Imagination: Relational documents
Documents can be very talkative.¹
Arlette Farge

The use of archival footage in documentary films brings forth questions of referentiality, temporality, and materiality. Most obviously, archival documents such as personal photographs or institutionally commissioned films offer documentaries a referential connection to a past moment. This evidentiary quality of documents is then foregrounded, appropriated, or re-appropriated in the representation of a past event in a documentary work. Perhaps most interestingly, documents in documentary films do not necessarily offer a cohesive view of the past, but institute cuts, intervals, and changing perspectives to the documentary composition. This raises a number of questions that steer the present discussion toward an articulation of documentary imagination. Namely, how are the historical dimensions of the appropriated documents played out in documentary films? Is the past they refer to dynamic, or sealed in irrevocable immobility? How is the material specificity of the documents – including the time of their making and viewing – negotiated in documentary films?

The two documentaries discussed in the following chapters – Kanerva Cederström’s Two Uncles (1991) and Chris Marker’s The Last Bolshevik (1993) – were made at a time that, on the one hand, witnessed an increase in the use of archival documents and, on the other, saw the documentary reconsider its relationship to fiction. Writing on the cusp of the moment, Linda Williams observes that documentaries from this period engage with a “newer, more contingent, relative, postmodern truth,”² instead of pursuing a single, unitary truth. Concurrent to the discourse of simulacras in critical theory and the ubiquity of electronic image manipulation, the documentary’s referential relationship to history came under scrutiny and encouraged filmmakers to weigh the ideologies and circumstances of different, competing truths in their stylistic choices. This resulted in explicit documentary interventions in established truths about the past – a feature Williams finds particularly remarkable in the “new documentary.” Her prime example is Errol Morris’s celebrated The Thin Blue Line (USA 1988) and the ways in which the documentary approaches the trauma of an inaccessible past and
So ul of the Documentary intervenes in the course of historical events. *The Thin Blue Line* is driven by a desire to inaugurate a “new truth” that will ultimately set a convicted man free, but it is simultaneously very conscious of the manipulations involved in attempts to fulfill that desire. The film dramatizes a myriad of truth claims in striking film-noirish re-enactments of the inaccessible murder and thus foregrounds the different views on what took place on the night a police officer was gunned down in Dallas.

According to Morris, the function of the dramatic style of the film is “to take you into the mystery and drama of what people are saying and thinking. It’s expressionistic rather than realistic. It works in service of ideas rather than facts.” Morris’s documentary drama intervenes in the events by weighing what people think they saw, what they believed might have happened. This, according to Williams, inaugurates a documentary modality that deploys conflicting reverberations of the past in order to reveal the seduction of lies in the present.

*Two Uncles* and *The Last Bolshevik* are equally invested in convoluted layers of history and contingent truths. The first addresses the disappearance of the filmmaker’s uncle in World War Two and the second considers the life of the forgotten Soviet filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin. Both documentaries rely on the strong authorial presence of the filmmakers and border on fiction in their style. What distinguishes the two films from Morris’s canonical piece is the central position of archival documents and their use. Whereas the re-enactments of the murder in *The Thin Blue Line* make up for the impossibility of representing the murder itself, *Two Uncles* and *The Last Bolshevik* are less interested in compensating for the impossibility of representation with dramatic strategies. Rather than approaching the past as unattainable, they frame it as immanent to the archival documents themselves. Instead of activating resonances across a fundamental gap, the documentaries make the documents speak a past that is immanent to them. This is not the referential past of a life lived, but a lively intensity that accrues the archival with an indeterminate sense of time unfolding.

*Two Uncles* and *The Last Bolshevik* work with photographs, illustrations, film stills, feature film fragments, and period footage. Ultimately, though, both documentaries bend investments in the evidentiary qualities of these documents into explorations in embedded layers of time. This takes place within dispositions of remembering. Both documentaries approach their documents with first person narrators who embody a particular curiosity towards the images. They wonder and remember with the documents, and allow themselves to be taken beyond what is readily available in them. Put differently, the dispositions of remembering frame the archival documents
in ways that enable the two films to imagine in the present. Here, remembering is less about tracing the true outlines of the two individuals and more about engaging with past images in order to find surprising beginnings.

These beginnings turn into cinematic life stories; ventures in the possible twists and turns in the lives of the two men. Most importantly, instead of working to reveal the mysterious lives hidden behind the archival documents, the documentaries invest in finding ways for the two men to live on in cinema. This sets the two documentaries apart from, for example, the recent *Finding Vivian Maier* (John Maloof & Charlie Siskel, USA 2013) – a documentary that reconstitutes the life of a reclusive nanny through the photographs she took during her lifetime. In *Finding Vivian Maier*, the surprise discovery of her negatives at an auction leads to an expository narrative of the solitary person behind the photographs, whereas in *Two Uncles* and *The Last Bolshevik* the archival documents lead to stories where the lives of the two men acquire imaginary qualities.6

Tapping into the underpinning layers of the documents, the two documentaries replace the poetics of reconstitution with a focus on the incipient relationality of archival documents. By working with what is surprising and emergent in the documents, the films intervene in history by fashioning a cinematic lifeline for those who were not known and who are no longer here to be known. The *more-than-referential* is the force and content of these imaginations. In this realm, according to the narrator of *The Last Bolshevik*, “miracles are only one breath away from normality.”