

Two Kinds of Interactive Documentary

Unconscious Associations and the Korsakowian Approach

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All the texts I am familiar with regarding “interactive documentary” in general, and Korsakow in particular, tend to focus on describing what the object of interest is and what can be done with it. I want to attempt a different perspective by looking at what it does – as if it were a living organism, a “living documentary” (Gaudenzi 2013). My particular focus here is on what I call *Korsakowian* interactive documentary.

To explain the term *Korsakowian*, I first need to distinguish it from what is *non-Korsakowian*, which I would argue encompasses most of the field of interactive documentary. For that reason, I would like to introduce a term only for the duration of this text to be used like a variable in computer programming. To indicate the arbitrary nature of this variable I use Greek and call it “τα περισσότερα” (ta perissōtera, “the most” in Greek). So, I will first outline some essential points that characterize what I want to put into that variable that I tentatively call “τα περισσότερα interactive documentary” and then illustrate how *Korsakowian documentary* differs in these very aspects.¹

Τα Περισσότερα Documentary

The Goal Is to Communicate

Whether linear or interactive, it can be said that the primary objective of a τα περισσότερα documentary is to communicate² something to an audience, be it knowledge or specific perspectives, sometimes in the form of observations. The τα περισσότερα documentary is thereby primarily an instrument of transmission of meaning from

1 In this text, I do not attempt a comprehensive description of interactive documentary. Interested readers are encouraged to explore *The Living Documentary* for a more in-depth understanding (Gaudenzi 2013).

2 “[C]ommunication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed,” (Carey and Adam 2009, 19)

“center-to-periphery”,³ where a center can also be a group collaborating to create a work that sends certain messages, ideas, or perspectives. The receiver can be an individual or a group. Senders are fundamentally also receivers of their own message, meaning the work also affects those who transmit it. However, this may be less noticeable when there is little or no discrepancy between what a work transmits and what the authors⁴ of the work think and feel.

Author-Audience Relationship

In τα περισσότερα documentary, I argue that there is a distinction between the role of the author and the role of the audience. It is a sender-receiver relationship, and the usual aim for senders is to impact as many receivers as possible. So the group of recipients is intended to be larger than the group of senders. The success of a τα περισσότερα documentary is often measured by counting the number of recipients a work reaches, for example the number of views it receives on YouTube.

Associations and Interpretations

In τα περισσότερα documentary, the elements of information conveyed by the work (arguments, observations, facts, thoughts, feelings, perspectives) are consciously interconnected by the creators of the work. The information is arranged in fixed – though not necessarily linear – orders. The key term here is “conscious”: The authors have consciously reflected the connections they establish – even if they rely on a subconscious level of association in the viewer – and this awareness is present at the latest when they have examined the finished work, the artefact, and released it for publication.

The potential interpretations arising from the connections laid out by the authors between the elements of information can be diverse, but they are also limited. The possible interpretations are confined to the space permitted by the connections established by the authors, as long as the audience does not resist the intended message itself.

Without the use of computers, it takes considerable effort to create media works whose connections are not consciously predetermined but rather assembled spontaneously and more or less randomly during presentations. Media installations sometimes achieve this even without the use of computers; in such cases, they take on the

3 As discussed by William Uricchio in this volume, p. 18.

4 Throughout this text, I use the term “author” for the sake of simplicity. In interactive documentary in general and even more so in the context of Korsakowian documentary, the term makes less and less sense, as I will explain further on. For now, I ask all readers who, like me, view the term “author” critically, for patience.

characteristics of exhibitions or performances, which, in turn, affects the number and kind of their potential audience.

The Position of the Viewer in Relation to the Work

One could say that observers look at a τα περισσότερα documentary from outside the work. The viewer observes or navigates the documentary, but the observer is not part of the observed system in the sense that the work does not alter its inherent structure in reaction to the feedback of the observers. This certainly goes for linear forms, but I would argue the same is true for interactive forms whose authors have prepared and pre-thought possible paths. In other words, the paths chosen by different viewers in a τα περισσότερα interactive documentary may vary, but these paths are pre-established, and the viewer cannot traverse paths that were not consciously laid out by the authors. Viewers of a τα περισσότερα documentary have no influence on the mechanics of the work.

Τα Περισσότερα Documentary: What Is It Good for?

The τα περισσότερα documentary is an excellent tool for conveying complex predefined messages from one or more senders to one or several recipients.

It can be argued that any medium of communication has its unique way of “encoding” (Hall 2018) information.⁵ In that sense, before film, there was no medium capable of encoding information in the particular way that film does. Different media encode differently. The way a particular medium affords encoding has implications not only on what kind of information can be encoded⁶ but also on what⁷ one⁸ is able to turn one’s attention⁹ to. So τα περισσότερα documentary – like any means of expression – defines the range of what can be encoded and communicated. As we trace the evolution of media, it becomes evident that each new medium has brought with it unique capabilities and modes of expression. The advent of print, for example, revolutionized the dissemination of information, allowing for the mass production of literature and news, thus transforming public discourse and individual knowledge. The invention of the telegraph, and later the telephone, shrank distances, enabling instant communication across vast spaces, and profoundly altering the pace and nature of personal and business interactions. Film combined visual, auditory,

5 (Arguments, observations, facts, thoughts, feelings, perspectives).

6 Or “what kinds of stories can be told”.

7 For example, topics or themes.

8 “Authors” as well as “audience”.

9 In this case, in the form of the camera.

and temporal elements to create immersive narratives and experiences. Its ability to depict motion and elicit emotional responses through a combination of visuals, music, and editing introduced a novel mode of communication. Therefore, I think it is not controversial to say that film, at the time it came into being, had a different range of what could be communicated, compared to any other medium at that time. Τα περισσότερα documentary thus has a particular range of what can be communicated, as does *Korsakowian documentary*.

Korsakowian Documentary

The term “Korsakowian” originates from the Korsakow System, developed by myself and others.¹⁰ This software is typically used as a tool to create interactive documentaries and “is distinct from other interactive documentary platforms” (Miles 2014, 205). For a more detailed description of Korsakow, I refer to the text by Adrian Miles from which this quote is taken. There, Miles has managed to explain Korsakow in great detail in a way that can be understood by scholars in the humanities.

For our purposes, it is important to point out that in Korsakow, information is structured using keywords. This allows for a flexible assemblage, an assemblage that typically also involves an inherent element of randomness. The creators determine both the content and the way in which it is linked using keywords. But connections based on keywords are only calculated and displayed during viewing. Creators can therefore only discover how the elements (the units of information) come together by watching the work. As the number of connections displayed when viewing a Korsakowian piece is usually smaller than the total number of possible connections, not all relationships and potential perspectives can be perceived in a single viewing. Hence, observers always see only a portion of the relations generated, and they are aware of that fact. Doing Korsakowian projects is an exercise that makes one realize that one can never perceive all perspectives, all references. Through this practice, one learns to think with this gap in mind, i.e. an awareness that one can never have all the perspectives, all the information at one’s disposal. One consequence of this exercise is that one cannot incorporate the concepts and theories of others into one’s own thinking in more than a provisional way, as long as one has not thought them through from the ground up oneself.

I have personally spent many years developing and working with Korsakow, and I would say that this enabled a Korsakowian practice that has been formative in shaping the way I perceive the world. In this text, I aim to precisely describe, from

10 Matt Soar, Dave Reisch, Willem Velthoven, Joachim Sauter, Heinz Emigholz, Tobias Hülswitt and students at the University of the Arts in Berlin, where I had the privilege to co-teach in a class on “Interactive Narration” from 2001 to 2007 alongside Willem Velthoven.

my perspective, what has constituted the magic of Korsakow for me, both in the past and present. I believe it aligns closely with the experiences of others who have dedicated significant time and energy to better understanding Korsakow from a theoretical standpoint (Aston 2022; Rosenzweig 2020; Weidle 2020; Thalhofer, Aston, and Odorico 2018; Wiehl 2016; Miles 2013, 2014; Soar 2014; Gaudenzi 2013; De 2009).

Korsakow is a tool that can be used in different ways. The Korsakowian approach is only one way, which means that not all works made with Korsakow are Korsakowian simply by means of using Korsakow.

In relation to Korsakow, Adrian Miles used the term “computational nonfiction” (Miles 2013) as a “placeholder” for what I understand to be Korsakowian, Franziska Weidle “tentatively” calls it “computational correspondence” (Weidle 2020, 175), both expressions focus on the computer – the tool – whereas I would like to focus more on the way the tool is used, the approach that the person using the tool brings to the table.

The goal is to learn that Korsakowian documentary pursues a different *primary goal* than conveying predefined messages (the *primary goal* of τα περισσότερα documentary, as laid out above). In Korsakowian documentary, the *primary focus* is to expand existing messages, opinions or perspectives to a point that goes beyond the opinions and perspectives of the authors. These perspectives are not consciously designed by authors of the artefact; they emerge from unconscious associations that can be triggered, for example in Korsakow, through the use of keywords. Linking without knowing what the links will be opens up an approach whereby one can potentially learn something from anyone/anything. This is not unproblematic, as it is associated with a very specific danger, as Stefano Mammola et al. have highlighted:

In the internet era, the digital architecture that keeps us connected and informed may also amplify the spread of misinformation. This problem is gaining global attention, as evidence accumulates that misinformation may interfere with democratic processes and undermine collective responses to environmental and health crises (Mammola et al. 2022).

To avoid picking up nonsense, one needs to develop a “sixth sense” (Nelson 2013, 31), and I argue that the exercise of the mind that results from the application of the Korsakowian approach can fulfill just this role. How precisely this exercise works should be the aim of further research. The development of a “sixth sense” can be observed in people who perform this exercise using Korsakowian systems.

Author-Audience Relationship

One could say that, at the outset, the authors or initiators of a Korsakowian documentary either do not precisely know what they think about a topic– the subject of

the respective documentary – i.e., they have no fixed opinion, or they do have an opinion but see their perspective merely as one voice among many. So the aim is not to persuade anyone, which is often the case in τα περισσότερα documentary; rather, it is about being convinced – about learning something (which could be from anyone). It is about wanting to see a perspective one hasn't seen before, and this applies to both authors and viewers (who for this reason are increasingly blending into one another). The agreement to embrace new viewpoints and at the same time critically reconsider “legacy perspectives” is the shared commitment of all involved in a Korsakowian documentary approach.

Counting the number of recipients of a Korsakowian documentary to assess the success of such a project is not only an inadequate method, but in my opinion, leads in the wrong direction; it sets the wrong incentives. A Korsakowian documentary should strive to gather and make understandable as many and as diverse perspectives as is both possible and ethically justifiable. Observation consistently shows that this is not well-received by many viewers. It can be said that people often react positively to what confirms their assumptions, and negatively to what challenges their thinking or makes little sense in the light of their thinking. The latter two points, however, are goals of a Korsakowian documentary. These are some of the reasons why Korsakowian documentaries are often perceived as more challenging and demanding than τα περισσότερα documentaries. All these points seem to argue against using audience size to gauge success.

Associations and Interpretations

A Korsakowian documentary is a space where it is essential for observers to actively participate in the process of interpretation. By connecting existing material in continually new ways, new perspectives can emerge, and this requires the involvement of observers in the meaning-making process. In a Korsakowian documentary, observers are not recipients of messages but the entities that make sense out of information. A Korsakowian documentary without an observer interpreting what is seen has no immanent meaning.

Furthermore, it can be said that a Korsakowian documentary is never finished, in the sense that its parts are in a fixed relationship to each other. In contrast, a puzzle, for example, is finished when all its pieces have found their fixed place, a linear film is finished when all the scenes have found their fixed place, a text is finished when all the words have found their fixed place and the text can be printed. According to these comparisons, a τα περισσότερα interactive documentary is finished when all the links between the elements have been established, which is usually the case at the time of its publication, at the latest. However, a Korsakowian documentary is never finished in this sense, even if the work on the piece has been completed and has been published. A Korsakowian documentary is always in a state of flux,

also and especially with regard to the artefact. As a consequence, the space of interpretation of a Korsakowian documentary is generally larger than is the case with a τα περισσότερα documentary. This refers to the space within which meaning can emerge when the woven connections between different pieces of information (arguments, observations, facts, thoughts, feelings, points of view) are received and interpreted/processed. This processing takes place in a process that Sandra Gaudenzi calls “autopoiesis” (2013) in the context of interactive documentary, using a term coined by the Chilean biologists, neuroscientists, and philosophers Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in relation to basic biological principles (Maturana and Varela, 1987).

Unconscious Associations May Lead to Recursive Reflective Awareness

Unlike in τα περισσότερα documentaries, information (arguments, observations, facts, thoughts, feelings, perspectives) can be *unconsciously* linked in a Korsakowian documentary.

The elements always come together according to the logic established by the creators, but the creators cannot predict the specific relationships between the elements. The creators are thus the originators of the connections between the elements, without being consciously aware of it; they create unconscious associations.

The Position of the Viewer in Relation to the Work

In Korsakowian documentary, authors and audience are actors within the same system, a setup that can be understood using the concepts of Second Order Cybernetics (Luhmann 2020; Glanville 2002; Von Foerster 1984). It can be said that a Korsakowian documentary observes the observers,¹¹ whose feedback – generated through interaction – influences the documentary. And vice versa, in Korsakowian documentary, the multitude of perspectives of the authors is also visible to the observers. The audience thus also becomes an observer of the observer, in this case the authors, so both groups of authors and audience become observers of the observers and both roles blend into each other. In Korsakowian documentary, every actor in the system observes everyone else in the system and, by communicating the observations, it can be said that everyone *also* observes themselves. One could therefore say that a Korsakowian documentary functions like a mirror in which the observers observe themselves.

11 Particularly obvious, for example, in a Korsakow show where the authors are part of a “living documentary” (Gaudenzi 2013) made in front of a live audience (<http://korsakow.tv/format/s/korsakow-show/>).

As the audience becomes increasingly part of the authorship via interaction and feedback that influences the system, and authors become observers of both the audience and the overall system influenced by the audience, the functions of author and audience increasingly merge. Observers observing observers in the act of observation. In a Korsakowian documentary, the subject of the documentary gradually recedes into the background, becoming more of an occasion for the actors to come together. It sets the framework within which the exercise of observation and reflection takes place. An example of this is an experiment that took place within the Polyphonic Documentary Project¹² initiated by Judith Aston and Stefano Odorico. For this project, participants, mostly academics, contributed short, personal video sequences expressing their ideas on the theme of “polyphony”. These sequences were interconnected in Korsakow using keywords. Participants found it fascinating to see what others contributed, how they approached the theme, and what insights and understanding could be gleaned from these perspectives. The result¹³ was discussed collectively in a Zoom session and was generally well received. I would like to invite anyone not involved in the project to take a look and keep an eye on the clock, noting how much time passes before they lose interest. I suspect it won't take very long. For an outsider, it may appear as random, unrelated film clips that make no sense. I believe the project may not be easily accessible to someone looking from the outside, someone who is not inside the system and not observing the observers¹⁴ (see also Aston 2022, 13 p.). In this example, the concept of autopoiesis, which Maturana and Varela coined to describe processes within a cell, is, in my opinion, highly apt, as one might imagine that a cell looks very different when viewed from within compared to when observed from the outside.

Korsakowian Documentary: What is it good for?

Korsakowian documentary is a tool for engaging in a process of collaborative thinking to gain new insights. Everyone involved in the documentary process, whether as an observer, creator, or subject of the documentary (e.g., an interviewee) participates in the process of collaborative thinking. Korsakowian documentaries do not aim to convey a message or insights; they are a space within which insights emerge.

Korsakowian documentary allows a wide variety of information to be shared with a multitude of recipients without simultaneously communicating how this information should be understood, something that is hardly avoidable with a conscious arrangement of elements. The information can be held in what I would like to call “interpretative suspension”, not only during the process of creation but also

12 <https://polyphonicdocumentary.com/>.

13 <http://polyphony.korsakow.tv/>.

14 ... or perhaps the observation as such?

within the work (the artefact). The space for interpretation in a Korsakowian documentary can thus be larger than in a τα περισσότερα documentary. If information (arguments, observations, facts, thoughts, feelings, perspectives) is to be transported without a predefined context in terms of space and time, a Korsakowian approach is suitable.

The Korsakowian Aspect in Other Systems

The Korsakowian approach is only one way to use Korsakow, but it is the way afforded by Korsakow in contrast to most other authoring tools used for creating interactive documentaries, which are more focused on giving the author what he presumably wants: control. This particular affordance of Korsakow sometimes leads to frustration among authors/users of the software who are concerned about giving up too much control over their material or want to tell a “good” story.

Korsakow is not unique in its affordance of Korsakowian documentary. I would argue, for example, that many social media platforms not only enable a Korsakowian approach, but are intrinsically Korsakowian. However, the Korsakowian aspect of social media platforms is only one aspect of many and is therefore perhaps easy to overlook. Korsakow is a very simplified tool that lacks many aspects of social media, such as commenting or sharing. The Korsakowian aspect is therefore very prominent and for this reason is easier to observe and describe.

Conclusions

I argue that what makes the “magic of Korsakow” is also a widely overlooked feature of generative media formats such as YouTube or X: the possibility of making a huge number of *unconscious associations* visible, of putting things (arguments, observations, facts, thoughts, feelings, points of view) into constantly changing meaningful relationships with each other. It’s not about finding the best relationships, the most meaningful or the most convincing. In my opinion, it is much more about the exercise of constantly learning to see things in new contexts. Not either/or but “and/and”, as Judith Aston has repeatedly stated in my supervisory sessions. I believe that this focus on similarities rather than differences can have a decisive influence on resisting the temptation to cherry-pick information from the flood that people are confronted with in digital networks. All too often, this fits their own image and serves their own confirmation bias. People who do not master this exercise are, I worry, in danger of literally drowning in information, constantly searching for right or wrong, good or bad and without sufficient practical experience – “knowledge-in-practice” (Schön 1983) – to distinguish one from the other. The tendency of human thinking to filter out information that does not fit the individual worldview

or to ignore it for as long as possible might be seen as a bug or as a feature. I understand what I call the Korsakowian approach as an exercise in distinguishing the relevant from the less relevant in a world of multi-layered and often contradictory information. It involves recognizing the signal in the noise and being able to make classifications on this basis that are wiser than one's own thinking and ideas would allow.

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