

Stop, Skip, and Operate: Epistemologies of the Interactive Documentary Film

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In 2024, the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) announced the closure of its interactive studios in Vancouver and Montréal. For over 15 years, the NFB had been a world leader in initiating, producing, and archiving interactive digital stories and, above all, what Jihoon Kim (2022) calls “documentary’s expanded fields”, which includes all those documentary practices that have emerged in recent years thanks to new digital media technologies. In the following, I am particularly interested in interactive documentaries, which received a lot of attention around 2010 – both from TV channels such as Arte and at festivals – as well as larger budgets. In recent years, however, this commitment has been greatly reduced. Instead of browser-based narratives, funding and investors prefer to focus on virtual reality projects and, above all, the expansion of streaming platforms. For many, the National Film Board’s decision is the final nail in the coffin for interactive documentaries. I would like to take the opportunity to ask what the documentary film can learn from a critical examination of the interactive genre.

The advantages that are usually mentioned in connection with interactive documentary film are the polyphonic structure of the format (cf. Aston & Odorico 2022), which favors the assemblage of heterogeneous materials and perspectives, as well as the weakening of authorial supremacy in favor of active decision-making possibilities on the part of the recipients (cf. Wiehl 2020). Here I shall concentrate primarily on those examples of interactive documentary films which offer elements that have the potential to be included in a theory of the documentary against the background of diversifying reception options. The focus is on examples where the viewer has to choose between clips in order to decide which direction to take, where, in Farocki’s words, we switch from montage to navigation (cf. Mende & Holert 2019). Examples in which the focus is more on user-generated content, which Patricia R. Zimmermann and others refers to as “co-creation” (Auguiste et al. 2020, 67),¹ as well as for-

1 They also add within the first of their fifty speculations, that “Co-Creation functions as a utopian idea that may never be fully actualized” (Auguiste et al. 2020, 67).

mats such as audio walks in which the material is played on a site-specific basis, will mostly be overlooked here.²

In most examples of those interactive documentaries, the images are simultaneously presented next to, behind, and on top of each other, something that Geert Lovink refers to as “distributed aesthetics” (Lovink 2007, 225). They belong to what Petra Löffler (2014) considers the media-historical tradition of distributed attention.

In this chapter, I will discuss three operations and ask what the theory of the documentary – which has developed primarily with linear forms and traditional types of image recording – can learn from the format of the interactive documentary film.

Stop

One special feature of interactive documentaries that is often mentioned is the possibility of choice, which allows recipients to decide between different paths or branches. This is connected to something that almost never becomes the focus of the analysis: that the film stops until a choice is made.

However, it is important that the project itself does not stop, even if no clips are being played. The website just waits for an input, and this waiting is part of the web browser’s dispositive, just as images on the web are expected to be clickable, as Thomas Elsaesser has noted (2017, 219).

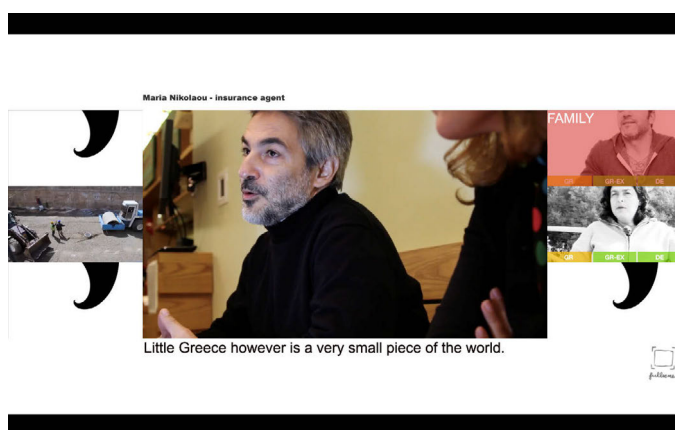
One specific form of this comprises projects in which multiple individual clips are visible to the user and the focus is on the sequence of individual videos. In *Geld.gr – Money and the Greeks* (Florian Thalhofer, D 2013), a documentary project about the Greek government debt crisis, individual clips play in different arrangements with other clips, shown alongside in smaller windows. When the clip in the main window has finished after a few minutes, the project waits for an input and almost nothing happens in the meantime, though some atmospheric sound continues in the background to signal that the website is not frozen.

Geld.gr was created with the Korsakow software, and projects realized with Korsakow tend to integrate the aspect of stopping more than other interactive films. This is due to the specific approach that Korsakow takes, which is less about providing a predefined selection of clips to choose from or offering various multilinear possibilities. In the Korsakow film *Racing Home* (Marianne McMahon & Phil Hoffman, CAN 2014), the film explicitly stops twice at the beginning. After the clip playing in the main window is over, it stops, the window goes black and another clip appears

2 For an overview of different genres of interactive documentary film, see also Gantier 2016 and Wiehl 2019; for the historical development, Mundhenke 2017; and for an overview of the established research on the topic, Sora-Domenjó & Kapur 2022, 45.

at the side. There is no selection, no background sound. *Racing Home* stops until you click on the one place that will play the next clip in the main window. After the first three clips, the film then switches to an interface that gives you three clips to choose from, displayed at the foot of the main window.

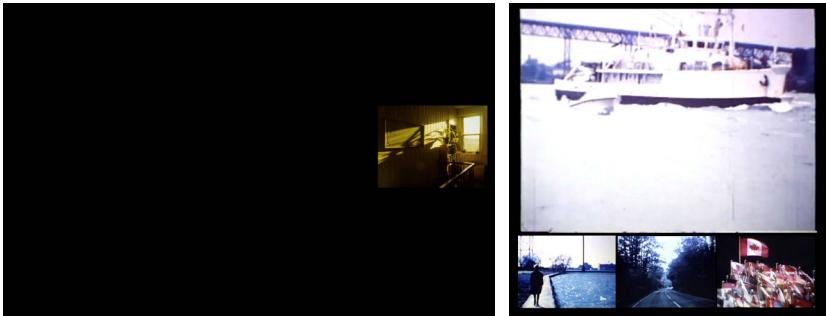
Fig. 1: *Geld.gr – Money and the Greeks* (Florian Thalhofer, D 2013), while the clip in the larger window is playing smaller preview windows on the left and on the right are visible. When the cursor moves over those black and white graphics long enough, a preview image of the clip becomes visible, showing what would play if the image were clicked.



Source: Screenshot: *Geld.gr – Money and the Greeks*

The moment of stopping and waiting is different in projects that are more committed to a database aesthetic than Korsakow projects. Some projects work on a web interface where you can navigate by selecting from a variety of documents, the individual documents being connected by the interface but still clearly separated from each other. *Field Trip* (D 2019, Eva Stotz), for example, is conceived as a central web interface allowing a range of selections. This project, which concerns the former airport Tempelhof in Berlin, combines very different and heterogeneous clips about the area via a bird's eye view map. Although the individual videos are also connected to each other, they are perceived very much individually, so that there is not necessarily any sense of a film stopping, as each clip can be watched on its own. There are connections between the different clips, but the project is designed so that you could return to the central interface at any moment and explore the site from there.

Fig. 2+3: *Racing Home* (Marianne McMahon and Phil Hoffman, CAN 2014), on the left the only possible selection after the first clip has ended. On the right the regular window with the clip playing in the larger window.

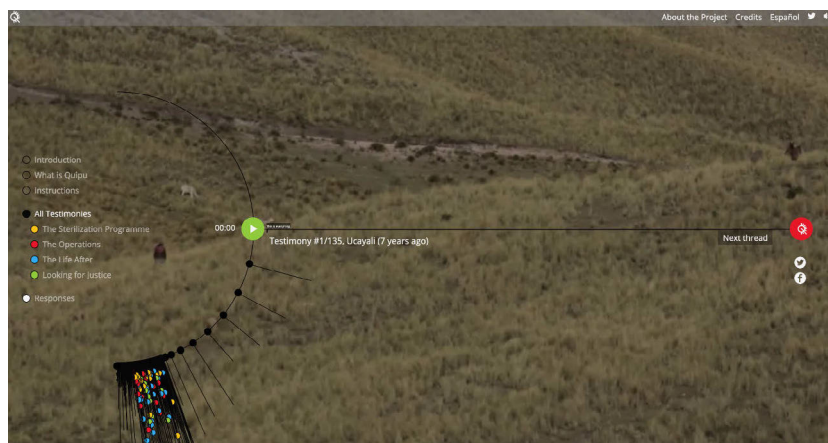


Source: Screenshots

Projects like *Field Trip* have more of a database aesthetic, as the user has a certain overview and can navigate to specific topics. Even though *Field Trip* consists primarily of moving images, the aspect of stopping is not as strong as in *Geld.gr* due to the database aesthetic, and the mode of selecting and navigating is clearly in the foreground. This is also the case with the *Quipu Project* (Maria Court, Rosemarie Lerner, Peru/GB 2015), a web documentary about the forced sterilization of over 250,000 women in Peru during the 1990s. The project primarily collects statements from those affected as audio documents. These can be selected via a graphic interface representing quipus, tapes with knots in them, an ancient recording system used by the Incas and other Andean peoples. When you click on a knot, an audio document plays. The knots are marked in different colors that enable you to proceed thematically. While a document is playing, you can select other nodes, whereupon another clip will play. When the end of a document is reached, the project stops. In the background you can see long video recordings with landscapes of the Andes, and a soundtrack includes atmospheric sounds such as the wind howling or birds twittering. As the *Quipu Project*³ consists mainly of audio files and the interface only conveys very limited visual information, this project creates a greater sense of deceleration and calm than *Field Trip*, for example, although both projects have a similar database aesthetic: an arrangement and logic that is far more visible and navigable than in projects like *Geld.gr*, where, for example, certain material cannot be accessed specifically.

3 For a detailed consideration of the project, see Nash 2022, 73ff.

Fig. 4: Quipu Project (Maria Court, Rosemarie Lerner, Peru/GB 2015), interface after an audio file has finished playing. In the video in the background you see a person walking. You can choose the next file from the knots below.



Source: Screenshot

In interactive projects where one clip follows the next, to stop the film can also be understood as an invitation to reconsider what has been seen with regard to what follows, to pause, to let the project rest or perhaps even to take a diversion that leaves the page altogether. However, the space that this opens is somewhat different from what is commonly referred to in film studies as a blank space and the viewer's imagination. The latter usually involves image design strategies of omission and allusion that deliberately leave certain elements of the image vague, do not show them or shift them into the diegetic off, in order to allow them to be filled more effectively by the viewer's imagination (cf. Hanich 2012). The stopping of the film does not concern the image and thus also not the *hors-champ* (the diegetic off). It has rather to do with processes that are connected with the production or reception of the film, i.e., which lie in the area of the *hors-cadre*, the non-diegetic off space.⁴ An interactive documentary that stops and waits for the viewer to make a selection for the next segment does not offer an opening for imagining, but for actually digressing. Since most interactive documentaries are on web interfaces and every other offering is always just a click away, stopping the video presents the opportunity for users to use the interruption to access other content, to not only pause but to leave the film. Platforms that aim to keep users on their sites for as long as possible are responding to this by

4 On the various areas of the off in *hors-champ* and *hors-cadre* in relation to new ways of image recording devices, see Krautkrämer 2014.

means, for instance, of auto-playing content. That is the case with interactive Netflix productions. In the reality series *You vs. Wild* (Ben Simms, USA 2019), the viewer is repeatedly asked to make decisions for the protagonist on his missions, such as whether he should go through the jungle or the river. This decision is embedded in the narrative, as Bear Grylls, who guides us through the series as protagonist and host, addresses the audience directly and constantly emphasizes how important it is that we make the decision for him. When such a decision has to be made, the narration pauses briefly, but not the film, as a video continuously plays in the background until you have made your choice – usually only between two options. The decision has to be made within a few seconds, otherwise the project will make the choice for you and one of the two available clips starts to play. There is no waiting here and no pause. You can also go back to a decision point at any time and make a different selection to see – or test⁵ – what the other option would have been – something that is not possible with Korsakow projects, for example.

This stopping of the film is something different from what Raymond Bellour called the gesture of stopping the image, as made possible for film analysis by the use of video recorders. In Bellour's eyes, the latter is also a transformation and digression, but with an insistence on the "fixation on the image" (Bellour 1985, 54). When the interactive documentary stops, it is often not to examine the still image in more detail; in most projects it is not possible to jump back to a given point in the last-played clip when it is stopped. The stopping of the interactive documentary is rather to be understood as an opening, a reflexive predetermined breaking point that is rooted in the format itself.

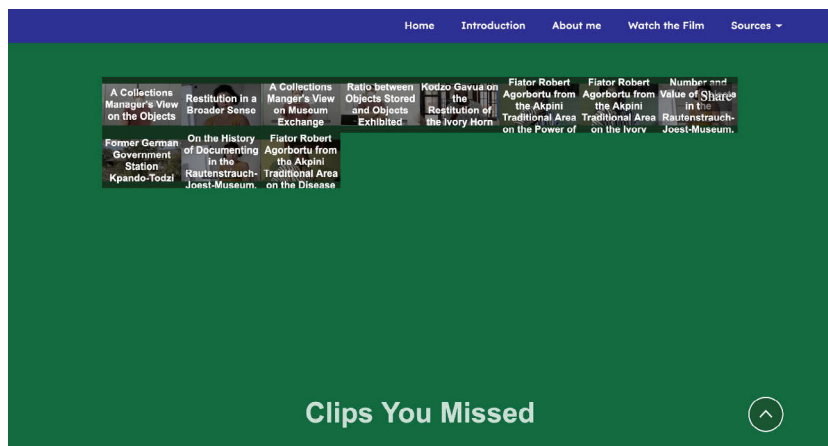
Skip

We can adopt Lev Manovich's term and describe the selection of clips from a juxtaposition or overlapping of the various offerings as a "spatial montage" (cf. 2001, 322). The multi-perspectivity and polyphony often mentioned in this context are concepts that have been developed in literature and music, which are linear media. In an interactive medium, however, different voices are integrated, but when a choice is made, other possibilities are no longer seen. Oliver Fahle has also pointed out, with regard to *direct cinema*, that on closer inspection, polyphony always points to the absence of other voices (cf. 2020, 88). And while interactive documentary film is also ultimately about the presentation and arrangement of material, this occurs crucially

5 Testing is also an important part of non-interactive survival shows, see Holzer 2023, 61f. See also Jan Distelmeyer in this volume, p. 85: "One fascinating characteristic of interactive documentaries, it seems to me, is that they test."

against the background of omitting and missing clips. In many projects, it is not certain how much of the material was ultimately seen. However, some films address precisely this circumstance. In *Thinking about Restitution* by Martin Doll (D 2022), which concerns the discourse of restitution in the Akpini Traditional Area in Kpando (Ghana), a board is shown at the end on which all the clips that were missed can be seen. However, these can no longer be selected; you would have to start the project again to perhaps catch them next time. Doll thus makes it clear that, especially with a topic as complex as restitution, only a selection of opinions and information can ever be shown and perceived and there is no definitive compilation.

Fig. 5: *Thinking about Restitution* (Martin Doll, D 2022).



Source: Screenshot

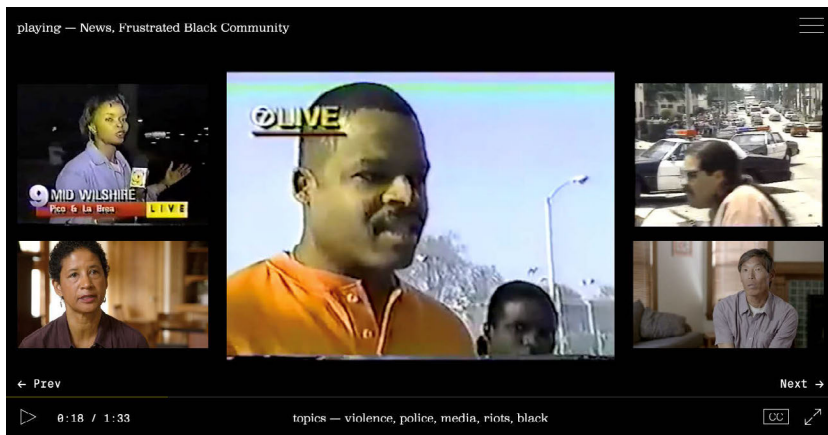
K-Town 92 (Grace Lee, USA 2017) addresses this missing out of material directly during the viewing process. The filmmaker's aim is to question the reporting on the aftermath of the 1992 Rodney King verdict in Los Angeles and the uprisings⁶ that took place in the days after. The aim of the film is to focus on Koreatown, to give a platform to voices that were not heard at the time and to criticize the one-dimensional and stereotypical coverage of the area at the time. Lee seeks to provide the narration and memory of the uprisings with a more diverse variety of multi-layered sources and statements. The project relies on the simultaneity of the material. Two

6 They are often referred to as riots, a term that often "reproduces the racist claims about black subjects: that they are violent, ignorant, selfish, and depoliticized", as Raven Rakia (2013) puts it. Leah Bassel finds the term uprising more culturally appropriate (cf. Bassel 2017, 38).

or more clips are often shown side by side. It is only possible to pause them all simultaneously, and not to pause one clip to watch later. But you hear only the sound of the clip in the middle or the one over which the cursor is hovering. The focus here is not on selecting individual clips, but on making the video audible. During the course of the project, you see several clips simultaneously, but can only hear one at a time. You have to constantly decide which argumentation you want to follow and whose positions you want to hear.⁷

This explicit foregrounding of the skipping and missing of material criticizes the ideology of the closed form of a linear documentary and instead emphasizes an open, porous, and fragile form. However, these interactive projects also make it clear that within a media environment characterized by an abundance of information, what is heard and what is not, and who is listened to and who is not, are always subject to a decision.

Fig. 6: K-Town 92 (Grace Lee, USA 2017). All clips play simultaneously, only the one in the middle or the one over which the mouse pointer is placed can be heard. At the top, the title of the clip whose audio is playing is displayed, below the connecting key words. (It is possible to navigate to the clips with those.) If you click on a smaller clip, it swaps position with the larger one and also loses its soundtrack, as it is no longer under the mouse pointer.



Source: Screenshot

7 It is possible to go back after one segment is over and watch it again with the mouse pointer on a different clip, but you can only hear them all by going forth and back. You can also navigate with the index to specific clips, but you will also find them side by side with others, not presented alone. See also the contribution by Vanessa Zallot to this volume, p. 60.

Operate

In an interactive documentary, the image or the individual clip can be more than just an image or part of a chain of argumentation. Not only because it is flanked by other images of equal value, but because the clip also has another task: It becomes part of the navigation. In very few interactive projects is it possible to refuse input and interaction and let the film run as a movie. Clips usually have to be selected and interacted with in order for the reception to function in the sense intended. The individual clips of an interactive documentary film thus become operational clips. Jan Distelmeyer has made the concept of operational images that was introduced by Harun Farocki productive for the interface (cf. Distelmeyer 2023, 24ff.). Farocki used the term operational image to describe those images that are created in industrial contexts, translate data, or control processes. They are images that are created by machines and that do not represent a process, but are part of a process and thus do not focus on or represent aesthetic functions, but rather questions of image pragmatics.⁸ Such images that are not intended for separate publication and strictly speaking do not appear as images at all, but merely as an intermediate product within a more comprehensive technical process (cf. Pantenburg 2015, 219). This means that the single clips of interactive documentary films would not fall under this category, as there are longer passages between the parts to be clicked on, in which moving images do indeed work in their iconic function as they do in linear films. It would make little sense to differentiate between two types of moving images in interactive documentaries. Rather, the operability of the images should be understood as an addition to the interactive format. In his book on operational images, Jussi Parikka therefore suggests that operational aesthetics should not be thought of as a particular style, but as a method of training (cf. 2023, 144ff.). In interactive documentaries, not only the buttons and elements of interfaces, but also the running clips themselves can be described as operational, as they must be clicked in order to proceed to the next sequence. Each selection is, on the one hand, a decision on how the movie should proceed, but at the same time also a necessary operation for the movie to continue in the first place. The operational images of an interactive documentary must be clicked or even skipped to get to the next images. Of course, we are not dealing with machine images that are no longer directed at the human gaze, the clips do not become the “nonhuman image and the nonrepresentational image” of operative images (Parikka 2023, 19), but they no longer stand alone as images either, as they have been given another very concrete function.

The operational videos make it clear that the analytical tools applied to interactive documentary films need to be expanded in order to recognize the influence

8 Cf. Farocki 2003, as well as Farocki 2004 and Eschkötter/Pantenburg 2014. On the international research field of operative images see Distelmeyer 2023, 24 and Parikka 2023.

that the interface and non-visible elements such as the software used to create the projects have, i.e., to focus on the performative aspects of users as well as platforms and programming. It is not a question of differentiating between different types of images; rather the interactive documentary reveals that the arrival of images on the internet places them in a context in which they no longer stand alone, but are always also involved in dependent selection and decision-making processes that are comparable to many other contemporary data processes.

All three operations briefly outlined here also address a weakening of the image. Within the discourse of the documentary image, they thus continue what Hito Steyerl described as a crisis of representation (2008, 129). What in Steyerl's case was still due to the technical inadequacy of the images, among other things, has now, more than 15 years later, given way to what Sam Ford, Joshua Green and Henry Jenkins summarized under the term "spreadability": high-resolution videos that are easy to make, distribute, change, and view. The format of the interactive documentary draws attention to this (cf. 2013).

Stopping, skipping, and operating are operations that I would like to associate in this context with an even older concept, namely that of the productive look, as coined by Kaja Silverman. In 1996, in *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Silverman used this term to describe strategies with which films show their images from new perspectives and whose gaze is no longer subordinate to the authority of the camera (Silverman 1996, 184). For Silverman, the *productive look* is a strategy of production in dealing with images, which she sees applied in films by Marker and Farocki, among others. This productive look is achieved by dealing with the images and a certain concept of film that produces a self-reflexive questioning of how things and people are viewed; the productive look confronts us with our expectations. However, Silverman was describing the processing and handling of the images, the producing of this cinema of the productive look, by the director and reflecting less on the concept in relation to the presentation of the material and a change in the presentation, which can happen in both installations and interactive formats. Yet the "look" can also be used to refer to reception, to processes that make the gaze of reception productive in order to find answers, not only to the crisis of representation, but also more comprehensively to challenges related to production, distribution, and reception.

The stopping, skipping, and operating of the interactive documentary film makes it clear that it is perhaps no longer necessary to seek new ways of capturing images, but rather that new ways of listening are needed instead. More than 20 years ago, also in 1996, John Fiske's analysis of the LA uprisings that are also the subject of *K-Town*, stated that the problem was not that critical voices had no platform – because platforms did exist, from radio to MTV – but that the prevailing discourse drew dividing lines between "us" and "them" and that certain positions were able to express themselves but were not listened to (Fiske 1996, 187).

The interactive documentary shows that simply making images available does not solve the problem; the images must also be listened to. In *Listening to Images* (2017), Tina Campt makes it clear that this can be achieved above all with alternative forms of reception, which can avoid the appropriation of problematic images.

The politics of listening require spaces, writes Leah Bassel in *Politics of Listening* (2017), where it can become a politics of empowerment for the speakers, where the roles of speakers and listeners can be exchanged to create interdependencies for endless transformations that break down the division into “us” and “them”. The format of the interactive documentary film can reflect the structural conditions of listening. Not every interactive documentary film offers this; as everywhere, there is great variation. In addition, there are also similar processes in linear documentary film concepts that attempt to address access and conditions of circulation in a different way, for example in participatory projects that rethink the division between in front of and behind the camera (cf. Krautkrämer 2023).

But the unfinished and porous nature of the interactive form, which distracts from the image instead of insisting on it, has the potential in the arrangement of the three operations to see the juxtaposition of the images not only as an attention-deficit installation, but also as a productive rethinking of digital possibilities and a critical reflection on the conditions of reception.

The format of the interactive documentary film may no longer be a viable alternative for the majority, but as an experiment and method for thinking about the provision and reception of images in our digital present, we can still learn something from it.

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