

Interactive Documentary in Teaching.

A Practical Report

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Parallel to our research project on interactive documentary, we taught a module lasting six to eight weeks on this topic once a year for four years. The module took place in the interdisciplinary study area and was particularly popular with students whose studies otherwise focused on film practice, programming apps and websites, or artistic projects. The use of the software Korsakow was obligatory, as this allowed the projects to be compared with each other and meant that the groups could help each other with technical issues. The students worked in groups, with everyone receiving an introduction to documentary work and working with the software. There were also introductions to the theory, history, and analysis of (interactive) documentaries.

The participants attended the module for very different reasons. Hardly anyone was familiar with interactive documentaries, let alone experienced in working with the format. Their basic knowledge of documentary film also varied greatly in scope and was very limited for many. The module therefore began with a comprehensive in-depth unit in which examples of linear and interactive documentary films were discussed. Here we also provided introductions to documentary work and to using Korsakow. The aim was not to move from linear to interactive documentaries, but to show examples and provide instructions for everything at the same time. Because even if there are variations, the parallels ultimately outweigh the differences: Documentary work means finding an attitude to the subject, solving questions of perspective, researching, picking up the camera, cutting sequences together.

From the outset, it was noticeable that students often expected to produce “classical” documentaries during the module: Interview-based films, with talking heads and voice-overs, that tell stories in chronological order. These forms are certainly possible to create with Korsakow – but that did not necessarily meet our aspirations for the module. One of the central motivations for the module was to introduce students to a certain openness towards documentary work. The interactive form was not intended to be a simple add-on. It was important to us to introduce the possibilities and limitations of Korsakow right from the start, so that the students would take this into account when designing the projects and recording the material.

The theoretical component of the module encouraged the students to discuss the use of media-based choices and the factors underlying them, and to heighten their awareness of where they are confronted with prompts for interactive participation in their own media consumption and what effect these have. To this end, we read and discussed a number of classic texts on the connection between interactivity and media. The aim here was both to question what is taken for granted when dealing with digital media formations and to draw attention to the fact that interactive media is not something entirely new or exclusively positive. In social discourse, the equation is often found to be “active = participatory = positive” | “passive = indifferent = negative”. However, the constant demand for participation – in Althusserian terminology “interpellation” (Althusser 1977, 142f.) – is sometimes either perceived as a burden (cf. Winkler 2016) or, on closer inspection, recognized as an expression of a specious freedom (Distelmeyer 2013). Finally, the influence of interfaces on the provision of options for decision-making and choice was also brought into focus.

These theoretical and analytical aspects were combined with short brainstorming sessions for the students: What does a medium have to do to evoke the impression of interactivity and participation? How should the invitation of a medium to become interactive be evaluated? Where are users confronted with scope and opportunities for decision-making in their daily media use and consumption? Where is the opportunity to (co-)decide not offered?

The requirement to work with Korsakow within the module was not always welcomed. Many students arrived with clear ideas about how the project should work, what the goal was. When working with Korsakow, however, our aim was to find a way of dealing with the uncertainty that the software brings to the projects. To create narratives whose authors would not even know where they might end up. To loosen the reins of the story was not an easy task for many participants. This is afforded by Korsakow’s field of tension, which is somewhere between the two poles of “planning” and “chance”.

These uncertainties, which have to be endured when working with Korsakow, were often met with frustration. The reaction to this was usually an attempt to regain control instead of engaging with uncertainties. In regular editorial meetings, the discussions of interactivity and the resulting knowledge formations tended to be more of a “Can Korsakow do this and if so, how?”

The advantages offered by a Korsakow approach, such as keeping the project open and constantly adding new material without having to unravel the timeline anew, were barely used. Similarly, heterogeneous material was rarely linked together to form interesting connections via the programming of the software.

The groups that developed a “looser” concept and in which the individual students divided up the work, e.g. one person dedicated themselves to dealing with Korsakow and another person was responsible for producing the images, perhaps gained most from the module. In some cases, we were able to observe how a process

of dialogue emerged among the individuals in these groups and how each was able to specialize further in their chosen field while contributing to the group effort.

The group consisting of Dominik Maag, Lea Karabash, and Stella Bohn had set themselves the goal of creating an experimental interactive video on the subject of surface and skin, which gave particular weight to the soundtrack (Tinnitus, 2021). In a very elaborate interface, one moved among various parts of the body, with each click adding additional layers to the sound. The project is both a haptic experimental film and an electronic sound collage, something that has rarely been done with Korsakow. This was possible because the students were able to combine different skills, merging them in the project: programming, sound, and photography.

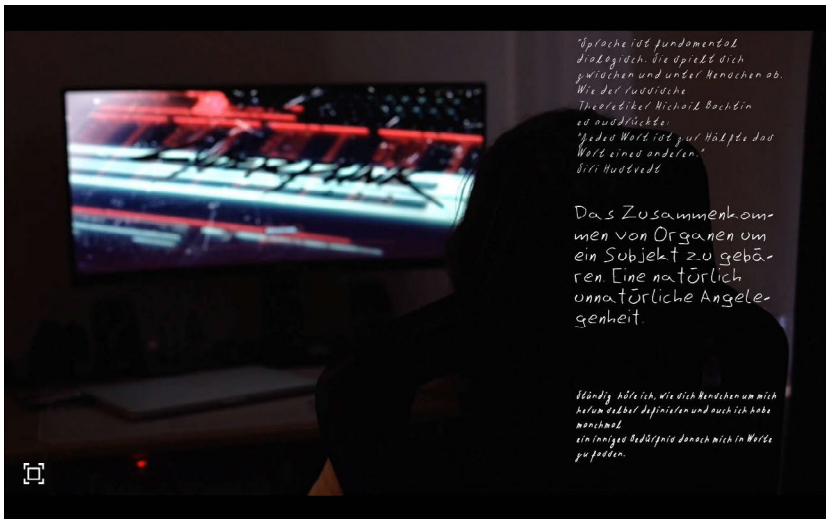
Fig. 1: Screenshot Tinnitus Interface



Source: Screenshot Tinnitus (Maag/Karabash/Bohn 2021)

One example where the process highlighted the uncertainties of Korsakow and the importance of maintaining them is the project "Einzel" by Lisa Blaser, Lukas Frauenfelder, Melina Hofer, and Felix Prantl (2023). The project deals with the question of the interdependence of the individual and the community. While the group initially aimed to resolve this question as part of the creative process, it turned out that exploring the question in the abstract while leaving it open was the group's actual interest. The group collected ideas and large amounts of video material, and all four group members kept notebooks. Instead of a closed project, a kind of heterogeneous archive of material emerged, which had developed over the course of a six-week module and which is framed by the initial question that opens the film on a text panel.

Fig. 2: Screenshot Einzeln Interface



Source: Screenshot Einzeln (Blaser/Frauenfelder/Prantl 2023)

The group succeeded in finding a middle ground between a conceptual approach and a certain messiness that Korsakow invites. This was not always easy for many students. The Korsakow software was an important partner in this, but it was not to be seen as a self-propelled machine. This is precisely why the module structure, interspersed with sessions for theory and reflection, proved to be particularly important. During the fourth and final implementation of the module, a module plan was drawn up which stipulated that the students would complete several small, sketch-like tasks during the module instead of one large project. This was intended to encourage students to experiment even more with the form of interactive documentary film, to find out what is possible – and what the Korsakow software enables. This resulted in examples that were most willing to engage in this process, as the open module plan created more space for thinking about experiential approaches to documentary work. In other words, spaces for thinking about how documentary films are made, what they say depending on their conceptualization and what interactivity can contribute.

References

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