Media Analysis Interdoc

Approaches and Suggestions for Analyzing Interactive Documentaries

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Introduction

Open a webpage. Click the "Start" button. A window opens, containing many other windows arranged in tiles. They all invite you to make selections. Clicking on one of the tiles makes the selection disappear. The options, and with them the ability to influence them, give way to a black square that now dominates the center of the screen. A short clip opens: A talking head speaks. Two minutes forty-three seconds. Then a fade-out. The square disappears from the screen and the selection of tiles appears again. Stasis. Waiting for a new input, a decision, a click.

This describes a possible formal framework and the user-facing elements of the interfaces that comprise and process the content of interactive documentaries like a container. The graphical user interfaces (GUI) and their concrete designs differ, but the implicit appeal to the user by providing a selection is always a central feature of interactive web documentation.[1] In the following article, I will collect, present, suggest, and discuss approaches for the analysis of interactive documentaries (interdocs, webdocs, or iDocs, the short name is still disputed). All analyses of this media formation (and arguably all analysis of media formations) center on a specific research question, whose development is of course the task of the analysts, and which corresponds to the thrust of their investigations. The methodological notes compiled here and presented on the basis of brief analyses therefore do not offer a universal solution for a media analysis of interactive documentaries. However, they present and bring together tried-and-tested approaches. Finally, I present an analytical grid

1 Most interactive documentaries are *web documentaries*. Interactive documentaries can be used in performance, museum, and exhibition contexts. However, their prime location – which is usually also the technical condition of their existence – is the World Wide Web and html code. Interactive documentaries are usually not kept on distributable data carriers, but are almost always presented on websites for reception.

that we developed as part of our research project on interactive documentaries and which has proven to be a useful approach to analysis.

About Documentary

Documentaries are narratives of reality. They describe a real world with real people and represent reality in a specific way. This representation influences what is said, what is narrated, and determines how reality is and can be perceived. A documentary is a representation of a historical world that not only portrays past events, but also tells a story under given conditions and at a certain time. The central conditions of documented history are "plausibility" and "conclusiveness".

Documentary practice serves a social function: Documentary film corresponds "with society's need for discursive understanding and stabilization of ideas regarding objectivity, truth, and reality" (Fahle 2020, 115).[2] Documentaries are an important instrument for negotiating and communicating about objectivity and truth – and thus about historical realities.

A central aspect of documentaries, which is therefore crucial in any analysis, is the type of argumentation used in a film. Filmmakers and their films argue through the "invocation of witnesses, scientific statements and evidence such as maps, diagrams, statistics, etc. […] as well as through narrative (but not fictional) embedding in stories" (Fahle 2020, 117).[3]

In the second decade of the 21st century, interactive documentaries have begun to offer a new arrangement of these materials for argumentation. And – not least due to technological developments – to provide new forms of montage and means of presentation of these materials.

The Documentary and Technology

Technological innovations affect different areas of (fiction and documentary) film in specific ways. While technology, as in all areas of the media, does not unilaterally determine cultural developments, certain practices and aesthetic-stylistic approaches are influenced by technical developments and innovations, as Nichols' documentary modes illustrate.[4] Nichols emphasizes, for example, that the *observational* and *partic-*

2 "[…] mit dem Bedürfnis der Gesellschaft nach diskursiver Verständigung und Stabilisierung von Vorstellungen hinsichtlich Objektivität, Wahrheit und Realität" in the original German.

3 "Aufrufen von Zeugen, wissenschaftlichen Aussagen und Evidenzen wie Karten, Diagrammen, Statistiken etc. […] sowie durch narrative (aber nicht fiktionale) Einbettungen in Geschichten" in the original German.

4 Bill Nichols (2017, 104ff.) identifies six modes of the documentary film, which he dubs the poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative modes. This clas-

ipatory modes benefited from the spread of smaller, lighter and thus more portable 16mm cameras in the 1960s, which enabled a comparably high recording quality in new recording settings (cf. Nichols 2017, 114).

With regard to interactive documentary film, it can be argued that the availability of computer technology has also facilitated specific changes on the side of reception. Factors that an analysis may consider include technical capabilities, recording modalities, and reception-specific changes in the storage of and access to documentation, insofar as these serve to answer specific questions and influence the production, distribution, and reception of a documentary.

Specifics of Interactive Documentation: Form – Purpose – Context

Technology also plays a role in Kate Nash's reflections on interactive documentary film, which are important for the critical analysis of *webdocs*. The starting point of her considerations, however, is a warning against overestimating the significance of technologies for the question of interactivity in web documentaries:

> […] I have argued that technology, while an important factor in discussions of interactivity, cannot in isolation help us to grasp the contribution that interactivity makes to documentary discourse. We must be sensitive to the webdoc text as a whole and the place of interactivity within it. (Nash 2012, 200)

For the analysis, Nash distinguishes between the categories of *form*, *purpose*, and *context* (Nash 2012, 201ff.). This generates a broad framework that can provide orientation for analysis.

Form

The inquiry into form equally involves an analysis of the representation, aesthetics, and functions of interactivity. Interaction here concerns the shaping of the relationship between author, text, and user. The formal analysis of interactivity should clarify where within a representation influence can be exerted on the narrative and where not. At the same time, this raises the question of the meaning and purpose of interactive elements. Are they an end in themselves, a gimmick, or do they bring

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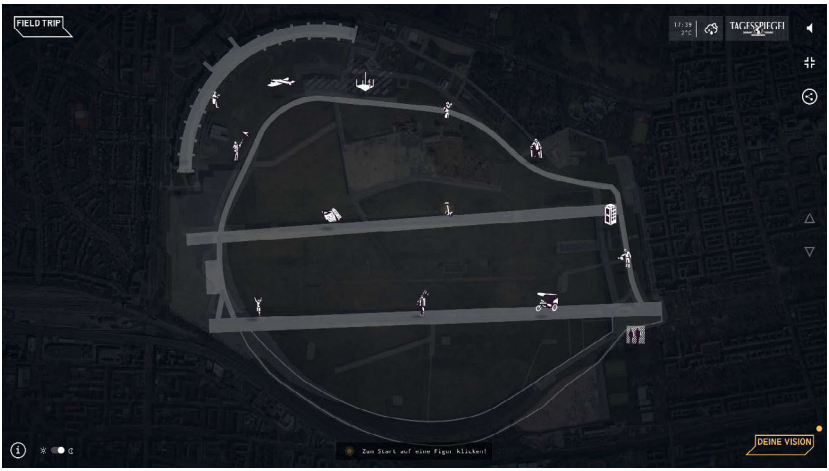
sificatory schema is both a tool for the analysis of documentaries and an important systematization for documentary film theory, which was derived from previous analyses. The modes describe broad, categorical differences in the argumentation of films. They serve to communicate what has already been realized in films and reality narratives, as extrapolated from existing media. And they serve as a description or rather a framework for comparing what may be innovative in new productions. Moreover, they allow different approaches to be distinguished and bring order to the scattered methods of documentary practice.

something new into play that influences, supplements, expands, or changes the documentary quality of the narrative? One question here, for example, is what influence users can have on the documentary text. A journalistic documentary such as *Firestorm* (The Guardian, 2016) certainly integrates elements of interactivity: If the user remains inactive, no narrative unfolds, no information emerges. At the same time, however, the user's influence is limited to scrolling back and forth on an otherwise largely linear and static website. In the documentary *Field Trip* (Eva Stotz, 2019), on the other hand, there is no linear narrative, but a map-like interface based on a satellite image.

Fig. 1: Screenshot of the interface of the interdoc Field Trip (Eva Stotz, 2019).



Source: *Field Trip* (Eva Stotz, 2019), screenshot

Users can (and must) decide freely the order in which they want to explore this presentation of the former airport Tempelhofer Feld in Berlin. Initially, interactive participation was not limited to this: In *Field Trip*, users were invited to tell their own stories and make them available to others. The makers saw this as a fundamental principle of their "open source documentary", the aim of which was to be a "permanently open and modifiable project that relies on open web technologies" (https://fieldtrip.tagesspiegel.de/#overview). This principle was to be applied throughout *Field Trip* – right down to the programming: All "possibilities of interaction, visualizations, transitions, effects and everything else except the raw material, is implemented via small, reusable code building blocks (code snippets)" (ibid.). These snippets were to be kept in an open repository in the spirit of open source. Today, it is no

longer possible to add your own clips to the documentation. However, the existing "crowd-sourced" clips are still available under a free license.

Documentaries created with the software *Korsakow*, e.g. *The 13th Floor* (Florian Thalhofer/Kolja Mensing, 2005), are built around small clips referred to as SNUs – for "smallest narrative unit". These are arranged and made available in a tiled interface according to a random algorithm and can be selected by the user. These are just three examples of the wide variety of different forms in which interactivity can be encountered.

Purpose

The *purpose of* interactivity in web documentaries is linked to more than just the immediate goal of giving users something to do. The analysis here focuses on the consequences and results of the integration of interactive elements for the documentary. It is about the use of interactivity for the documentary narrative. Of the various conceivable purposes of interactivity in documentaries I will discuss the four most prominent: 1) Information can be provided that is to be found and discovered within the documentary and beyond it. The documentary *The Shoreline Project* (Liz Miller, 2017), for example, provides a *strategy toolkit*: This contains links and further information in the form of suggestions for activist action for the protection of coastal regions. *The Shoreline Project* pursues the purpose of "learning" through an in-depth or activating form of discussion by means of interactive incentives. The *strategy toolkit* contains possible guiding questions for dealing with the topic of the documentary in school lessons. 2) Interactivity can be used to further develop a narrative. The interactive narrative of *Prison Valley* (Philippe Brault/David Dufresne, 2009) began[5] with a narrative "check-in" to a hotel. Users were asked to log in to a fictitious hotel reception using their real Facebook accounts. In *Prison Valley*, the aim of interactivity was both a specific form of personalization of the documentary experience and a narratively motivated exchange among users, who were encouraged to engage in collective discussion and conversation inherent to and organized by the documentary. 3) Interactivity can involve the inclusion of user-generated content. I have already mentioned *Field Trip*. Another example is *18 Days in Egypt* (Jighar Mehta/Yasmin Elayat, 2011), whose users were invited to add their own videos and content to the documentary. This resulted in a collaborative and crowd-sourced documentary about the Arab Spring.[6] 4) Another form of interactivity is the integration of ludic elements that playfully introduce users to the interface, which then ultimately reveals the actual information. This is also

5 *Prison Valley* is one of the best-known interactive documentaries. However, because it was based on Flash and was not transferred to html5, I speak of it in the past tense.

6 https://docubase.mit.edu/project/18-days-in-egypt/, last accessed May 28, 2025.

where there is a blurring of the boundary with the genre of "serious games". One example would be the narration of *Pirate Fishing* (Orlando von Einsiedel, 2011), an Al Jazeera production that deals with illegal fishing off the coast of Sierra Leone. At the outset, the documentary involved users via a fictitious email in which they were asked to collect information as investigative journalists. Short video clips could then be viewed within the game, which could be used to fill a fictitious notebook with factual information. The further the game was played, the more information was revealed. The playful background was therefore the entry point and marker of progress for the reproduction of the documentary content.

And finally, interactive elements of a documentary can also simply serve as entertainment. One popular, yet strange, example is the interactive documentary series *You vs. Wild* (Ben Simms, 2019) by Netflix. The adventure reality show asks its viewers to make more or less important decisions for its protagonist Bear Grylls so that he can prevail against the supposed dangers of nature in inhospitable regions. The scenarios depicted are all scripted reality. The interactivity is limited to two choices based on predefined plot points, but is less aimed at teaching specific lessons than at increasing entertainment and amusement.[7]

Context

Nash considers the *context* of an interactive documentary to include both the presentation of opportunities to exert influence and the underlying technical infrastructure.

> How extensive are opportunities for interaction? Where are they located? To what extent do elements either within the frame or outside it encourage or discourage participation? Is the interface designed to be comprehensible or opaque? Where is the webdoc hosted and what impact might that have? How is the user positioned in the interaction? Are they addressed directly, left to work it out for themselves or, perhaps, positioned outside the text, a position that parallels film or television spectatorship? (Nash 2012, 201).

While the analysis of the context particularly focuses on the interfaces of interactive documentaries, it also concerns the technical infrastructure. For example, it is relevant *where* a documentary is hosted, which devices can be used to access it, and on which (storage) media it is kept. The importance of this context for interactive documentaries can easily be seen from the fact that many web documentaries created in the 2010s are no longer available. *Prison Valley, Fort McMoney* (David Dufresne,

7 See also the discussion of *You vs. Wild* in the chapter by Florian Krautkrämer, who describes how the decision-making process in interactive Netflix projects is designed to keep users on the platform for as long as possible.

2013), *Gaza/Sderot* (AlexSzalat/Joel Ronez/Susanna Lotz, 2008) – the most ambitious and most successful interactive documentaries of the decade can no longer be accessed today. They were based on Adobe Flash, a proprietary platform that was discontinued due to security concerns and as a result of the emergence of new, open standards in 2020. While repositories like the Internet Archive were able to archive some Flash-based browser games and the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) has migrated some interactive documentaries to html5, other works, such as the documentaries mentioned above, are not available for current systems due to their complexity and thus cannot currently be viewed.[8] The technical basis here determines the cultural availability. When analyzing the context, the technical background and foundations of interactive documentaries should therefore be taken into account. And, of course, the dispositive – the network of techniques and discourses – is influenced by the fact that interactive documentaries are available on the World Wide Web, but usually are not (or cannot be) distributed via linear television or storage media such as Blu-ray. This equally affects availability, target group specificity, and referencing within analyses.[9]

Methods

The information and clips or films contained in interactive documentaries can also be analyzed in isolation using familiar methods of film and media theory. Florian Mundhenke (2016) considers the "film sequence protocol" [*Sequenzprotokoll*] to be a tool that remains relevant. One problem of analysis can be seen in the fact that the "text" is never completely available, because it only unfolds in the interaction with users (cf. also Nash 2012, 195). Mundhenke names various analysis options, some of which originate from ethnography, to counter this circumstance. For example, in addition to participant or non-participant observation, guided interviews are also an option: Here, the way different users deal with the content and features offered by webdocs can be examined and, for example, the "perception of freedom of action" (Mundhenke 2016, 37) can be brought into focus. Mundhenke essentially suggests a relatively classical division of the analysis into "text analyses" and "user analyses" (ibid., 34). This corresponds to his classification of web documentary as a hybrid between documentary (at the level of content) and play (in formal terms). Such a division certainly has advantages, because each of the sub-areas can be given its own analysis. At the same time, however, a strict separation of content and form for me seems to miss the dimensions in which the form and thus also the mediality of the

8 Cf. also the interview with the NFB's Jimmy Fournier and Louis-Richard Tremblay in this volume.

9 One need only recall that Siegfried Zielinsky (1986) described the video recorder as a condition for the possibility of media research.

decision co-determine the contextual aspects or at least their representation and reception.

Analysis of this kind cannot answer the following questions:

- What influence does the presentation of the choices have on the progress of the narrative?
- Do webdocs and interactive documentaries have their own specific visualities and how are these linked to their visual presentation and their integration into a website layout?
- What differences are there in the attention economy and how is this reflected in the editing and form? Mundhenke himself points out, for example, that the web dispositive privileges shorter clips of three to five minutes in length over excerpts of 20 minutes (cf. Mundhenke 2016, 27).

On the Dissolution of Form and Content

I have already indicated that the distribution of interactive documentaries via the World Wide Web plays an important role for their context. Along with interactivity and non-linearity, this has important implications for the methodology of the analysis. The question of the role played by the montage of the individual clips, users' selection decisions, and thus the order in which a documentary is accessed has also already been problematized. It is difficult to precisely reconstruct the reception of an interactive documentary. A documentary such as *K-Town'92* (GraceLee, 2017), for example, contains so many clips, so many hours of material, and so many possibilities for variation that it is impossible to comprehensively reconstruct a *general* reception situation. The "projection interface" of *K-Town'92* consists of (up to) five clips shown in parallel, containing five different audiovisual fragments.

Next to a play button, classically symbolized as a right-facing triangle and near an indication of both time elapsed and a yellow progress bar, there are keywords, *tags*, labeling the topics of the clips. At the top left-hand corner of the screen, the titles of the current clips are displayed next to the word "playing". Moving the mouse pointer over the selection of clips currently playing displays the current title. At the same time, the mouse pointer activates the audio track of the corresponding clips. If the mouse remains inactive, the text and interaction overlay disappears and only the currently running clips continue in parallel. The fragments are historical news reports on the uprisings in Los Angeles following the Rodney King trial, interviews with contemporary witnesses, and other footage.[10] As noted above, if you move your mouse pointer over one of the clips displayed, the sound of that clip is played. In this

10 See also the analysis by Vanessa Zallot in this volume.

way, the sound of one clip becomes the off-screen commentary of a completely different clip. The fragments mix and connect; they intermingle and intertwine. Hence, it is (almost) impossible for two people to watch the same documentary – at least as long as the content of the clips is regarded as the text and content of the documentary.

Fig. 2: Screenshot showing the interface of K-Town'92 (Grace Lee, 2017).

Source: *K-Town'92* (Grace Lee, 2017), screenshot

This example, however, demonstrates the central role of the theoretical understanding of interactive documentary: After all, it would be plausible not to draw the classical distinction between content and form, but rather to conceptualize the interactive documentary film as a successful hybridization of the two. This also weakens the significance of the individual viewing sequence and the situational montage: It is not what the user is given to see in which order that is of central importance. Rather, the fact that new mixing ratios, montage sequences, and the mixing of images and sound from different clips can and must be produced again and again *is the central textual statement of the interactive documentary.* There is no one image, no one point of view, but rather a polyphony of voices and a kaleidoscope of multiple perspectives. However, this does not diminish the significance of a specific viewing situation for the analysis. On the contrary, it actually enhances it: precisely because we are no longer concerned with the individual viewing and the passage of clips, but with the conditions of the possibility of producing a specific viewing. Reoriented in this way, the textual analysis acquires a different and original explanatory function. Analysis then does not undertake the impossible task of (completely) reconstructing

the polyphonic and multi-perspective points of view, but aims to make comprehensible and to work out the *means of creating* different perspectives and polyphony.[11]

Interactive documentaries have a major advantage for this type of analysis, as the importance of the interfaces provides very specific, external, and objectifiable indications of how the narrative can be extrinsically influenced by the users – with the means made available to them by the makers and programmers. Methodologically, this increases the importance of certain procedures, such as screen captures, as a means of making specific reception decisions accessible for repeated viewing, thereby recording an individual viewing experience. However, to emphasize this once again: This is not about exaggerating this specific, situational and individual reception situation itself. The point is to use screen capture – which may include a record of the analyst's own viewing experience – as a foundation for the analysis of the mode of reception and possibilities for the unfolding of the audiovisual text as an interactive hybrid. It is not the content that is central, but the mechanics of its uncovering.

Such an analysis places particular demands on the descriptive language of the analysts: As the example of *K-Town'92* shows, different things often happen on the screen at the same time, but these can only be reproduced successively in language. The paradigmatic unfolding of the interface must be translated into the syntagmatic structure of language. The analysts must be attentive and try to make themselves as blind as possible to previous experiences in order to discover and name supposedly self-evident aspects of use. What can you do with the mouse? How can the visual and pictographic interfaces be translated into language? What is important and what is not? What can be left out of the description so as to explain the reception situation in a comprehensible way? The analyst's language is critical for the success of the analysis. And of course, alongside their own viewings and screen captures, interviews with other users, as described above by Mundhenke (2016), can also be beneficial. Getting users to speak can serve to introduce variations into the descriptive language and multiply the attention of the analysis. This can be supplemented by processing public reviews or existing analyses.

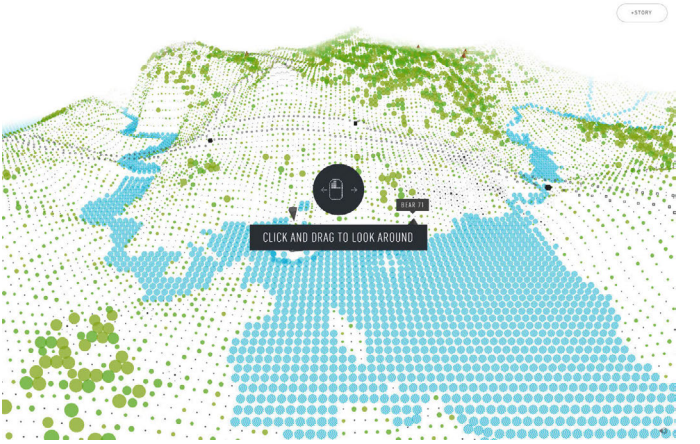
The Importance of the Interface

Viewing an interactive documentary as a hybrid in which content and form merge also underlines the central role of the graphical user interface (GUI): "A webdoc is a

11 A separate question would be whether this really is so fundamentally different with regard to linear film: Audiences' individual histories, their psychological constitutions, viewing experiences, and cultural embeddedness have always influenced the reception of a film – but it is impossible for the authors to fully anticipate or control this. Here too, the aim of the analysis was to work out what activation potential a particular narrative provided for certain readings.

database that is structured by an interface" (Nash 2012, 207). This is where the mediality of the decision is particularly noticeable and where the novelty of interactive documentaries compared to traditional documentaries is located: Interactivity finds its own *mise en scene* (Distelmeyer 2013) in the design of the interfaces. At the same time, the user's commanding power is both established and limited there.[12] From a media-theoretical perspective, the GUI is only one of five interfaces and access points that can be distinguished.[13] As interactive documentaries are usually "web documentaries", the means by which users can select among possible continuations of a documentary narrative via web interface are central to the analysis. They link the users to the medium in which the content is presented, while simultaneously linking the content to the form in which it is displayed. This aspect of the analysis is relevant because it makes the result of programming visible: "What I encounter in interface analyses […] are effects of a programming that has already been decided" (Distelmeyer 2022, 118).

Fig. 3: Screenshot showing the interface of Bear 71 (Leanne Allison/Jeremy Mendes, 2012).



Source: *Bear 71* (Leanne Allison/Jeremy Mendes, 2012), screenshot

12 See also Jan Distelmeyer's statement that "the commanding of what computers have to offer is always linked to acts of compliance" (Distelmeyer 2022, 68).

13 The underlying interfaces, which can be assigned to the *context* in Nash's terminology, are identical in different documentaries. The other interfaces that need to be named are: hardware-to-hardware, software-to-software, hardware-to-software, and software-to-hardware links (Distelmeyer 2022; Cramer/Fuller 2008).

The interfaces also require careful description if they are to be analyzed effectively. Above all, it is important to always consider both the possibilities an interface reveals and those it may also (non-)explicitly exclude. In addition to the prominence of control elements for selecting and assembling available clips, links, or information, central questions also concern the options for navigating within the clips: Can a video be stopped or rewound once it has been selected? Can individual sequences from a clip be selected using a timeline or progress bar? Or does clicking on a clip mean relinquishing control and starting a process – such as playing a video – for whose entire duration no further action can be taken? Is the length of a selected clip made transparent to the viewer, or is the duration (of the clip or the overall documentary) unknown? What instructions for using the interface are given to the users? What is explicitly explained and which functions do they have to discover for themselves using a *trial-and-error* process?

The procedure of an interface analysis also benefits here from various memories and objectifications of the interaction: Screen captures and screenshots offer an important instrument for providing a dense description of interfaces.

Parameters of an Analysis Grid

The analysis of interactive documentaries faces particularly challenges owing to the wide variety of designs that can be used to create such documentaries and the variability of parameters that can be considered in analysis. In our research project on interactive documentaries, which is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), we have therefore developed a matrix that brings together some important categories for analyzing interdocs. The starting point for the analysis is certain standard information: In addition to the title, year of creation, details of those responsible for making the documentary, synopsis/topic, and the URL, this also includes an approximate indication of duration. This information often already requires a certain amount of research. Some interdocs, such as *Bear 71* (Leanne Allison/Jeremy Mendes, 2012) or *Atterwasch* (Marco del Pra'/Frédéric Dubois, 2014) show the running time on the opening screen. With other formats, as in the case of *The Shoreline Project* or *K-Town'92*, this information must be extrapolated from the volume and approximate duration of the total material included. A further piece of basic information that may be noted concerns which of Nichols' documentary mode (or modes) a given work should be assigned to.[14]

14 Cf. also footnote 4.

Narration and Style

Two further parameters of the analysis matrix concern narration (macro perspective) and style (micro perspective): Narration may be characterized, for example, as linear or non-linear. The organization of the material can also be taken into consideration here: Is the montage exclusively user-determined? Is the organization of the content controlled or left to chance? Is specific content such as video clips sorted by topic or theme? Does the presentation follow an organizational principle such as the "chapter form"? Is there a single linear storyline or are different narrative strands interwoven? Style, by contrast, refers to the formal and more fine-grain preparation of the content: For instance when a documentary includes interviews, do the clips include the questions put to the interviewees, or can these be derived based on their answers? Do clips include off-camera commentary? How are media artifacts arranged and represented? Is the documentary a work of journalism? Does it present factual knowledge or is the argumentation more poetic and associative? Who are the speaking subjects? Does the documentary use music or sound collage?

Sound

Sound deserves its own separate category: Here, analysts should pay attention to the role of ambient sounds, the use (or not) of voiceovers, whether words and images are mismatched (by design or not), and how music is used, e.g. repetitively as a theme. In her analysis of *Pregoneros de Medellín* (Ángela Carabalí/Thibault Durand, 2015), Vanessa Zallot notes, for example, that it uses "geo-spatialized sounds":[15] The singing of the *pregoneros*, the Colombian street vendors of Medellín, gets louder the closer you get to them (virtually). In the *Shoreline Project*, individual chapters are accompanied by a themed soundscape. The chapter "Stormy Skies" is backed by a loop of thunderstorms, birdsong, whistling, and splashing water; "Rising Waters" with the cries of seagulls, the sound of waves, and the creaking of a moored boat.

Imagery and Aesthetics of the Material

Another central parameter is the imagery and aesthetics of the material: This category attends to the visual design of the documentaries – both in terms of individual clips and film excerpts as well as the visuality of the interfaces. Some documentaries use original material, while others are built around found footage (e.g. with an 8 mm or 16 mm look). Interactive documentaries may include recordings with the aesthetics of surveillance cameras, photographs, GoPro clips, or smartphone recordings, labeled maps or overlays from Google Maps. The entire spectrum of analog and

15 See the article by Vanessa Zallot in this volume.

digital visuality comes into play here. The short, six-minute installation *In Event of Moon Disaster* (Francesca Panetta/Halsey Burgund, 2019) uses historical TV footage of the moon landing from July 1969, underpins it with VHS effects and simulates the rounded corners of a tube television. All of this is combined with the digitally generated deepfake of a speech that Richard Nixon would have given if Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin had not been able to return from the surface of the moon.

The editing of the underlying cinematic/audiovisual material is also important: How is it cut? Which shots are used? The complete toolbox of film and media analysis comes into play here.

Interface Grammar/Interface Aesthetics

I have already emphasized above that the imagery in interactive documentaries generally does not stand on its own and does not merely depict something. In most cases, visuality is accompanied by an "operative imagery" (Distelmeyer 2017, 92). For example, when the thumbnail of a video clip also functions as a button for selecting the corresponding clip. Furthermore, the entire structure of the website, including its control elements and layout, is both part of the aesthetic image design and a central element of the user interface and should be described accordingly in the analysis. Jan Distelmeyer has pointed out that the various levels of interfaces connecting software, hardware, and users combine the functions of both physical conduct and ideological guidance (cf. Distelmeyer 2022, 58). Conducting [*Leiten*] is to be understood simultaneously in its electrotechnical meaning as "conducting electricity" [*Strom leiten*], as well as in its meaning of "*guiding*" [*leiten*] in the sense of leading towards an intended use and behavior. Both are thus "*Leitungsfunktionen*". This raises the analytical question of how the *interface-mise-en-scene* (Distelmeyer 2017, 81) guides users through the process of participatory input and documentary presentation. Among other things, this concerns the arrangement of *choice architectures* for the clips: Interdocs created using Korsakow usually have a tiled look. A rectangular window contains the currently selected clip. Below, above, next to it, or following it sequentially, further small rectangles with thumbnails of corresponding clips are then offered for selection. In the Korsakow documentary *13th Floor*, for example, 13 (!) tiles of variable size containing linked clips are offered after a clip is played. One tile is the largest, four tiles are half the size, and eight further tiles are half the size again – each halving the size of the main clip currently playing. There is also the option of a "BirdsEye" view, which provides 36 (out of a total of around one hundred[16]) clips arranged as a grid. The visual content of the thumbnails is at first hidden from users. Just the titles, displayed in white letters on a black background, are visible. Only when the mouse is moved over a tile does the loop of a compilation open as a

16 Statement by the director Florian Thalhofer.

preview of the respective clip, allowing the user to infer, for example, who is being interviewed in this clip. One effect of this interface arrangement is the creation of a retarding moment: Users have to pause once until the clip selection has revealed itself and again until they can make an informed decision about which interviewees to continue the documentary with.[17] The selection interface in the Korsakow film *Geld.gr* (Florian Thalhofer, 2013) is designed in a similar way.

The UK newspaper *The Guardian*'s "scrollumentary" *Firestorm* uses a completely different method of user guidance. The central navigation option is linear scrolling, allowing users to move forwards and backwards. But it also allows direct selection of individual chapters and sub-chapters from a menu. Unlike in Korsakow documentaries, you can also start, stop, and jump within the individual video clips. Navigation functions are clearly separate from the texts and images of the documentary itself. The situation is different again in the case of documentaries like *Bear 71* or *Field Trip*: Here the navigation is integrated – in different ways in each case – into the visual concept of the representation of the documented object: In *Bear 71*, it takes the form of a stylized, animated map, which at the same time connotes the narrative negotiation of nature and on which the clips are offered as pop-ups for selection. In *Field Trip*, the navigation is part of the aforementioned satellite photograph of Tempelhofer Feld, on which pictograms of corresponding objects and protagonists can be found, enabling a selection of footage or interview material.

User/Interface Control

The matter of user/interface control is not entirely distinct from the previous parameter: A range of activities – or restrictions of possible uses – can be registered separately under this heading. For example, is it possible to intervene in the sequence of single clips or not? How does the interaction between users and the presentation of the documentary on the website work? While the previous parameter focuses more on the formal and design aspects of the interface, this parameter is concerned with the (im)possible action potential of users.

Software/Backend

This aspect deals, as far as possible, with the specific software employed. Which programming languages were used? Which authoring software was chosen? Is it clear which software was used to edit the clips?

17 Thalhofer once commented that he had observed an acquaintance watching the documentary *Kleine Welt* who simply clicked through the documentary at high speed. To prevent this speedrun through the documentary, he introduced the retarding moment.

It is important to note that every interactive documentary, like film in general, is already based on an enormous conglomerate of software and hardware. Specifically in the case of interactive documentaries, however, hosting is of particular importance. Furthermore, as noted above, in the brief history of interactive documentaries, the fact that the discontinuation of Adobe Flash has ruined a large number of prominent works shows clearly how closely interwoven their content and technical-material foundations are.

Extras/Special Features

Aspects that are important for the interactive documentary but are not included in any of the other categories can be entered here: For example, the open-source concept used in *Field Trip* and *Pregoneros de Medellín* would be important to include. The teaching/learning background of the documentary *The Shoreline Project* can also be noted here.

Paratexts

Precisely because interactive documentaries often work with links and additional material, this material must also be taken into account in the analysis. Interactive documentaries that are intended as works of journalism often refer to editorial articles that contain background information.

Conclusion

Where an analysis leads and how detailed individual parameters of it are constructed is decided in the formulation of the research question that motivates it. For example, it has not yet been mentioned that a discursive embedding of the documentary – for example through reviews, other cultural analysis, or the localization of the topic within a discursive field – can also lead to conclusions about the social function and significance of an interdoc. At the same time, the breakdown of the diverse parameters of the analysis makes it clear that the distinguishing feature of interactive documentary, the stimulation of co-decision and active participation via the design of the interface, requires a special mode of representation. However, I would like to claim that interactivity is not simply an additional documentary mode. Rather, the production and design of interactive possibilities establishes a link between form and content, while the representation of the object is affected and altered by the utilization of operative imagery. The interactive documentary is a hybrid created by establishing possibilities for exerting influence and the blending of form and content that this entails. The goal of the analysis is to uncover the mediality of decision-making and the representation of reality resulting from this

hybridization. The analytical grid proposed here can do its part to support such an uncovering while also integrating aesthetic aspects of the documentary.

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