to Rancière, representation is not to be understood as the regulation of the truthfulness of the mirroring of reality into artistic forms, but as the hierarchical system of regulations of what has to be shown and how. To overcome representation therefore means to overcome this hierarchy.

Realism has to be understood beyond the traditional oppositions between experience and abstraction, naturalness and artificiality, or reality and fiction, as an aesthetic power of disruption of representations, significations or the symbolic order. It opens up an aesthetic space where images, words and things unfold their immanent power to signify. *Spielberg's List* is not the documentation of a Hollywood film and its critique, but the documentation of the disrupting power of fictions that materialise into things, *dispositifs*, constructions and memories of history that haven't been experienced. I would like to call this an 'aesthetic realism' that emphasises the impossibility to distinguish between fiction and reality. Aesthetic realism is founded on the disruption of techniques of representation, both political and aesthetic, which inscribe the represented within a set of constraints. It is not determined by the mimetic fidelity to the represented object, but instead refers to reality in a way that exposes it to processes of stylisation and fictionalisation. Consequently, realism and its strategies – such as re-enactment or documentary – emphasise a constitutively ambiguous relation to the notion of reality – an ambiguity that is inherent to the notion of reality itself. This is what is at stake in Fast's work: he not only blurs the documentarian claim to truth and the fictional limitation to untruth, but he shows the absurd nature of this partition and its presupposition of a clear, hierarchical distinction between facts and fictions, fictions and life, reality and representation.

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8 In contrast, Claude Lanzmann begins his documentary *Shoah* (1985) in the present, showing the empty location of the camp, and thus making it possible to 'hear' the witnessing of the old man in the clearance of Chelmo who brings past and present together not by reproducing or imitating the past in the present, but by addressing the past as a certain present, as a 'reality'.

9 Another example is the film *Retour en Normandie* by Nicolas Philibert (2006), where the director interviews the inhabitants of a village in Normandy where René Allio's film *Moi, Pierre Rivière, ayant égorgé ma mere, ma soeur, mon frère* was shot in 1975. Philibert uses the same strategy as Fast in *Spielberg's List*, by investigating not Rivière's actual assassination of his family, but the effects the film and had on the villagers who took part in it.

10 See, for example, the edition of *Artforum* on 'Realism and Courbet', in May 2008. On a smaller but very interesting scale, see the Realism Working Group at the Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main: http://realismworkingroup.wordpress.com (last accessed on 4 November 2008).