

# Introduction

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Interactive documentaries have experienced a great boom over the last 20 years. During this period, they have taken many different forms, varying in terms of production, presentation, and circulation. Most of them are web-based, and they often consist of heterogeneous material, such as video clips, photographs, text, and background information. While they have gone by many names,<sup>1</sup> interactive documentaries in the broadest sense are attempts to truthfully engage with our shared world (which is the core feature of documentaries) via digital affordances that allow or even encourage users to interact with the material provided in some shape or form via an interface.<sup>2</sup>

In the simplest cases, interacting with the material consists of scrolling through a webpage or letting users decide how to advance the narrative by choosing material from a database or via some other means. These decisions have to be made from a given set of choices, often presented via a tiled interface. The connections and logics that link individual clips together often remain hidden to the user. Interactive documentaries can take on a wide range of forms, and both the constant innovation typical of interactive projects as well as the many parameters that may vary (see Conradi in this volume for an analytical grid) discourage the establishment of typologies. However, some types of interactive documentaries are more common than others: There are those that present the material on a webpage, allowing the user to jump among topics, with each section providing links to further chapters. An example of

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1 Multi-linear-docs, interdocs, webdocs or i-docs, to give just a few examples. For more detail, see Brian Winston's foreword to Aston, Gaudenzi, & Rose (2017, xv) as well as the introduction (Aston, Gaudenzi, & Rose 2017, 2).

2 In doing so they often include recurring elements such as hyperlinks, menus, forums, timelines and maps (cf. Odorico 2015, 215). Many interactive documentaries implement the interface between software and user by means of a graphical user interface (GUI), which allows for interaction by clicking buttons or swiping across a touchscreen. Jan Distelmeyer refers to these interfaces, using a term coined by Harun Farocki, as "operative images" (Distelmeyer 2022, 53). They are designed and "staged" forms of presentation that invite users to select content – or to decide on the basis of a predefined selection; they also conceal the operation of the hardware. See also Cramer, David & Matthew Fuller, (2008): "Interface", in: Fuller (2008, 149–152).

this is *Field Trip* (Eva Stotz, 2019),<sup>3</sup> which is typical in presenting material contained in a database in a visual and narrative form, inviting individual reception. An alternative format presents a clip and allows the user to select the next clip while it is playing. Two approaches to this format can be distinguished: In *multilinear interactive documentaries*, the possible paths through the database are pre-defined and can be drawn as a tree structure. In *generative interactive documentaries*, the connections between clips in the database are created on the fly via algorithms. In such films, the paths through a database cannot be reproduced as they can in the case of multilinear interactive documentaries, and the relationships among the individual images varies with each viewing experience. Whether a film has a multilinear or generative structure often depends on the software used to produce it. One noteworthy example of the latter is the software *Korsakow*, which will be discussed in several contributions to this volume (see Thalhofer, Doll, and Krautkrämer).

Interactivity is not limited to cases where users watch an interactive documentary. It can also unfold as part of *participatory and collaborative projects*. Such projects allow for material to be added to a film by collaborators or users either in the production phase or even continuously after the film has been published – in comment sections or even by uploading audio and video. Patricia R. Zimmerman and others refer to this as “co-creation”, one of the many ways interactive documentaries foster collaborative work (Auguiste et al. 2020). Collaborative projects demonstrate the potential of interactive documentaries to be more than merely a representational practice. This is particularly noticeable in projects in which interactive documentaries are ascribed with qualities of “toolness” and a methodological character. Often stemming from academic contexts, such projects use the production of interactive documentaries as a method to find new insights on a certain topic and can therefore be considered as a method of knowledge production (see Doll and Thalhofer in this volume). In this way, these projects take on a laboratory character, allowing different forms of knowledge to emerge in different experimental arrangements (Latour & Woolgar 1979; Rheinberger 2001).

In recent years, the concept of interactive documentary has increasingly been applied to media formats built around virtual reality, artificial reality, and gaming. This makes clear that the term is not limited to the web dispositive – and it will not be in this volume.

The understanding of interactive documentary that we pursue emphasizes the centrality of documentary material and the associated selection processes. This can include any kind of interactive documentary. However, most examples dealt with in this volume are web-based projects, while VR-, AR-, game-based projects, and interactive “scrollytelling” news articles are less prominent.

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3 <https://fieldtrip.berlin/>, last accessed: August 27, 2024.

Drawing on many examples of such interactive documentaries, this book aims to shed light on three characteristic aspects: *interactive formations*, *relational practices*, and *destabilized reception*.

## Interactive Formations

“Interactivity” has been around for quite some time now and has taken on special significance in media theory since at least the 1990s – which was not coincidentally also the time when the World Wide Web had its social breakthrough. Lev Manovich, one of the early (media) theorists of interactivity (and one of the concept’s first skeptics) claims that:

In relation to computer-based media, the concept of interactivity is a tautology. Modern HCI<sup>4</sup> is by definition interactive. [...] [M]odern HCI allows the user to control the computer in real-time by manipulating information displayed on the screen. Once an object is represented in a computer, it automatically becomes interactive. (Manovich 2001, 55)

Manovich further emphasizes not only that the computer is always interactive, but that art itself had depended on interactivity long before the advent of digital media. Ellipsis in literature, voids and omissions in visual art among others: In order to reveal their message, works of art have always depended on an activity between the work and the spectator (cf. *ibid.*, 56). In the case of interactive digital media, however, algorithms always play a special role, often as opaque rules in the background, determining and limiting the scope of the decisions that users can enact.

Due to the variety of existing interactive documentaries in general, and the range discussed in this volume in particular, one could, following Michel Foucault, speak of a “system of dispersion”. Yet they do have elements in common, namely differently extensive and differently spelled-out forms of interactive involvement. In his *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault uses the term “discursive formation” to address the internal structuring of discontinuous fragments of knowledge. These formations are subject to certain formation rules, but they arise from a system of dispersion. Discursive formation implies a unity of differences. In Foucault’s words:

Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation* – thus avoiding words that are already overladen with

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4 Human-computer interface [the authors].

conditions and consequences, and in any case inadequate to the task of designating such a dispersion, such as “science”, “ideology”, “theory”, or “domain of objectivity”. (Foucault 1972, 38)

In our opinion, a similar definition can be applied to the media formation of interactive documentaries, or *interactive formations* for short. Interactive documentaries are based on a special media arrangement, in that they involve users in a new way, implement digital techniques and innovate in this respect, break open categories of montage, place special demands on website design and technical factors, such as hosting services, and in the combination of all these heterogenous factors also have an influence on the principle of the documentary.

What distinguishes working with and analyzing interactive documentaries from work with linear films is a stronger focus on technical principles and contexts. The technical object that was previously at the center of documentary film research was the recording device, the camera and – less prominently – sound recording technology. Documentary film theory revolves primarily around the problematization and change that occurs when a recording device is added to reality with the aim of capturing this very reality – with all the changes and moral implications that this entails. Changes in documentary film are therefore usually negotiated in parallel to changes in recording technology, for example when devices become smaller and more portable (cf. Fahle 2020, 78ff.; Müller 2011) or when recording and processing is done digitally instead of by analog means (cf. Steyerl 2008).

In the case of interactive documentaries, we are also dealing with a changing medium, but one that is not limited to the area of recording. Instead, it includes post-production, circulation, and reception, areas that are no longer regarded as stable and unchangeable and are negotiated in film studies under the term post-cinema (cf. Denson & Leyda 2016). However, the emphasis placed on precisely these areas when working with interactive documentaries is not intended to be reserved exclusively for this form of documentary, but to also exemplify the gaps and research desiderata that could exist for the field of documentary in general. Examples in this volume, as described in the texts by Marta Fiolic and Martin Doll, among others, make it clear how knowledge of a changed form of distribution and reception culture also has an impact on the production of the material that makes up the interactive documentaries.

This first section shows that the formation of the interactive documentary is intertwined with the internet, with technological changes in the context of computerized societies and a general shift in the ecosystem of mass media. Emerging media, William Uricchio makes clear, not only involve the usage of new technologies but come with a new approach, a new way of dealing with information. Uricchio claims that while centralized broadcasting media follow the metaphor of transmission, the use of emerging media can better be grasped as a form of ritual.

Accordingly, questions of the quality of interaction, dialogue, and exchange become more important. In the case of documentaries, this deemphasizes argument and evidence. Instead, the strength of interactive documentaries is based on personalization, dialogue, and sometimes participation.

Understanding interactive documentaries as a formation that has emerged and is positioned in a changing media environment also creates challenges for analysis. In this regard, the chapter by Tobias Conradi describes the interactive documentary as a hybrid whose analysis can certainly benefit from established methods of film and media analysis, but which also calls for new analytical approaches. Following a discussion of existing models that seek to define, classify, and analyze interactive documentaries, Conradi presents a new analytical grid for grasping the various heterogeneous facets of this interactive formation.

Building on the importance of the databases that underlie interactive formations, Vanessa Zallot shows by means of two examples how interactive documentaries can support fundamentally different knowledge practices. Analyzing the contrasting structures of the documentaries *K-Town*<sup>92</sup> by Grace Lee (2017) and *Pregoneros de Medellín* by Ángela Carabalí and Thibault Durand (2015), Zallot demonstrates how the different interfaces allow for different forms of montage, which reveal the “limits to knowledge” of the documentary form, on the one hand, and the attraction and possibility of finally knowing it all, on the other.

The interviews in this section, one with David Dufresne and Anita Hugi, filmmakers and pioneers of the interactive documentary, and the other with Jimmy Fournier and Louis-Richard Tremblay from the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) give first-hand accounts of the early years of interactive film and web projects. These four key protagonists describe the opportunities and challenges of a time when an emerging media formation opened up a space for experimentation.

The interviews outline the new opportunities for financing risky projects that have emerged at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The NFB is also an example of the institutionalization of new forms of creative expression in computer- and internet-based media. Hugi gets to the heart of the matter when she explains that the aim was not to produce “documentaries for the Internet, but with the means of the Internet”. At the same time, however, the interviewees also speak about the sometimes painful and costly learning processes: Adobe Flash is repeatedly mentioned and how the discontinuation of a proprietary platform has abruptly resulted in the loss of large parts of the early history of the web. On the other hand, as already seen in William Uricchio’s article, it becomes clear that social media play a part in the figuration and structuring of interactive formations: whether this takes the form of TikTok and Instagram aesthetically ennobling portrait mode for videos or because videos uploaded to YouTube find their way into documentaries as user-generated found-footage material.

The section closes with the article by Jan Distelmeyer, who shows with reference to the film industry how the focus and meaning of interactivity has fundamentally changed during the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. While interactivity was the central characteristic of digitality in the 1990s – with DVDs, videogames, and digital television all being advertised as such – the promises of interactivity in today’s interactive formation seem to be represented by a permanent technological activity and automated decision-making that (supposedly) removes the need for human control.

## Relational Practice

In their book *Collective Wisdom*, Kat Cizek and William Uricchio state: “At its core, co-creation is relational” (Cizek & Uricchio 2022, 21). Indeed, co-creation, participation, and collaboration are often central features of interactive documentaries, and are deserving of further study. One potential benefit of interactivity is that it may facilitate greater engagement and participation from the audience. This becomes particularly apparent in the chapter by Jasmin Kermanchi, who examines the potential of interactive documentaries for various forms of participation: cultural participation, democratic participation in the public sphere, and participation in a (virtual) community. Drawing on philosophical and political theory by Jacques Rancière, Nancy Fraser, and Chantal Mouffe, Kermanchi suggests a “taking-part” and “having-a-part” model and analyzes the conditions of three different forms of participation.

Many chapters concerned with relational practice also emphasize the importance and characteristics of a mindset that facilitates co-creative undertakings. Marta Fiolíć reflects on the extent to which collaborative practices in documentary allow for a more nuanced and authentic approach to filmmaking. Referring to the co-creative interactive documentary *Somos Mulheres*, Fiolíć examines the potential of the interactive approach to initiate dialogue and discusses how participant involvement may allow for a more fine-grained representation of difficult issues such as homelessness.

Florian Thalhofer distinguishes two types of interactive documentaries: a “τα περισσότερα” (ta perissótera) type and a “Korsakowian” type. He then argues that the latter’s relationship between author and audience is characterized by a pronounced shift in interpretative power from the former to the latter, due to the Korsakowian method’s tendency to facilitate “unconscious associations” and its inherent “interpretative suspension”, which becomes apparent both in the process of creation and within the Korsakow artefact.

In similar vein, and based on his own experiences as a filmmaker, Frédéric Dubois focuses on a core attitude he dubs the “sandbox mindset”. This, he argues, should be embraced by individuals and institutions alike, via the development of a

framework that encourages, enables, and rewards experimentation. The designation of studios, labs, and hubs as experimental sandboxes signifies an institution's willingness to take risks (especially financial ones). The opportunity, as Dubois posits, lies in guaranteeing innovation through sustainable funding, despite the risk that not all projects will likely be successful.

While one current in interactive documentaries strives for equality between creatives and users, there are also attempts to reconcile a more creator-driven attitude with relationality. In an interview, Mike Robbins talks about important characteristics of documentaries and emphasizes the notion of a creator realizing their subjective feeling or opinion. Robbins also criticizes the perceived rise of impact-driven approaches to documentary. While impact cannot be entirely neglected, according to Robbins, he posits a more holistic approach that contemplates the oscillating relation among audience, filmmaker, and production. Further subjects of discussion are the past and potential future development of interactive documentaries and how these may affect audience trust.

Throughout the SNSF-funded research project on interactive documentaries out of which this volume emerged, the participating scholars also taught a module for students at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts using the software *Korsakow*. The report on this course, which had four iterations, details what was learned and which challenges were faced. It makes it clear that the focus is not only on learning the software and specific practices, but above all that a degree of experimental openness must be achieved in the groups in order to engage with the possibilities associated with this format.

## **(De-)Stabilized Reception**

In addition to relational practice, the formation of the interactive documentary is particularly interesting because of how it clearly changes the relationship between production and reception. The various choices that are made when a user engages with a project make it necessary to assume a highly individualized reception, in which a different version is seen with each viewing process. In some projects, it is not even clear whether all the material has been viewed at the end – or whether the end has even been reached. When analyzing interactive documentaries, it is therefore no longer possible to presuppose a stable form; the performative aspect of the reception process comes more into focus, as do factors influencing the selection process, such as the interface or the underlying programming.

It is this aspect that Cornelia Lund highlights in her contribution. She shifts the focus from the question of the bodily involvement of the user in an interactive documentary to an underexamined aspect of how and where interactive documentary can happen, namely as part of installations where interaction involves movement

to connect and activate different parts of the documentary. Via close analysis of installations by Harun Farocki, Rimini Protokoll, and others, Lund explores the bodily parallels and differences among web-based films, video installations, and theatrical performances that all are situated in the field of the documentary.

This destabilization of the interactive documentary and its varying dispositives may also be responsible for the dwindling interest in the format after the initial peak phase around 2010. At the start of 2024, the NFB in Canada shocked the community with the announcement that it was discontinuing its funding program for interactive formats. The funds freed up were to be invested in the latest technology (AI) and the expansion of streaming platforms (cf. the interview with Jimmy Fournier and Louis-Richard Tremblay of the NFB in this volume). The discontinuation of Adobe Flash in 2020, which was used to create many projects, has made it clear how important it is to include archiving concepts in the realization at an early stage. Two of the most prominent examples of interactive documentaries that can no longer be played online since this discontinuation are *Prison Valley* (Philippe Brault & David Dufresne, 2009) and *Fort McMoney* (David Dufresne, 2013).

Florian Krautkrämer also takes the termination of the NFB funding program as an opportunity to ask what a critical theory of the documentary could still learn from the formation of interactive documentaries and concludes that this lies above all in a weakening of the individual image. For instance, interactive documentaries often feature repeated breaks, stops, or interruptions, while also encouraging viewers to skip content. Krautkrämer does not judge this in a culturally pessimistic way as a symptom of a society with ever shorter attention spans, but rather sees it as a process of reflection that can encourage a critical examination of the documentary.

In his article, Daniel Fetzner describes a project that aims to establish a fixed dispositive but does so via a method of production that is itself highly unstable. In *Becoming River*, he and his team experiment with a change of perspective that abolishes the separation of subject and object, people and environment, using methods of sensory ethnography film production, equipping the river with cameras, microphones, and sensors, to collect non-anthropocentric images and sounds. The use of stereographic projection expands on this approach to explore an uncommon zero-person perspective. The topology of the interactive documentary can thus be considered as a meshwork that creates entanglements both within individual media documents and with the thinking of the visitor.

In Martin Doll's interactive documentary project on contextualizing restitution in contemporary Ghana, on the other hand, the majority of decisions were made by the filmmaker. Doll reflects both on strategies that can make this perspectivity as transparent as possible through specific aesthetic decisions, as well as on how to make the incompatible speaking positions visible without contributing to a colonial epistemology. A notable example highlighting perspectivity is the "landing page" af-

ter the end credits, where viewers can see what clips they missed during the viewing experience.

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Although the interactive documentary is so versatile and unstable in its form of reception, we have opted for a traditional publication without digital content. However, we recommend that you take a look at the website of our research project ([www.interdocs.ch](http://www.interdocs.ch)) before, during, or after reading, where you will find links to the examples discussed here, as well as explanatory notes on terms, projects, and other materials.

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