

The Act of Creation Is a Means to an End

An Interview With Mike Robbins

Florian Thalhofer

Florian: What is documentary to you?

Mike: Documentaries to me are about observations and what the observer does with those observations that he or she made. Documentary is *this is what I saw* and *this is what I think about it*.

When I first started in interactive documentary, I thought a documentary was supposed to be completely objective, but soon I realized that it is the opposite. Documentaries are entirely subjective. Observations are made from a point of view.

F: I agree, every observation is made from a point of view and is thereby subjective. Do people experience that firsthand – how media is made by using social media?

M: Yes, social media is more and more every person's documentary tool. If you look at Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs... When we did Highrise, Kat (Katerina Cizek) started with the idea that the internet is documentary, the internet that is made up of social media, she thought that it is one big documentary tool. Everyone is becoming a documentarian, as everyone is not only observing but makes comments on the observed, draws conclusions. I think that this is the important part of the documentary process, to draw conclusions.

F: Why is news not documentary?

M: I think that the difference between news and documentary is that most documentary makers would say, yes, I do have a point of view, and this is why I am saying this, and this is who I expect to see this, and this is the *impact* I think this should have.

The classic interactive film creator is not much different than the linear one, they are foremost film-makers. If you go to any of those labs or workshops for making interactive documentary, one of the biggest parts of the labs is *impact*.

F: Impact?

M: Impact. What effect will your work have on the audience. Very much a design-thinking process: who is the audience, why will they watch this, and what will they take away from this film or this piece.

This has been part of the documentary workshops and labs since I started working in them. (Laughs) I myself am not really that interested in the impact part of it.

F: Why are you not interested in impact?

M: I don't know. A good question, I guess. I believe that often it feels like putting the cart before the horse. Here is what my interactive documentary or feature documentary film will do, this is how I will accomplish it, and these are the actions we will take. This would be the methodology of some of these labs. Before actually: This is what we are making.

But I think that a storytelling project has to start primarily from having a point of view and that starts with the creator by having a subjective feeling or a thought – an opinion on an observation. You have to see something and then have your own reaction to it.

It has to be more than observation. From that observation you draw a conclusion and that is what you offer to the rest of the world. But it is not the rest of the world's conclusion; it is your conclusion. It is your subjectivity. It is your perception.

However, documentary labs tend to push more towards impact by gauging a need in an audience and fulfilling that need. I think that this is more like marketing, but then I also think that marketing has its place at some point, too. I don't think it has any real place in the creation process. I would say that making PR is not a way of creation, it is not art. It is selling something.

F: Has your practice of “doing documentary”, of looking at things from other angles, changed you?

M: I would say yes, and I believe this is also why someone would undertake such a project. In my view, anything you do should serve as both an act of learning and an act of creation.

This is the same thing for a carpenter who is making a door or for someone that is working in a 3D environment. To me that has the same kind of satisfaction as a maker. You make it and then you put your headset on, and you try it yourself. I will try it first as Mike, and then I will try it as somebody else. What would my partner Harmke Heezen say if she saw this? What would Florian say? What would my mother say? For me it is the same thing when I write, say, something funny and it makes

me laugh, sometimes it can make me laugh even harder if I imagine somebody else reading this and the effect that it will have on them.

When we talk about impact, you cannot rule impact out completely, but what I suggest here is the holistic aspect: The contemplation of what the audience is and its relation to you and your relationship to the piece and the audience – that act of oscillation. That's what I teach at these workshops. It sticks out a little bit because it is more of a complicated message and maybe not as easy to assimilate during two or three days. But I would say that 50 percent of the people at those labs have no time for such thoughts, they just want to make something, and consider the impact. I would say 50 percent don't care, 25 percent think it is nonsense and the other 25 percent say, "Ah, that is pretty cool!"

F: What does this act of oscillation contain? Do you try to teach people to use the tools of documentary, like the camera, to see things from another perspective?

M: Yes, you could put it that way. We try to use the idea of consideration of the audience or another person. You use that as a tool to help your own perception, and you use that to inform the tool – in that case the camera.

F: In my thinking, the audience is not part of my consideration, because I am the audience as well. Authors and audiences become the same thing. You are becoming the audience through role-playing, and I am the audience of my piece myself?

M: We are saying the same thing.

F: For me it is difficult to imagine what other people think.

M: I really think it is difficult. And probably not super accurate. But one still has to try a little bit. For me it is still like an exercise. And it is not even done quite consciously.

F: There is a way of using Korsakow – I call it the *Korsakowian approach* – that allows you to create *unaware associations* – associations that you as the creator are not aware of. Nevertheless, you are creating them. You can see them when you watch what you did, when you become the audience. Korsakow is a tool that affords unaware associations. But it won't work when you have an agenda, when you want to communicate something to an audience. Wanting to create *impact* breaks it.

M: This makes me think of apples and oranges. Which I both kind of enjoy. Oranges are like linear storytelling: I have an idea, and this gets expressed. The nonlinear process is more to do with emergence.

To me the linear is one-to-one, not necessarily in a straight line. One idea, one statement. I have an idea; I create statements to support that idea. That's a linear thought or writing process to me.

Whereas with the nonlinear thing you describe, you have keywords or perhaps situations. I think this is like a process of maybe 20th century collage, like the early, early 1900s: Dada. You put the idea out first, a thought. But there's no linearity involved in this. Saying, well, I have this and then I put this and then you look at those two things that happen kind of by chance and you ask, well, what's the meaning out of this? And then through this juxtaposition arises a sense of understanding or meaning that may not be coincidental. It probably has something to do with your own self-unconsciousness. That to me is [a] nonlinear thinking approach. And that's what I would also call an *emergent*. Using emergence as a storytelling technique. Emergence is something that arises out of something. So you create a system of unrelated things. Things that have no other relationships to each other apart from the fact they're in the same system. And through their interrelationships something happens. Some sort of chemical reaction.

From editing came surrealism. This to me is kind of part of the importance of the early 20th century of modernism. And I think one of the keystones of modernism is juxtaposition. *Meaning through juxtaposition*. And this was only really considered at all post 1900. Prior, there was no idea of modernism as we know it, which contains these ideas of juxtaposition. So, whether or not it's in film, whether or not it's in painting or the plastic arts – it just happened at the same time, also in music. I extensively studied these concepts for “Night Divides the Day”, a game project that my partner, Harmke Heezen, and I are developing. We explored how music, film, and the visual arts became so interrelated at this point in time. The core of the idea of this game is juxtaposition and the meanings derive through juxtaposition.

Emergence kind of is something that the audience can feel. Well, I see an eyeball and a razor. And they say: Well, hmm, from this combination I get this, and this is something that the audience feels. But this is also something the filmmaker feels. Whether Luis Buñuel or Max Ernst, Joseph Cornell, Marcel Duchamp, or Igor Stravinsky. They put seemingly unrelated things together. You have no idea why Joseph Cornell puts a red rubber ball together with a stuffed parrot. And I think he did not know himself until it was done. And then he said – *Well, that's why*.

And that carries through even to somebody like David Lynch, who says: “I'm going to put all these elements together.” And it's not random in his mind. When you read his writing, everything has a reason. He's not going to tell you what that is, and I think he actually cannot fully put that into words himself. But he knows when those things are together and out of this emerges for him – *meaning*.

F: Do you see yourself as someone who is doing i-docs?

M: I would go every second year to the i-Docs symposium. It was nice to go there because people understood what you were doing. There were other people that were doing what you were doing. There were people that were writing about what you were doing. And kind of an audience, you know. An audience for that. At that point in time, I would consider the work that I was doing as i-docs because that was what the audience was. I don't know so much anymore, because "i-docs" instinctively has a connotation of something that's kind of browser based and that you see on the computer screen and involves some form of interface that you can use, with a mouse or touch, very much related to software. Related to software, that's what I consider the "i-docers". I know it's a lot more than just the web page. But I mean really, if push comes to shove, I don't really think that what we're doing now is that much different in a way than what we did ten years ago. So if we do a piece now about body doubles and use computer vision to capture faces and put it on a big screen in a dark room, it is more of an installation piece. I think that is interactive and it's a documentary. It's not necessarily using the same tools that we used ten years ago, but the creation process is not much different.

F: Is the way you think a result of the tools you used?

M: Possibly. I mean I think the tools taught me to be reflexive. Self-reflexive. You are what you are because you are.

Perhaps there isn't a lot of difference between Korsakow and the artistic practice of Joseph Cornell from the 40s, 50s, and 60s because this was somebody who used collage in the process and somebody that wrote nonlinear stories in his little boxes. He created boxes and inside these boxes he kind of made these worlds. His worlds had stories in them, sometimes almost narratives. The tools he used very much dictated the way he told stories. That affected the way he lived, how he looked at things, how he learned to make sense of the things in the world. Joseph Cornell's work is very influential to my thinking.

F: Through his practice he made sense of the world and through his making sense of the world he unveiled a bit more of the world?

M: Reciprocating. Yes.

F: Working with media and computers at that intensity for so many years, what is your advice for people that are *now* using all those tools? When I started to use these tools, it was difficult to have access to them. This is different now, people have access to cameras, editing and publishing tools all on their smartphones. What is your advice on how to handle these tools?

M: One thing would be to be open to having the way you use that thing change the way you look at other things. Just like Joseph Cornell.

When you use a tool, be patient with it. Be very patient with it so you can get its full potential of what it can do for you.

Before I started to work at Helios doing this job that I did for all the i-doc things, I thought that computers are stupid. But then I thought “F***! Now that I am 30, I need a real job – not being a musician anymore,” so I thought I would learn whatever I needed to learn about computers. I had no idea of what juxtaposition or emergence were, but then through the process of working every day with juxtaposition and emergence, you start to develop the language for it. The human mind kind of remaps itself in a very literal way, it does not take long before whatever neurons in your brain are repatched.

F: What did computers teach you about juxtaposition and emergence?

M: I think the key commands for *cut and paste* literally to me are like a huge revelation. I learned that I write backwards, to a certain degree, when I use computers. If I write a paragraph and usually what the whole paragraph is about is the first sentence. Then I usually realize that the first sentence should come in the last sentence of the paragraph. And that I would need some form of context for that sentence. Using a computer, I could now write all these things out in the way I can imagine them being said and then reorder this super quickly. If you write something down with pen and paper, once you have written it, it is written. But if you write it on a computer, you can move it around; you can edit it; you can delete it; you can add to it. I am just talking about word processing now, but there is not much difference between word processing and for example Photoshop or video editing software. It's the same principle.

The thing about juxtaposition is possibilities. That's not all there is to juxtaposition, but in the very same way that someone like Joseph Cornell had his objects that he could take out and put in and switch around and change at will, that's what computers are for me. The possibility to put things in, change things, move them around, change their meaning, get new meanings without it being written. The only time when it is actually written or when you have committed to something is when someone else actually sees it. Computers have built into them this idea of cut and paste and that you can move things around.

F: That allows you to get into dialogue with the thing that came out of your own mind. And computers make that process frictionless.

M: Yes, and I think speed is important, in the creative process, or this part of the creative process. There is less and less thinking of how difficult it is to do things. Whatever comes into your mind comes out.

If I have to rely less on other people's knowledge on how to do something, if I don't need someone to make something – for me this is a big thing. I see filmmakers, and it is sometimes epic which steps you have to take to make a film. Even if you know how to run a camera yourself, you still have to rely on a team of any number of people.

F: So with computers you can make something as complex as a film on your own.

M: I mean the trick is not to not make films. A good advice for people learning how to use computers is to have something to do first. Have a project. The act of creation is a means to an end. Not the learning of how to get there. To have that goal in mind is ten times, 100 times more effective than learning for the sake of learning. But this usually requires some degree of lying. Because you usually have to tell someone that you can do something that you can't.

F: What would your world look like if there were no computers?

M: I certainly would have a different job. I think I would be a carpenter. I would have a workshop with tools and wood chips and shavings and glue.

I think time would go slower. Of course, perception of time is kind of relative. Because computers do things faster and faster, and everything about computing is about speed, I think this makes one hyper aware of time. With computers you have this completely different sense of time.

With photography, you can capture an instant in time. One instant can now last forever. This also kind of messed with people's perception of time. So I think we kind of live in that world collectively, you know, our sense of time and passage of time and how we live through it is completely different, it changed. Since the industrial revolution.

F: Computers sped the world up.

M: Computers sped my world up. Now it is crazy how quickly a day can go. The pre-computer time must have been some kind of slower. Slower it seems and longer. Now it is faster and shorter.

The other thing is that computers and photography store us, so we see ourselves in an accelerated sort of fashion as well. I think that the passage of time between now and say like the last 30 years has gone super quickly. For me that's about the time that I started using computers.

F: Is this only because of computers?

M: I don't know. I just know that 30 years ago, at the age of 30, I started using computers and now it just seems that 30 years has gone much more quickly than 15 of the 30 years that preceded it. I sort of experience that every day. It's like this sort of truncation. The truncation of time or acceleration of time. I don't know if that's age. I do know that if I'm out of the office and if we spend two or three weeks without a computer, without spending time in front of the screen doing stuff, then time for me goes a lot slower.

That's my general feeling. I don't think you could physically, or medically, or scientifically prove that; it's just a subjective feeling.

F: How do you think the future of i-docs will develop?

M: We spend less and less time on learning how to use something before we move on to the next platform or medium. I think people spent an awfully long time learning how to use film, before it was something that was artistically viable or didn't really have to be explained or excused to the audience. That didn't come until many decades later, when artistically satisfying and complex films were being made.

That's a lot of knowledge that has to be gained, for years and years and years. And when you look at the time and the number of people that were working on this, the people hours that went into and the dedication – the sweat equity – all that was put into this as a medium, so people understood how to use it. I don't know if that's actually the same with things now. I think that the period of time is a lot shorter that people actually have with a new medium now, before it becomes obsolete and ephemeral.

I started doing i-docs in the world of Flash, and Flash was this de facto industry standard – *this is how things will be made forever*. Then it took maybe three or four years from flash to no flash. It was like overnight – *all gone*.

When you think of the amount of learning that people had done already, but also all the learning people still had to do. If you think of how even the most complex and realized Flash pieces were at the time, and in retrospect how limited they were, still. People were still wrestling with the medium.

And then all the sudden that is not a viable form of expression anymore.

So. You move on to HTML5 and then HTML5 with a combination of other things that kind of lasts for, you know, like five or six years. And then it becomes obsolete in a way, or at least obsolete in terms of funding or the ability to create sustainable projects.

And then it moves on to Virtual Reality. After around seven years of VR being touted as the future of how things will be done, people are now questioning that assumption. Once again, there is uncertainty about which platform will receive sus-

tainable funding and support that allows for the development of a system, such as a company.

F: But if media is produced with that impact thing in mind, this is manipulating viewers to a certain way of looking at things, the thing viewers learn is that they are being manipulated. Often as a result we can see that people are basically deciding what message they want to listen to, what kind of impact they want to be impacted by. This does not leave room for a naive or open-minded approach to the world. How can you trust anyone if everyone has in mind how to impact you? What is your trick, how do you look through the fog?

M: That's for another evening.

F: Tell me, in one sentence.

M: I guess I don't believe anything anymore.