Fact, Facticity and the Imagination

Raqs Media Collective

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The Origins of Our Practice

The origins of the our practice lies in documentary filmmaking, and though they have traversed a long distance from the empiricist imperative of mainstream documentary making, documents themselves, and other forms that gesture to the notionally real, continue to intrigue them.

We are interested in documents, not because the claims that can be made with them can be either verified or falsified, but because of the rhetorical spaces that can be prised open while handling documents. These include the elaborate disguises and ruses that the rhetoric of documents sometimes carries with and within themselves.

Our work has occasionally investigated these folds and fissues in the documentary mode to create correspondences between fact, facticity (the appearance of something as factual) and the imagination. In this essay, we

will rehearse an itinerary through this disputed territory, which is claimed contentiously and simultaneously, by reality and some of its close relations.

The First Information Report

The First Information Report (FIR) is a written document prepared by the police in India when they receive information about the commission of a cognizable offence. Looking at FIRs is an exercise in the observation of the intersection and interlacing of many kinds of narrative strategies and claims to truth. When speaking of the FIR, one has to ask - who brings it into the domain of discourse, what methods are used to present it, and to what end is it sought to be presented.

It is common knowledge that the FIR can become an instrument used to shape 'convenient truths' on behalf of those who wield power. The FIR cantilevers 'truths' - the different truth claims of different parties, their different credibilities often an index of their material and enunciative capacity - and a 'juridical truth' together into a relationship that enables the precise application of legal force intended at achieving a specific aim that fulfils the objectives of power.

Sometimes this is done by framing false charges (fictional facticity) against a person who can then be made a target of police harassment, and on other occasions, the facts stated by a complainant can be deliberately distorted, elided, obscured, so that the charge loses credibility and is disqualified due to inconsistencies in the registration of the FIR. Here the inscription of the FIR is marked not by detail but by a blurred vagueness or a powerful opacity. The particular rhetoric of documentation implicit in the language of a given FIR can be co-related to a specific problem encountered by power.
What can be said about an FIR is generally valid for most 'documents'. The normal function of the document is to register and index a stable picture of the world as power wills it to be. The documentary, like history, can be read as the 'prose of counter insurgency', as the record of a permanent military campaign to subdue a recalcitrant world of discomfiting, incongruous and insurgent realities – to produce in turn, images and representations that are

well organized, persuasive, and that conform to the approximation of truth from the perspective of power.

When the Document Enters the Art Space

That the 'document' enters the art space at a time when the world seems to be grappling with visible crises should come as no surprise. The enhanced 'visibility' of the crises, particularly as a result of the intensification of the extensive presence of media networks, threatens to overwhelm all repositories of significant representations. If one function of art making is to offer a way of making sense of the realities we live in, then it is not as such remarkable that contemporary art practice chooses to engage with the visibility of global crises in our times. The art space cannot keep the troubled world at bay, and in order to apprehend reality as it is, in all its disarray, it has to permit the entry of the document as a 'stable' referent of the chaotic world it inhabits.

What magnifies the presence of the 'document' in the space of representation and discourse is the cognitive and epistemic pressure brought about by a belated recognition of globalization. Not only is reality visibly 'crisis-ridden', but the networked nature of each crisis - the thickly interlaced relationship of one manifestation of crisis to another, across a global space - also seems to magnify the impact of reality. This 'magnified and amplified reality effect' presses in. There is, in other words, no escape possible in art at the moment from what may at first seem to be the mere 'facticity' of the document, which seems to invade contemporary art from other semantic spaces and spheres.

The Recovery of History and Memory

At heart, the dilemma remains one of what can be done with the images, testimonies and quotations of reality that a documentary mode brings in to art (from everywhere). Just as the FIR can be read as a statement by power about the world (and to the world), it is also always vulnerable to counter readings, to being prised open, and connected to other 'documents' or other realities, and to being made to reveal the inner logic of power. The FIR may

not have much that is original or remarkable to say, but its evasions, narrative stances, and silences may be eloquent and compelling. The challenge of working with documents in an art space (for the artist, the curator, the critic and the viewer) is the possibility of decrypting the aporias in the representations of the real.

This is what makes working with documents aesthetically and formally a difficult thing to do, and this is why working with documents in contemporary art spaces can often end up only in the alleviation of representational anxieties (of artists, curators and the public). Because the document's raw material is rhetoric, the practitioner has to constantly evolve a rhetoric of rhetoric in order to make documents yield. This requires more not less imagination, and a vigilance about the relationship between the externality of a document and the subjectivity implicit in the act of reading it differently from the norm.

That is why, just as the recovery of memory and history (of defeats and dispersal, of powerlessness and servitude as much as of survival and creation), and the painstaking reconstruction of an archive of lost and scattered meanings is one of the first cultural tasks on the agenda of the insurgent, a critical engagement with a documentary mode of practice too becomes (for the same reason) one of the key undertakings of the contemporary art practitioner who seeks to express contemporaneity as much as s/he engages with art. The contemporary moment, nothing if not a contest of images that seek to define 'globality', demands documents as counterweights to its own 'documentary' record.

Bodies and Maps

Images of human beings construct a map of the world. Even the judgement in a criminal case has to rely on the metaphor of the difference between the maps of two countries when talking about the difference between two impressions of the ridges and whorls at the fingertips of two human beings. As if the body were a territory, and its features possible to render as lines, ridges and whorls on a map. As if the body were a territory, the mapping of which would be the first step in its governance, and in the subjugation of its

boundaries to regulation and control.

Images of human beings, like maps of the world, locate like and unlike, near and far, familiar and strange. These categories, which are premised in the sense of what we see as being similar or different to who we are, or where we stand - on our sense of orientation. It is through these that power creates the binaries needed to inscribe in our minds it's map of the world.

When this happens, images of the body (or of clusters of bodies) can become weapons of offence, and the instruments of a siege. They can be used to maim or injure, or imprison. No war or skirmish (local or global) is fought without it's own arsenal of images. Images are endowed with the ability to create proximities and distances that can impel or sanitize acts of violence. Consider the aerial photograph used to identify targets for bombardment in cities, or the identikit photograph of the 'Wanted' person that often sticks to the walls of cities. Both kinds of images carry with them the charge of an anticipated act of violence, a bombing, an imprisonment, perhaps an execution. Both act as indexes, as maps, as locators of targets, and as the means to zero in on them. They are both navigation aids for missiles in the mind, and the radar that locates the enemy for the eye.

Consider the image of the typical 'other', the one who renders a distance between anyone we say is like 'us' and anyone we are accustomed to thinking of as unlike us. At its barest, it is a measurement of the distance - between us, and those we are mobilized to think of as being different, or exotic, or banal, or inferior, or superior, subhuman, or superhuman in relation to us. At its barest, this is what the issue of identity and difference are about.

Identity and Difference

Identity (following Liebniz) is an assertion that two expressions are equal regardless of the values of any variables. Difference is the residue that remains when any two entities stand in a relation to each other such that all that is identical between them is subtracted out.

Any unambiguous statement of difference in human beings presupposes

a certainty about identity. Similarities, such that they are available to the naked human eye, and to experience, are at best evanescent and do not yield certainties. In fact, the problem for those who have sought to mark out differences are that certainties do not exist sui generis, but need to be harvested or produced in order that a clear distinction can be ascertained.

The uncertainty about identity is not a reflection of the cognitive impossibility of identity. In a philosophical sense, identity is an enigma, but it is not an impossibility. We can say with a sense of certainty that a person x is indeed x, but we may not be able to completely spell out the reasons for our certainty.

It is possible to recognize that a person x is someone distinct – from ourselves, from another person y and from all other persons – and to give voice to our recognition of x's individuality. However, it is almost impossible to exhaustively list what it is that makes us recognize x's identity. At best, we can make an estimate that x is indeed x and not y out of the constellation of perceptible physical attributes, our memories of x and x's actions and utterances, what we have been told about x, and our affective responses when we encounter or consider x.

This constellation contains many items of information that will overlap with other constellations that we attach to our cognitive and affective map of other human beings. There are things that we could say of x, which could also hold true for y – these could be physical, or affective, or to do with x's and y's place in society, or in our lives. We may even say that it is difficult to tell x and y apart, but our very recognition of their similarity is at the same time a statement about their difference. No two objects may be seen as having attributes that are similar, or even identical, if they are not in the first instance, different. In other words, even if x and y are clones of each other, they still are x and y, or at the most, x and x–, but it would be meaningless to say that they are x and x. A person cannot be one and another at the same time.

This statement does require a caveat. Person x may not be one and another at the same time, except for circumstances where x pretends to be or is

actively engaged in becoming, or is seen to be 'possessed of', or is under the impression that he/she is someone other than what we and he/she understand to be x. This covers a wide range of behaviour – performance, 'self-improvement', masquerade and imposture, ritual possession, trans-gendering of the self. In each of these circumstances our sense of who x is needs to be glossed against what x is in the process of becoming, or what x has become, as distinct from the x that we consider as the ground against which the said transformation of the self occurs. It may be difficult or even un-necessary to construct a hierarchy of the veracity of x and the other iterations of selfhood in such cases, and the conundrum of which 'person' is 'true' may tell us less about the person, and more about our anxiety to fix an overarching identity in the face of manifest ambiguities. This anxiety describes a desire to see people as if there were 'original' and 'fake' aspects to their being, and to their performance of their self. If we understand that the self is a narrative, and a performance, (how else can we know another if they do not narrate and perform themselves to us) then the desire to privilege any one of these narratives and performances as the 'original' leads to an automatic relegation of all other iterations to the status of the counterfeit. This idealization of what is arbitrarily assigned the status of the 'original' is something that is fixed by the observer, and is in turn based on what is processed from the information that the observer harvests from the person encountered in a chosen context.

It is also possible that with time, things may be added or subtracted from the constellation that we have used to describe x. We may recognize x after twenty years even if x loses his hair, or a limb and our feelings about x may change from affection, to indifference, to desire, to hostility over time. Nevertheless, we are still able to satisfy ourselves that x is not y, and that the x we meet after twenty years is still the same x that we knew earlier. Our recognition of x's individuality, in its specificity vis-à-vis others, and its diachronic continuity vis-à-vis the x we knew twenty years ago, is a function of our ability to comprehend the 'inextinguishable recurring decimal' that marks the identity of x to our eyes. Perhaps the only way we can talk of how we access this elusive reality of the person before our eyes is by referring to something of the order of 'insight'.

Faced with these difficulties, we can say that the identity of a person is something that we experience, and intuit, and surmise more than we know.

Knowing would mean the processing of information from the body and the being of the person into a set of fixed data that can act as a metaphorical barcode of the person in question. Such a barcode is constructed by abstracting a set of pre-defined parameters of what is needed to be 'known' and 'made known' about the person. This process involves a transformation of the experiential and the intuitive in relation to the fluid ambiguities of a person, to a set of insensate certainties that stay frozen. It is in order to achieve this fixity that blue prints are designed for the machines that measure man.

What are these measuring machines that render the differences that can then be computed? What measures do these machines undertake, and which measures do they conform to? What makes these machines made to measure work?

The Measure of Man

In a photograph taken in the year 1876, forty-six men, women and children, aboriginal inhabitants of the Andaman Islands (an archipelago off the south east coast of India), are portrayed arrayed about a single measuring rod. The rod, at the very centre of the image, stands in relation to the people about it as a scale would to features on a map, or a silhouetted, stylized human figure would to an architects drawing of a building. Perhaps, more crucially, the rod can be read as an indexical allegory, or as a barely concealed code inscribed into the image that ironically points to an imputed and immeasurable distance that separates the photographed from the photographer, or, man from his measure.

The photograph, titled simply and prosaically, as "Andamanese Group with Measuring Rod", is one of a series of images taken by Ernest Horace Man, as part of his project to study Andamanese aboriginals, then considered to be a 'pure' primitive race in serious danger of extinction. E H Man's copious photographic record paved the way for an intense process of the scrutiny of

the bodies of living and dead Andamanese (which lasted through to the early years of the twentieth century, and which continues, somewhat erratically till today). They were photographed against anthropometric grids, clothed as well as naked, their skulls were measured with calipers, and their nostrils, ears, eye sockets, buttocks and hair were measured and tabulated on cross indexed tables. The photographs, which were circulated as ethnographic studies, images in travelogues, items in popular encyclopaedias and museum catalogues, illustrations in missionary literature and as pornographic curiosities, continued to have a career well into the late twentieth century.

The measurements and images harvested from the Andamanese were worked on to compute statistical averages – means and medians that could then express the idea of what an 'average' Andamanese might be.

This in turn could then be taken to express the 'identity' of the Andamanese, a figure that could substitute a mathematical metaphor for the inconvenient tendency of the individual human body to exhibit variation. The figure of the measure of the 'average' Andamanese – expressed through calculations, or through photographic composites – was then something that could be compared to other 'averages' to create clusters of information about niches within the social spectrum. Photographic composites of Andamanese skulls, for instance, were mapped on to composites consisting of the images of the skulls of Irish indigents, prostitutes, convicts and the criminal insane. Finally, there were more photographs and measurements than there were people. The Andamanese became more data and less a living community of human beings. It could be said that the technology that indexed their 'identity' and hence their 'difference' to those who did the indexing also measured out the terms of their subtraction from life, until they remained only as the ghostly prisoners of photographic negatives in the collections of anthropological museums and archives. The measure of man in the end became a calculus of cadavers – a detail in the arithmetic of violence of the nineteenth century.

The Smear of Truth

If Anthropometry sought to compute an average that flattened differences in the name of a composite image of an identity, then Fingerprinting, another

way of reading the body for signs of identity, sought to locate and fix the individual as a unique and unvarying entity . Nineteenth century India, which was one of the greatest anthropometric field laboratories in the world, was also the prime experimental site for the development of technologies for registering and interpreting fingerprints, and the rise of fingerprinting as a precise forensic science. From the pioneering usage of fingerprints as identity markers in land records in the village of Jangipur in the Maldah district of Bengal by James William Herschel in 1858, to Francis Galton's enthusiastic 'anthropometric' endorsements of Herschel's experiments, to the systematization of forensic fingerprinting (along with 'Bertillonage' or anthropometric measurements after the manner of Alphonse Bertillon) by Sir Edward Henry, Azizul Haque and Hem Chandra Bose of the Bengal Police in 1897, created a rich body of knowledge about the principles that animated technologies of identification. In a sense, the techniques of ruling through information that were perfected in the colonies, were then exported to the metropoles, and thereafter became generalized as the standard technologies for the affixture of identity and the recognition of difference that we have come to know today on a global scale. Had the early experiments with anthropometric image making not been undertaken in remote parts of the world, or the intense desire to read the smears of fingertips as markers of truth not taken root in the minds of colonial administrators in rural Bengal, the techniques of biometric identification and surveillance that we have become familiar with in recent years all over the world would not have had such a smooth and untrammelled career as the necessary exigencies of power, articulated as knowledge in and about bodies, read as maps, and subjugated as conquered territories.

It is important to understand that this anxiety to produce certainties about identity emerged from a deep cognitive gulf that separated power from its objects in colonial Bengal. To the rulers of the day, the 'natives' they governed, were infamously disingenuous. Their 'un-veracity' and the desire to confuse those who ruled them was a matter of great concern to administrators, judges, prison authorities and even to those assigned with the tasks of collecting taxes and revenue. Thomas Babington Macaulay once famously remarked, with some exasperation and considerable rhetorical flourish – "What horns are to the buffalo, what the paw is to the tiger,

what the sting is to the bee, what beauty, according to old Greek song, is to woman, deceit is to the Bengalee. Large promises, smooth excuses, elaborate tissues of circumstantial falsehood, chicanery, perjury, forgery, are the weapons, offensive and defensive, of the inhabitants of the lower Ganges…"

It was against these weapons, this modest arsenal (deceit, circumstantial falsehood, chicanery, perjury, forgery) of everyday insurgencies in the offices, courts and corridors of power that the emergent colonial state invested into the development of an armoury for ascertaining identities and recognizing differences. That this project of ascertaining who was 'what' took place at the broadly anthropological level (as in the case of the Andamanese, and many other ethnic groups spread across the South Asian landmass) as well as the microscopically forensic level (as in the case of the Bengali peasant) tells us about the scope and pervasiveness of this anxiety.

The Inextinguishable Recurring Decimal

It is difficult to imagine why or when and under which circumstances one would like to yield a complete transparency about oneself to the scrutinizing apparatus of power. However, the increasingly fraught operation of power in society requires the harnessing of exponentially amplified means of visualizing us as transparent vessels of bodies of data. This means that the slightest shadow, the smallest reticence or hesitation in yielding the substance of our selves, and the iteration of our selves through actions, encounters and interactions with others, is liable in many places today to be read as 'deceit, circumstantial falsehood, chicanery, perjury and forgery'. This is the means by which the true test of citizenship is not a level of commitment to and participation in the polis, but the degree to which the subject is prepared to make him or herself known to the state. This votive offering of knowledge about ourselves to the guardians in power then guarantees us a place in the polis, and a certainty that we are what the state says we are, and distinct from those aliens that it seeks to protect us from.

In an early book of the Mahabharata, one of the great epics in the Indic tradition, Ekalavya, an aboriginal teenager, is found copying and practicing the education being imparted to the Aryan warrior princes, the Pandavas, the

protagonists of the narrative. Their teacher and guardian, who is concerned that Ekalavya has greater mastery over the art of archery than his favourite pupil – the Pandava prince Arjun - demands of Ekalavya his right thumb as Guru Dakshina (a gift that every pupil must make to his teacher on the completion of his education).

Ekalavya, bound as he is by the protocols and codes that govern the transmission of knowledge in society, cuts off his thumb (the one with which he grips the bowstring) and offers it to the guardian. The subaltern exchanges his mastery of archery for the knowledge that the warriors will always be different from him, and that it is his identity as a lowborn aboriginal that will underwrite this difference. The difference will locate him, as well as them, in the places assigned to them by the guardians of social order, and his bloodied thumb seals the terms of this inexorable contract.

The subaltern Ekalavya's bloodied thumb (the first demand for a digit as a mark of identity) remains with us as a resonant smear of the truth of power. Ekalavya's thumb, which guided his grip over the bowstring, can be seen as symbolic place holder for the inextinguishable recurring decimal, which makes the low born aboriginal teenager similar to the warrior princes by the same logic that makes all human beings similar or different from other human beings – their individuality. It is that complex interplay between their genetic inheritance, their social experiences and environment and their specific desires. The rounding off of this digit, this inextinguishable recurring decimal to the nearest available whole integer, marks the 'identity' of the subaltern, and the clear 'difference' of the subaltern from the prince. The bloodied smear of the truth produced by the apparatus of identification tells Ekalavya, overriding all ambiguities, who he is, who he is not, and what he never can hope to be. A technology of location, registration and the production of knowledge, does successfully extinguish the obstinate recurring decimal. The digit is cleaved from the body, and Ekalavya, like all of us when we give up all our digits to the state, loses the means and the skills acquired with effort to defend himself.

What the technologies of identification do not take into account, however, is the ability of a person to enact different iterations of the self. Crucially,

this means that the story of personhood, and the narratives of identity that gather around a person, are material available for constant re-fashioning. It means that the question of identity can also give rise to a hyperlinking of aspects of being - an expanding and cross referencing matrix of acts, attributes and attitudes that constitute the database of a person's 'becoming' over time. Thus, even if Ekalvya's amputated right thumb is an emblem of the way in which a discourse of power wishes to reduce his identity, it cannot guarantee that Ekalavya, in some other narration of his story, may not decide to learn to use his left hand.

The identity of Ekalavya, then, is something that emerges from the relationship of two kinds or enactments of selfhood. It is something that bridges the person whose right thumb got cut off and the person who decided to learn to use his left hand, and cultivate a left-handed knowledge of the world. The inextinguishable recurring decimal by its very nature resists being rounded off to the nearest whole number, and continues its fractal dance on the adding machine. This takes us back to the person x who cannot but continue to transform himself/herself, and whose process of transformation holds in abeyance all attempts to frame his/her identity in a timeless embrace. Let us call x – Ekalavya.

Ekalavya's effort with his left hand, may give rise to speculations in some quarters about the distance between the 'original' and the 'counterfeit' Ekalavya – the first, the devoted disciple willing to efface himself out of deference to the knowledgeable guardian, and the second, the one who goes against the 'moral of the story' and rises above or beyond his 'station' to be something or somebody he never should have been. This is not to say that the 'fake' Ekalavya, who keeps the label of his name but changes the content of his person, does not have an identity. However, this identity is something that he fashions, taking something from a story already told about him and something from a story yet to be told, in such a way that it is impossible to construct a hierarchy of veracity. What he is, what he is reduced to, what he desires and what he becomes, are impossible to place along a graduated scale of more and less truth. They tell different truths about the different acts of personhood that are possible to imagine on the ground of Ekalavya.

Ekalavya's Left Hand

In these random reflections, we have tried to sketch an itinerary that moves from a set of fading photographs in the basements of archives, to the thumbprints on a ledger of landholdings, to a strange story about a bloodied thumb. These digressions have been a way for us to think about the present we find ourselves in. A climate of paranoia about national security has made it possible for key factions within the Indian state to argue for the creation of a nationwide citizens identification database tied to a system of smart cards containing biometric data about every 'legal' Indian citizen. This apparatus, which is being touted as the solution to all problems ranging from terrorism to the crisis of identities within contemporary India, is in our eyes the worthy inheritor of the legacy that produced Ekalavya's thumb in mythic antiquity, the measuring rod amidst the Andamanese in 1862, the fingerprints of the peasants of Jangipur in Bengal in 1858, and the system devised by Henry, Haque and Bose of the Bengal Police in 1897. In a single digital move it is able to forge a solution to the problem of identity that bridges the realities of the twenty first century, the history of the colonial era, and an ancient fable.

A continuous state of emergency (what Agamben has characterized as the state of 'exception' peculiar to our contemporary reality) produces its own specific sense of fatigue – an exhaustion that comes from remaining alert to yielding oneself up to acts of random or routine scrutiny. This wakefulness and watchfulness, this baleful insomniac rendition of the self into units of meaningful information, is the unexamined personal collateral damage of the rise of a global apparatus of interlocking security and surveillance systems.

For some time now, many parts of the world, particularly those that are governed by the imperatives of the global war against terrorism, have learnt to live with a state of emergency, a moderate intensity level of panic and anxiety that makes the predatory excesses of the scrutinizing eye seem banal by the mere fact of exhausting repetition. And so, we succumb. We do so not only at airports and border posts, but also at workplaces and public spaces in large cities the world over, to routine and random searches of our persons, to scans, registrations, surveillance and recordings of the traces of our actions,

our encounters with others, our presences and transiences, our itineraries, purchases and decisions, our intimacies and our public acts, our utterances and our secrets, our habits and our desires - the minutiae of all our lives.

We see surveillance, particularly new technologies such as facial recognition, retinal tracing and biometric scanning, as performing a similar set of operations to those undertaken by early anthropometry and fingerprinting. The body as data is also put to analogous uses, especially for 'racial profiling' at airports and other transit points, just as anthropometric photographs were used to substantiate elaborate theories of racial typage. The intensive application of surveillance technologies at public places, work, and even in the home or in the private sphere leads to a monitoring of thought and affect to a degree that suggests that we can now begin to speak tentatively of an 'anthropometry of the soul'.