

WEAPONS OF NARRATION

Reshaping history for the present

MA Thesis

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“They were capable of choosing the right words, seizing situations, taking the gravity of the moment and filling it with the imminent event, bringing it into the present moment. Mad, of course, but skilful too.”¹

– Gert from-the-Well in Q

1 Luther Blissett, Q, (London: Arrow, 2000), 189.

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Preface

In 2014, I started my research for a series of photographs and a short film addressing nostalgia surrounding the milk production industry in the Netherlands. I distrusted the idealised image in my mind that was shaped by television commercials, milk cartons and other dairy packages. In a rather scattered research approach, I made a trip to automated dairy farms, visited a company that develops agricultural technology, held an interview with the Research and Development department of a leading milk company and conducted interviews with my aunt, uncle and mother who had all grown up on a Dutch dairy farm. Aside from these visits, I studied the portrayal of the Dutch countryside from the Second World War to the present. I noticed that for consumers—despite technological breakthroughs and a total transformation of the industry—the romantic image of perfectly clean cows on a bright green meadow was still perfectly intact. There were no milking robots in their imagined sight; life on a farm could still be seen as an isolated “life with nature,” devoid of financial or political entanglements. I learned that the vice grip of the free market, the fragile position of farmers, the environmental impossibility of producing on such a scale was not enough to break the nostalgic image. The Dutch narrative of a country of farmers and of a milk and cheese consuming nation is apparently strong enough to keep all the structural changes of the past 70 years out of the national image of the industry. I started wondering if an alternative, politicised narrative of industrial modernisation would be able to produce the same affect of belonging.

It is through this research that I became interested in the political potential of “myths” or narratives. In this thesis, I will take off from my own practice to research what empowering and critical narratives are effective for thinking and feeling politically in the present. How can historical events be seen as a source for new imaginative narratives? And what artistic strategies can be used by artists to achieve new forces of, and uses for, imagination?

In this thesis, I have used three key writers to navigate these questions. Georges Bataille is introduced in chapter one to first unpack how attractive narratives can eventually transform into naturalised hegemonic thinking and what the political consequences of this process are. In chapter two, literary theorist Lauren Berlant and her work on political affect is employed to think through how individuals feel through historical narratives in ways that can have an empowering function in our daily life. She elaborates how a deeper connection to history can change our perception of the present that we are living in, such that the political dimensions of our individual lives might be realised.

To think about how historical narratives can critically engage with the present, Lauren Berlant’s writing is put into critical parallel with the writing practices of the Wu Ming Foundation, an Italian collective. As artistic actors in the anti-globalisation movement around the turn of the 21st century, they have been experimenting with writing new historical myths for progressive left wing movements.

The aim of this research is to find new strategies of narration in an artistic practice that tries to diversify and complicate stories that we have learned from corporations and from congealed politics. This thesis researches how a newly-created but deeply-rooted connection to history can help us in becoming aware of our historical present. Ultimately, the aim is to realise how our current position in the present and our understanding of the present condition is not one that has been created out of (bad) luck or by natural force, but is a carefully crafted present that can be reshaped and recreated by imagination.

Introduction

Questioning and shuffling isolated events

Every day of our lives we are being bombarded by myths and fantasies that aim to make realist claims on the present. Companies use them to sell their products, politicians use them to promote their ideas and we use them daily in communication. In a time in which the “grand narratives” are supposed to have left the world stage, imagination and invented myths continue to play a huge role in our lives. Radical right political movements are looking for arguments in the history of nation-states with the aim of (re)shaping a homogeneous society. Food producers wrap their products in nostalgic packaging, and cheaply produced mass-furniture is made to look like it has been found in a forgotten attic. In this thesis, I will explore how mythical and imagined narratives can be used to introduce new forms of political imagination. To untangle this question, we will deal with different strategies for imagination and look at what factors complicate the writing of new political narratives. A common critique of nostalgia and the use of myths in politics is just to abandon them and find ways of dealing with politics that make stronger claims to scientific rationality. After the fall of the Soviet Union, all the grand political narratives and belief structures had supposedly failed or were crumbling down. Francis Fukuyama lamented history to be over and ideology and imagination had to be replaced with economic calculation, reducing the concept of organised politics to be focused upon the endless solving of technical problems i.e. rational management.²

However, the growing popularity of more outspoken conservative and progressive politics that are not primarily interested in economic rationality reveals how different imaginations for the future (and present) still play a vital role in politics. In the case of governments and companies in power, ideology is often concealed by referring to vital economic growth and the “natural” processes of supply and demand. This naturalisation and rationalisation of economics and science hides the political and material aspects from view while the economised “bottom line” is still considered the strongest argument in debates about climate change, refugees or health issues. This validation of economic reasoning through naturalisation hides ongoing crises that are inherent to the capitalist system: crisis on the human body and the natural environment, and crises in the philosophy of the system itself (the fact that market-driven economies need public money to survive).

In the edited interview “Questions of Method,” Michel Foucault explains his strategy of “eventalisation” as a way to dismantle self-evident narratives. Foucault describes eventalisation as a method of extracting a singular event to contest prevailing historical narratives.³ Following the singled-out event and the breaking

2 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” *The National Interest*, summer 1989.

3 Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller ed. *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 76.

up of self-evident ideas, eventalisation makes the creation of new connections possible. Foucault uses the event as a critical tool in his research, and stresses the necessity of context when dealing with the event:

“Does this mean that one regards the singularity one is analyzing simply as a fact to be registered, a reasonless break in an inert continuum? Clearly not, since that would amount to treating continuity as a self-sufficient reality which carries its own *raison d'être* within itself.”⁴

Foucault sees the event as a critical tool in his research and—in *Questions of Method*—does not speak of instances where the event is not critically contextualised. I would like to argue that whenever this context is not provided, the singled out event and strategies of eventalisation work to reinstate self-evident narratives and hide the “self-sufficient reality which carries its own *raison d'être*.” Without critically informed context, processes of eventalisation, or the breaking up of the environment into smaller fragments in time and space, can hide the underlying environment of systemic crisis. One single natural disaster cannot be deduced back to climate change as a whole, and thus can create the opportunity for other stories of origin to be created (technical failures, chance). The event remains in the present and is not connected to a longer history or trend. The banking crisis of 2008 did not become a signifier for the inherent flaws in capitalist logic. We're just glad it's over, sort of.

Lauren Berlant uses the case of obesity to illustrate the crisis of the destruction of human bodies under capitalism. This destruction has not only evolved in history (labour conditions in industrial factories and sweatshops in Bangladesh) but has also taken different shapes in the present: in a gruesome way the destruction of human bodies binds the malnourished child together with the obese in the Western world. When obesity is described as a disease, the focus of this “event” is redirected to health rather than unequal social and historical conditions. Next to eventalisation, a focus on individuals and choice makes a struggle seem non-historical and devoid of an environment. This logic operates across any focus on individual figures in history, which come to represent a whole social field or movement. The focus on one historical figure can obscure the longer processes that have happened in the background. The unrealised demands or struggles of other individuals can get lost in the attention for the wide-spread recognition for one person. Through this focus on the individual, these other processes are sidestepped and remain hidden in mainstream narratives. In his book *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, activist and media theorist Stephen Duncombe provides the example of Rosa Parks, who American media always portrays as the ordinary woman who—at one point in her life—is fed up with racial segregation. In reality, Parks was already an active civil-rights activist

4 Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller ed. *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 76

and worked as a secretary for the NAACP⁵ and was well educated.⁶ The “myth” of the everywoman who “just happened to be in the right place at the right time” is much easier and less painful to swallow, and obscures the longer processes at work, including ongoing commitments to political organising. It is not hard to imagine how a hegemonic position can be reinstated by splitting up subversive groups into smaller groups, by a focus on individual and contradictive wants and needs. These processes of eventalisation and individualisation make it hard to become aware of the historical dimensions of our present situation.

What I’m interested in for the sake of this thesis is how these strategies of eventalisation and individualisation can be reclaimed and used for different purposes. Is there a way to appropriate them to show the hegemonic structure for the construction that it is? After (or during) the pragmatic shift in politics since the 1990s, is there a way to re-imagine political narratives and create new stories out of these events and individuals to become aware of the historical present?

5 NAACP: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

6 Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York, London: The New Press, 2007), 21.

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