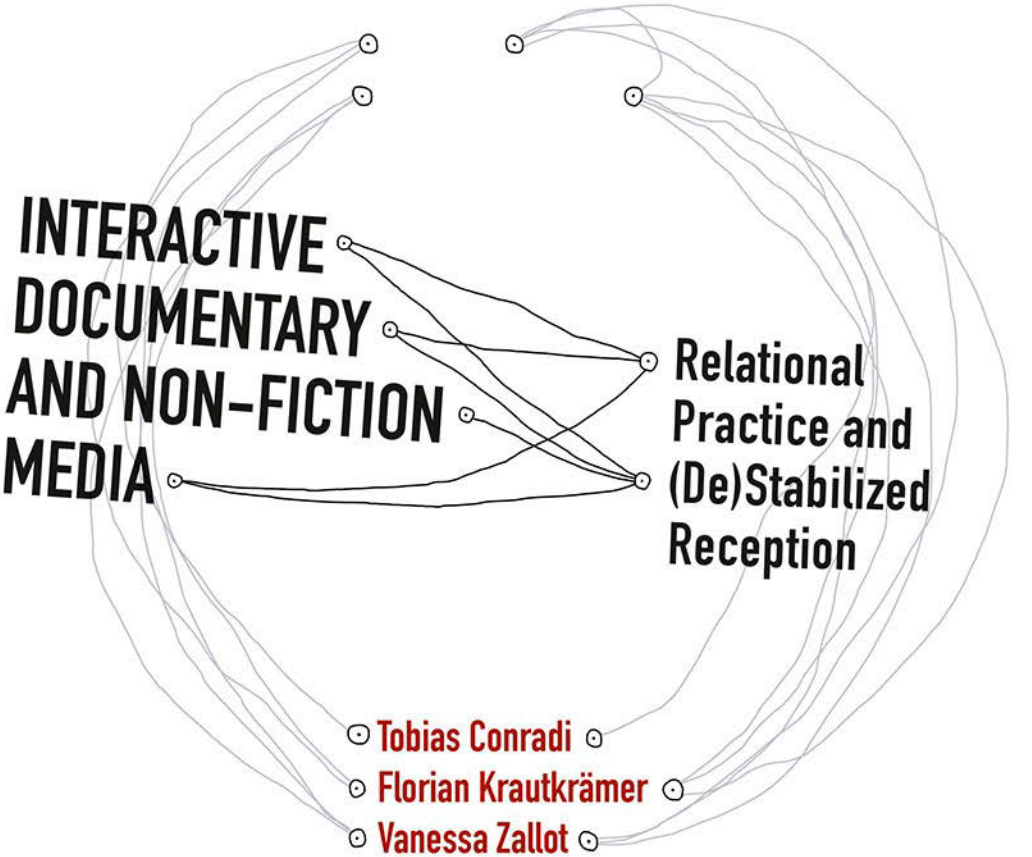

INTERACTIVE DOCUMENTARY AND NON-FICTION MEDIA

Relational Practice and (De)Stabilized Reception

Tobias Conradi
Florian Krautkrämer
Vanessa Zallot
(eds.)

[transcript] Media Studies

Tobias Conradi, Florian Krautkrämer, Vanessa Zallot (eds.)
Interactive Documentary and Non-Fiction Media

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Tobias Conradi, Florian Krautkrämer, Vanessa Zallot (eds.)

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Assisted by Florian Thalhofer and Francesco Spöring

[transcript]

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Introduction

Tobias Conradi, Florian Krautkrämer, Francesco Spöring, and Vanessa Zallot

Interactive documentaries have experienced a great boom over the last 20 years. During this period, they have taken many different forms, varying in terms of production, presentation, and circulation. Most of them are web-based, and they often consist of heterogeneous material, such as video clips, photographs, text, and background information. While they have gone by many names,[1] interactive documentaries in the broadest sense are attempts to truthfully engage with our shared world (which is the core feature of documentaries) via digital affordances that allow or even encourage users to interact with the material provided in some shape or form via an interface.[2]

In the simplest cases, interacting with the material consists of scrolling through a webpage or letting users decide how to advance the narrative by choosing material from a database or via some other means. These decisions have to be made from a given set of choices, often presented via a tiled interface. The connections and logics that link individual clips together often remain hidden to the user. Interactive documentaries can take on a wide range of forms, and both the constant innovation typical of interactive projects as well as the many parameters that may vary (see Conradi in this volume for an analytical grid) discourage the establishment of typologies. However, some types of interactive documentaries are more common than others: There are those that present the material on a webpage, allowing the user to jump among topics, with each section providing links to further chapters. An example of

1 Multi-linear-docs, interdocs, webdocs or i-docs, to give just a few examples. For more detail, see Brian Winston's foreword to Aston, Gaudenzi, & Rose (2017, xv) as well as the introduction (Aston, Gaudenzi, & Rose 2017, 2).

2 In doing so they often include recurring elements such as hyperlinks, menus, forums, timelines and maps (cf. Odorico 2015, 215). Many interactive documentaries implement the interface between software and user by means of a graphical user interface (GUI), which allows for interaction by clicking buttons or swiping across a touchscreen. Jan Distelmeyer refers to these interfaces, using a term coined by Harun Farocki, as "operative images" (Distelmeyer 2022, 53). They are designed and "staged" forms of presentation that invite users to select content – or to decide on the basis of a predefined selection; they also conceal the operation of the hardware. See also Cramer, David & Matthew Fuller, (2008): "Interface", in: Fuller (2008, 149–152).

this is *Field Trip* (Eva Stotz, 2019),[3] which is typical in presenting material contained in a database in a visual and narrative form, inviting individual reception. An alternative format presents a clip and allows the user to select the next clip while it is playing. Two approaches to this format can be distinguished: In *multilinear interactive documentaries*, the possible paths through the database are pre-defined and can be drawn as a tree structure. In *generative interactive documentaries*, the connections between clips in the database are created on the fly via algorithms. In such films, the paths through a database cannot be reproduced as they can in the case of multilinear interactive documentaries, and the relationships among the individual images varies with each viewing experience. Whether a film has a multilinear or generative structure often depends on the software used to produce it. One noteworthy example of the latter is the software *Korsakow*, which will be discussed in several contributions to this volume (see Thalhofer, Doll, and Krautkrämer).

Interactivity is not limited to cases where users watch an interactive documentary. It can also unfold as part of *participatory and collaborative projects*. Such projects allow for material to be added to a film by collaborators or users either in the production phase or even continuously after the film has been published – in comment sections or even by uploading audio and video. Patricia R. Zimmerman and others refer to this as "co-creation", one of the many ways interactive documentaries foster collaborative work (Auguiste et al. 2020). Collaborative projects demonstrate the potential of interactive documentaries to be more than merely a representational practice. This is particularly noticeable in projects in which interactive documentaries are ascribed with qualities of "toolness" and a methodological character. Often stemming from academic contexts, such projects use the production of interactive documentaries as a method to find new insights on a certain topic and can therefore be considered as a method of knowledge production (see Doll and Thalhofer in this volume). In this way, these projects take on a laboratory character, allowing different forms of knowledge to emerge in different experimental arrangements (Latour & Woolgar 1979; Rheinberger 2001).

In recent years, the concept of interactive documentary has increasingly been applied to media formats built around virtual reality, artificial reality, and gaming. This makes clear that the term is not limited to the web dispositive – and it will not be in this volume.

The understanding of interactive documentary that we pursue emphasizes the centrality of documentary material and the associated selection processes. This can include any kind of interactive documentary. However, most examples dealt with in this volume are web-based projects, while VR-, AR-, game-based projects, and interactive "scrollytelling" news articles are less prominent.

3 https://fieldtrip.berlin/, last accessed: August 27, 2024.

Drawing on many examples of such interactive documentaries, this book aims to shed light on three characteristic aspects: *interactive formations*, *relational practices*, and *destabilized reception*.

Interactive Formations

"Interactivity" has been around for quite some time now and has taken on special significance in media theory since at least the 1990s – which was not coincidentally also the time when the World Wide Web had its social breakthrough. Lev Manovich, one of the early (media) theorists of interactivity (and one of the concept's first skeptics) claims that:

> In relation to computer-based media, the concept of interactivity is a tautology. Modern HCI[4] is by definition interactive. […] [M]odern HCI allows the user to control the computer in real-time by manipulating information displayed on the screen. Once an object is represented in a computer, it automatically becomes interactive. (Manovich 2001, 55)

Manovich further emphasizes not only that the computer is always interactive, but that art itself had depended on interactivity long before the advent of digital media. Ellipsis in literature, voids and omissions in visual art among others: In order to reveal their message, works of art have always depended on an activity between the work and the spectator (cf. ibid., 56). In the case of interactive digital media, however, algorithms always play a special role, often as opaque rules in the background, determining and limiting the scope of the decisions that users can enact.

Due to the variety of existing interactive documentaries in general, and the range discussed in this volume in particular, one could, following Michel Foucault, speak of a "system of dispersion". Yet they do have elements in common, namely differently extensive and differently spelled-out forms of interactive involvement. In his *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault uses the term "discursive formation" to address the internal structuring of discontinuous fragments of knowledge. These formations are subject to certain formation rules, but they arise from a system of dispersion. Discursive formation implies a unity of differences. In Foucault's words:

> Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation* – thus avoiding words that are already overladen with

4 Human-computer interface [the authors].

> conditions and consequences, and in any case inadequate to the task of designating such a dispersion, such as "science", "ideology", "theory", or "domain of objectivity". (Foucault 1972, 38)

In our opinion, a similar definition can be applied to the media formation of interactive documentaries, or *interactive formations* for short. Interactive documentaries are based on a special media arrangement, in that they involve users in a new way, implement digital techniques and innovate in this respect, break open categories of montage, place special demands on website design and technical factors, such as hosting services, and in the combination of all these heterogenous factors also have an influence on the principle of the documentary.

What distinguishes working with and analyzing interactive documentaries from work with linear films is a stronger focus on technical principles and contexts. The technical object that was previously at the center of documentary film research was the recording device, the camera and – less prominently – sound recording technology. Documentary film theory revolves primarily around the problematization and change that occurs when a recording device is added to reality with the aim of capturing this very reality – with all the changes and moral implications that this entails. Changes in documentary film are therefore usually negotiated in parallel to changes in recording technology, for example when devices become smaller and more portable (cf. Fahle 2020, 78ff.; Müller 2011) or when recording and processing is done digitally instead of by analog means (cf. Steyerl 2008).

In the case of interactive documentaries, we are also dealing with a changing medium, but one that is not limited to the area of recording. Instead, it includes post-production, circulation, and reception, areas that are no longer regarded as stable and unchangeable and are negotiated in film studies under the term post-cinema (cf. Denson & Leyda 2016). However, the emphasis placed on precisely these areas when working with interactive documentaries is not intended to be reserved exclusively for this form of documentary, but to also exemplify the gaps and research desiderata that could exist for the field of documentary in general. Examples in this volume, as described in the texts by Marta Fiolić and Martin Doll, among others, make it clear how knowledge of a changed form of distribution and reception culture also has an impact on the production of the material that makes up the interactive documentaries.

This first section shows that the formation of the interactive documentary is intertwined with the internet, with technological changes in the context of computerized societies and a general shift in the ecosystem of mass media. Emerging media, William Uricchio makes clear, not only involve the usage of new technologies but come with a new approach, a new way of dealing with information. Uricchio claims that while centralized broadcasting media follow the metaphor of transmission, the use of emerging media can better be grasped as a form of ritual.

Accordingly, questions of the quality of interaction, dialogue, and exchange become more important. In the case of documentaries, this deemphasizes argument and evidence. Instead, the strength of interactive documentaries is based on personalization, dialogue, and sometimes participation.

Understanding interactive documentaries as a formation that has emerged and is positioned in a changing media environment also creates challenges for analysis. In this regard, the chapter by Tobias Conradi describes the interactive documentary as a hybrid whose analysis can certainly benefit from established methods of film and media analysis, but which also calls for new analytical approaches. Following a discussion of existing models that seek to define, classify, and analyze interactive documentaries, Conradi presents a new analytical grid for grasping the various heterogenous facets of this interactive formation.

Building on the importance of the databases that underlie interactive formations, Vanessa Zallot shows by means of two examples how interactive documentaries can support fundamentally different knowledge practices. Analyzing the contrasting structures of the documentaries *K-Town'92* by Grace Lee (2017) and *Pregoneros de Medellín* by Ángela Carabalí and Thibault Durand (2015), Zallot demonstrates how the different interfaces allow for different forms of montage, which reveal the "limits to knowledge" of the documentary form, on the one hand, and the attraction and possibility of finally knowing it all, on the other.

The interviews in this section, one with David Dufresne and Anita Hugi, filmmakers and pioneers of the interactive documentary, and the other with Jimmy Fournier and Louis-Richard Tremblay from the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) give first-hand accounts of the early years of interactive film and web projects. These four key protagonists describe the opportunities and challenges of a time when an emerging media formation opened up a space for experimentation.

The interviews outline the new opportunities for financing risky projects that have emerged at the start of the 21st century. The NFB is also an example of the institutionalization of new forms of creative expression in computer- and internet-based media. Hugi gets to the heart of the matter when she explains that the aim was not to produce "documentaries *for* the Internet, but with the means *of* the Internet". At the same time, however, the interviewees also speak about the sometimes painful and costly learning processes: Adobe Flash is repeatedly mentioned and how the discontinuation of a proprietary platform has abruptly resulted in the loss of large parts of the early history of the web. On the other hand, as already seen in William Uricchio's article, it becomes clear that social media play a part in the figuration and structuring of interactive formations: whether this takes the form of TikTok and Instagram aesthetically ennobling portrait mode for videos or because videos uploaded to YouTube find their way into documentaries as user-generated found-footage material.

The section closes with the article by Jan Distelmeyer, who shows with reference to the film industry how the focus and meaning of interactivity has fundamentally changed during the late 20th and early 21st century. While interactivity was the central characteristic of digitality in the 1990s – with DVDs, videogames, and digital television all being advertised as such – the promises of interactivity in today's interactive formation seem to be represented by a permanent technological activity and automated decision-making that (supposedly) removes the need for human control.

Relational Practice

In their book *Collective Wisdom*, Kat Cizek and William Uricchio state: "At its core, co-creation is relational" (Cizek & Uricchio 2022, 21). Indeed, co-creation, participation, and collaboration are often central features of interactive documentaries, and are deserving of further study. One potential benefit of interactivity is that it may facilitate greater engagement and participation from the audience. This becomes particularly apparent in the chapter by Jasmin Kermanchi, who examines the potential of interactive documentaries for various forms of participation: cultural participation, democratic participation in the public sphere, and participation in a (virtual) community. Drawing on philosophical and political theory by Jacques Rancière, Nancy Fraser, and Chantal Mouffe, Kermanchi suggests a "taking-part" and "having-a-part" model and analyzes the conditions of three different forms of participation.

Many chapters concerned with relational practice also emphasize the importance and characteristics of a mindset that facilitates co-creative undertakings. Marta Fiolić reflects on the extent to which collaborative practices in documentary allow for a more nuanced and authentic approach to filmmaking. Referring to the co-creative interactive documentary *Somos Mulheres*, Fiolić examines the potential of the interactive approach to initiate dialogue and discusses how participant involvement may allow for a more fine-grained representation of difficult issues such as homelessness.

Florian Thalhofer distinguishes two types of interactive documentaries: a "τα περισσότερα" (ta perissótera) type and a "Korsakowian" type. He then argues that the latter's relationship between author and audience is characterized by a pronounced shift in interpretative power from the former to the latter, due to the Korsakowian method's tendency to facilitate "unconscious associations" and its inherent "interpretative suspension", which becomes apparent both in the process of creation and within the Korsakow artefact.

In similar vein, and based on his own experiences as a filmmaker, Frédéric Dubois focuses on a core attitude he dubs the "sandbox mindset". This, he argues, should be embraced by individuals and institutions alike, via the development of a

framework that encourages, enables, and rewards experimentation. The designation of studios, labs, and hubs as experimental sandboxes signifies an institution's willingness to take risks (especially financial ones). The opportunity, as Dubois posits, lies in guaranteeing innovation through sustainable funding, despite the risk that not all projects will likely be successful.

While one current in interactive documentaries strives for equality between creatives and users, there are also attempts to reconcile a more creator-driven attitude with relationality. In an interview, Mike Robbins talks about important characteristics of documentaries and emphasizes the notion of a creator realizing their subjective feeling or opinion. Robbins also criticizes the perceived rise of impact-driven approaches to documentary. While impact cannot be entirely neglected, according to Robbins, he posits a more holistic approach that contemplates the oscillating relation among audience, filmmaker, and production. Further subjects of discussion are the past and potential future development of interactive documentaries and how these may affect audience trust.

Throughout the SNSF-funded research project on interactive documentaries out of which this volume emerged, the participating scholars also taught a module for students at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts using the software *Korsakow*. The report on this course, which had four iterations, details what was learned and which challenges were faced. It makes it clear that the focus is not only on learning the software and specific practices, but above all that a degree of experimental openness must be achieved in the groups in order to engage with the possibilities associated with this format.

(De-)Stabilized Reception

In addition to relational practice, the formation of the interactive documentary is particularly interesting because of how it clearly changes the relationship between production and reception. The various choices that are made when a user engages with a project make it necessary to assume a highly individualized reception, in which a different version is seen with each viewing process. In some projects, it is not even clear whether all the material has been viewed at the end – or whether the end has even been reached. When analyzing interactive documentaries, it is therefore no longer possible to presuppose a stable form; the performative aspect of the reception process comes more into focus, as do factors influencing the selection process, such as the interface or the underlying programming.

It is this aspect that Cornelia Lund highlights in her contribution. She shifts the focus from the question of the bodily involvement of the user in an interactive documentary to an underexamined aspect of how and where interactive documentary can happen, namely as part of installations where interaction involves movement

to connect and activate different parts of the documentary. Via close analysis of installations by Harun Farocki, Rimini Protokoll, and others, Lund explores the bodily parallels and differences among web-based films, video installations, and theatrical performances that all are situated in the field of the documentary.

This destabilization of the interactive documentary and its varying dispositives may also be responsible for the dwindling interest in the format after the initial peak phase around 2010. At the start of 2024, the NFB in Canada shocked the community with the announcement that it was discontinuing its funding program for interactive formats. The funds freed up were to be invested in the latest technology (AI) and the expansion of streaming platforms (cf. the interview with Jimmy Fournier and Louis-Richard Tremblay of the NFB in this volume). The discontinuation of Adobe Flash in 2020, which was used to create many projects, has made it clear how important it is to include archiving concepts in the realization at an early stage. Two of the most prominent examples of interactive documentaries that can no longer be played online since this discontinuation are *Prison Valley* (Philippe Brault & David Dufresne, 2009) and *Fort McMoney* (David Dufresne, 2013).

Florian Krautkrämer also takes the termination of the NFB funding program as an opportunity to ask what a critical theory of the documentary could still learn from the formation of interactive documentaries and concludes that this lies above all in a weakening of the individual image. For instance, interactive documentaries often feature repeated breaks, stops, or interruptions, while also encouraging viewers to skip content. Krautkrämer does not judge this in a culturally pessimistic way as a symptom of a society with ever shorter attention spans, but rather sees it as a process of reflection that can encourage a critical examination of the documentary.

In his article, Daniel Fetzner describes a project that aims to establish a fixed dispositive but does so via a method of production that is itself highly unstable. In *Becoming River*, he and his team experiment with a change of perspective that abolishes the separation of subject and object, people and environment, using methods of sensory ethnography film production, equipping the river with cameras, microphones, and sensors, to collect non-anthropocentric images and sounds. The use of stereographic projection expands on this approach to explore an uncommon zero-person perspective. The topology of the interactive documentary can thus be considered as a meshwork that creates entanglements both within individual media documents and with the thinking of the visitor.

In Martin Doll's interactive documentary project on contextualizing restitution in contemporary Ghana, on the other hand, the majority of decisions were made by the filmmaker. Doll reflects both on strategies that can make this perspectivity as transparent as possible through specific aesthetic decisions, as well as on how to make the incompatible speaking positions visible without contributing to a colonial epistemology. A notable example highlighting perspectivity is the "landing page" af-

ter the end credits, where viewers can see what clips they missed during the viewing experience.

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Although the interactive documentary is so versatile and unstable in its form of reception, we have opted for a traditional publication without digital content. However, we recommend that you take a look at the website of our research project (www.interdocs.ch) before, during, or after reading, where you will find links to the examples discussed here, as well as explanatory notes on terms, projects, and other materials.

The website was created during the three-year project, which concludes with this publication. We would like to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation for its generous funding and the Department of Design, Film and Art at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts for its support. We also would like to thank our project partners and extended research network: Judith Aston, Jens Eder, Ute Holl, Ken McAllister, Judd Ruggill, Alexandra Schneider, Matthias Thiele, Fred Truniger, Andres Wanner; Axel Vogelsang and the Visual Narrative Research Group at HSLU, as well as Jlanit Schumacher and Yasemen Büyükberber and the Grants Office for administrative support; Jacqueline Holzer, Dean of the Lucerne School of Design, Film and Art; the speakers at our conferences for the exchange and continued dialogue: Jumanah Bawazir, Philippe Bédard, Martin Bonnard, Alena Činčerová, Katerina Cizek, Rob Eagle, Alisa Lebow, Florian Mundhenke, Alena Strohmaier, Thomas Weber, Franziska Weidle. We thank Graeme Currie for his professional and careful copyediting. A special thanks goes to Julius Lange for his continued support throughout the project and for his proof reading of the early drafts.

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The Ethics of Emergence

The Challenge of Trust in Today's Interactive and Immersive Documentary

William Uricchio

"France being 'pounded' by Russian disinformation, says minister"; "Can AI image generators be policed to prevent explicit deepfakes of children?"; "Social Media algorithms 'amplifying misogynistic content'".[1] Headlines like these and many more like them have amplified to an extent that hovers on the dystopian the supposed threat posed by artificial intelligence, deepfakes, social media platforms, and other departures from the relatively "stable" media technologies of the past.

Concern is certainly merited, particularly given the largely untested and underregulated state of these media forms, combined with the motives of their backers, who tend to put profits and power before civic responsibility. But the structure of the jeremiads and their assignment of responsibility are also revealing. "Top down" solutions, whether technological (better content flagging and filtering systems, watermarks, even censorship) or organizational (enforcement of the responsibilities of creators, publishers, platforms, and regulators) figure prominently in the discussion. Techniques that worked reasonably well with the centralized, one-to-many media forms of the past (broadcasting and publishing prominent among them) are uncritically extended to a new class of media forms (including interactive, immersive, algorithmically curated, and recursive systems that respond to user behaviors). And therein exist both problems and opportunities for the interactive and immersive documentary that this essay will address.

Still very much in an experimental stage, interactive and immersive documentaries, as documentaries, bear an implicit relationship to the truth. Yet, like other emerging media forms, their defining affordances shift agency to a space shared

1 All headlines from *The Guardian*: Lisa O'Carroll 22 April 2024, "France being 'pounded' by Russian disinformation, says minister: Jean-Noël Barrot says propaganda via social media and fake websites may distort EU election results"; Alex Hern, 23 April 2024, "Can AI image generators be policed to prevent explicit deepfakes of children?"; Sally Weale, 5 February 2024, "Social media algorithms 'amplifying misogynistic content': Researchers say extreme content being pushed on young people and becoming normalized".

by, on one side, producers and publishers, and on the other, the "people formerly known as audiences" (Rosen 2012) – the systems' users. The pages ahead will sketch the larger media situation, examine where the documentary fits and how the field discusses responsibility and the ethics of truth, before finally taking up alternatives and strategies for their exploration. To be clear, the discussion will focus on the interactive and immersive documentary, but with implications for how today's publics negotiate the emerging media landscape. The current situation raises more questions than it provides answers, but that's precisely the use-value of the interactive and immersive documentary. Documentary, as always, is a "canary in the coalmine", and a laboratory for the larger project of reality-facing representation.[2]

Context

The past few decades have witnessed a dramatic change in the logics of media production and consumption, and it is my contention that society's critical responses have not kept up. Zooming out, one might say that we are transitioning from roughly 600 years of textual stability introduced ca. 1450 with the printed word, and developed by media organizations largely predicated on center-to-periphery distribution.[3] Stability was facilitated, for better or worse, by institutions such as publishing houses, film studios, and broadcasters, under constraints stemming from sources such as governments, regulatory bodies, legal conventions, and markets. The situation changed dramatically by the end of the 20th century as decentralized peer-to-peer networks enabled anyone to be a "publisher", thanks to the trifecta of affordable personal computers, rapid advances in processing power, and the internet. Legacy publishers saw their centrality and markets erode as a new ecosystem of bulletin boards, blogs, search engines, social media, and disaggregated "content" rose to dominance. Companies such as Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, and Tencent dis-

2 The documentary has consistently been a site of innovation in moving picture technology and technique, pioneering ideas that would later become part of the cinematic mainstream. The majority of the films made between 1895 and 1903 were on non-fiction topics, often replete with moving camera (fiction topics would dominate by 1906, initially with static shots); the earliest color films and in some national settings, sound films [e.g., *Melodie der Welt* (Ruttmann, 1929), *Enthusiasm: The Symphony of Donbas* (Vertov, 1931)] were documentaries; and, by the mid-point of the 20th Century, pioneering television transmissions often had a documentary character.

3 Telephone and post are exceptions, but these are one-to-one and not many-to-many.

placed many traditional media companies, with the survivors often aggregating into transmedia conglomerates.[4]

Because legal systems, like human perceptual comprehension, are precedent-based, these emerging technological and corporate configurations have tended to be retrofitted into existing categories, their radical potentials often missed. When familiar transgressions appear – false information, misuse of personal data, intellectual property infringement, etc. – familiar remedies are sought. Alas, censorship, content filters, agreements regarding data use, and litigation, all of which have ample precedent in the legacy media world, aren't particularly effective with decentralized media. It's not even clear who, precisely, should be held responsible: producers? Users? Platforms? Internet Service Providers? And to complicate the picture even more, *un*familiar forms of transgression such as deepfakes, re-traumatization through immersive media, and re-contextualization with interactive media, have no ready-made solutions to fall back on, and so are shunted to the closest available legacy category. And so here we are, caught at a juncture in media paradigms, and neither sure what we are up against nor armed with appropriate reflexes.

For all of their newness, elements of this transition were anticipated by the "revenge of the reader" that played out in a variety of ways in the post-Second World War literary and cultural scenes. Phrases such as "the death of the author" (Barthes, Foucault), interpretive latitude (Fish), and the reader's newfound agency (cultural studies generally, and in particular scholars such as Fiske and Radway) celebrated user agency rather than the dictates of the author and determinations of the text. That agency was largely interpretive: Regardless of what the author or text intended, the reader could do what they wanted. The digital turn has raised the stakes. Rather than simply enabling interpretive agency, which is still an option, readers can now construct their own texts. The interactive documentary is a case in point. Rather than viewers simply interpreting a linear documentary like *Hearts and Minds* (Davis, 1974), they can, as individuals, navigate through an interactive environment like *Highrise/Out My Window* (Cizek, 2010) effectively working with documentary content and the affordances of a given interactive system to create their own text. The acts of interpretation and navigation are to some extent conjoined, and both are now in the user's hands.

In communication-theoretical terms, *transmission* describes the once-dominant paradigm of center-to-periphery, fixed-text media forms: getting information from point A to point B with minimum distortion. Telephone engineering was the model, and Claude Shannon's (and later, Shannon & Weaver's) "A Mathematical Model of Communication" (1948) the theory (Shannon 1948). In 1988, James Carey anticipated

4 Although the user has greater agency, there is still considerable constraint evident in the re-aggregation of corporate ownership and control and demonstrated through governmental intervention (e.g., China's "Great Firewall").

by a decade the dynamics of the "experience economy" and social media, making the case for a competing communication theory based on *ritual*, exchange, and dialogue. Drawing on Emile Durkheim's work on ritual and religion (2001 [1912]), Carey argued that these exchanges build community (1988). These two communication forms have crystallized around media organizations such as the Washington Post (transmission) and WhatsApp (ritual).[5] And ideally, both forms work in tandem, such as when people read newspapers (transmission) and then discuss what they have read with others over coffee (ritual).

Whereas the stable texts of traditional documentaries can easily be understood through the transmission model (What's the message? How large was its target audience, and did it reach it?), interactive documentaries are much better understood through the lens of ritual (where the quality rather than quantity of interaction, dialogue, and exchange matters). And this in turn has implications for the theory of documentary, long understood as a rhetorical art in which argument and evidence were central. Interactive documentaries can certainly marshal argument and evidence, but rhetorical strategies such as argument require fixed structure, which they obviously lack. Instead, their strength comes from personalization, the dialogic, and (in some forms), the contributory.

Raymond Williams and Lisa Gittelman have, in different ways, defined media as culturally specific instances of platforms/technologies and protocols/behaviors. With nearly 600 years of experience under their collective belts, societies seem well-acclimated to the platforms of the past and attend to them with well-codified protocols. For example, television viewers can generally distinguish fiction from non-fiction, and advertisements from news. Protocols such as attribution, editorial boards, regulatory frameworks, libel laws, and more enforce that regime of predictability. But they are predicated on the logics of transmission and assume an institutional center as well as relatively stable texts. What about interactive, immersive, and even generative media forms? Who is responsible for the choices made by users and the content they might share? Those protocols have not yet taken form, and as noted, the next best thing seems to be to fall back on precedent protocol, whether it fits or not.

5 In 2014, Jeff Bezos bought the *Washington Post* for an estimated 80 million USD (the complete transaction was 250 million USD and included a number of sister companies). The same year, Mark Zuckerberg bought *WhatsApp* for ca 19 billion USD. The differential attests to the relative market values of transmission vs. ritual. The assessment of value is also complicated by the shift from the old quantitative metrics regime of "exposure" (how many people view something) to the challenges of assessing qualitative markers of "engagement". See Napoli 2011.

Dominant Ethical Frameworks for Media

Responsibility can be a contentious term, caught between ethical codes, legal obligation, and the discursive claims of the text in question (fact, satire, fiction, etc.). As a genre within reality-facing media, the documentary to some extent falls under the ethical mantle established by journalism. Of course, journalism – at least for much of the 20th Century – has been fact-based and "policed" by institutions and professional credentialization; documentary, by contrast, has been truth-based and, with some important exceptions, institutionally independent. The exceptions tend to be documentaries produced for journalistic broadcast and print entities such as FRONTLINE, *The New York Times* OpDocs, and BBC productions, which must hew to fact-checking as they also engage in truth-telling. Fact and truth point in the same direction, of course, but are worlds apart; and this matters because ethical frameworks (contained in codes and codices, taught in courses) relevant for documentary have been produced under both banners.

What is the state of ethics as they pertain to the documentary? What follows is an impressionistic survey of key terms based on an analysis of the ethical codes and recommendations advanced by leading English-language journalistic, documentary, and interactive media organizations.[6] This is an initial sketch, and a fuller comparative study across linguistic and cultural divides remains to be completed. The most frequently mentioned media-ethical issues include:

- privacy & data security;
- transparency;
- accuracy & truthfulness;
- inclusivity & diversity;
- user empowerment;
- social responsibility;
- cultural sensitivity;
- environmental impact;
- regulatory compliance.

6 The data were drawn from journalistic organizations including the Poynter Institute, the Ethical Journalism Network, The Society of Professional Journalists, and centers such as The Media Ethics Initiative at the University of Texas at Austin and The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University; documentary-specific organizations such as the International Documentary Association, The Center for Media & Social Impact, The British Documentary Film Foundation, and The Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program; and initiatives concerned with emerging media such as the International Game Developers Association, The Entertainment Software Rating Board, The Game Developers Conference, The Future of StoryTelling, The XR Safety Initiative, and The Interactive Ethics Working Group.

Topics such as "inclusivity & diversity", "cultural sensitivity", and "environmental impact" reflect the current cultural moment; but surprisingly, only "privacy & data security" specifically addresses the paradigm shift from fixed to interactive media forms. Otherwise, all of these categories fit well the tradition of stable and centrally distributed legacy media. That said, they are fine desiderata for emerging media forms.

If we refine the filter to ethical concerns regarding *digital* media, a number of familiar tropes appear:

- user generated content & misinformation;
- algorithmic bias & filter bubbles;
- privacy & data collection;
- online harassment;
- deepfakes & manipulated media;
- gamification & behavioral manipulation;
- automated content creation (in journalism);
- augmented reality & invasion of privacy;
- digital divide & access inequities.

This worthy set of concerns reflects fears that regularly surface as headlines. With one or two exceptions, however, (user generated content and perhaps online harassment), they also reflect issues that have been constructed with a mind to top-down solutions. The "fix" for issues such as algorithmic bias, gamification, data collection, access inequities, and the rest, is in the hands of regulators, producers, and platforms. Those who use digital media can be informed or not, can opt-in or out, but their ability to act doesn't extend much farther. In a setting that celebrates newfound user agency through terms such as "personalization" and "on-demand" services, the framing of sites of ethical concern as essentially the responsibility of the top seems problematic. But it is also emblematic, supporting dramatic headlines and conjuring up industry guidelines, rule sets, disclosure statements, filtering technologies, watermarks, and the rest. Ironically, the most pointed engagement with the user, at least in the software sector, comes in the form of EULAs – end user license agreements – which generally restrict the user's behaviors while also limiting the producer's liability. Think of this as the industry's idea of "applied ethics".

Legacy and emerging media share the same default construction of ethical responsibility, despite the earlier discussed difference between logics of transmission and ritual. Top-down interventions work best in centralized distribution systems, where control at a single point has implications for myriad outlets down the line. But emerging media's disaggregated networks, user-navigated textual systems, and

contributory assemblages (whether documentary or social media) effectively lack the hierarchical structures conducive to control. And that's a problem, as emerging systems increasingly become the norm.[7]

Alternative Ethical Frameworks for Interactive and Immersive Documentaries

If the institutionally dominant response to the question of ethical responsibility in emerging media is a top-down matrix of filters, regulations, and industry guidelines – and if, as argued, these have limited efficacy because these are not transmissive but rather ritual media forms – there are at least two major alternatives. One puts explicit emphasis on the user by connecting the dots between the user's newfound agency as a textual co-constructor and the user's obligation to use that agency responsibly. The other is a collaborative model, where designers (top-down) and users (bottom-up) work together to create responsible behaviors. Let's first briefly consider the case for ethics as part of user agency.

As noted, the world of literary and cultural theory has for decades recognized the interpretive agency of users, endorsing their capacity for meaning-making and putting it at the same level as the author's intent and the "constraints" of the text. Interactive and immersive media went a step further, unleashing the navigational freedom of the user and, with it, the user's ability to construct their own text, in addition to interpreting it. This expanded agency assumed the user's capacity for coherent decision-making.[8] But somehow, the ethical implications of that expansion, and the notion that coherent decision-making should entail responsibility, was largely unspoken. Granted, individual ethical engagements are difficult to monitor, but they are relatively easy to articulate and systematize through the educational

7 As of January 2023, of the total world population of 8.01 billion, 68% were unique mobile phone users; 64.4% were internet users; and 59.4% were active social media users. Based on United Nations and governmental data, as summarized by Simon Kemp (2023).

8 Although I have framed this problem in terms of the challenge posed by today's emerging media, in fact it is not new. The print and film media of the late-19th and early 20th century used images to illustrate events without necessarily making any claim to accuracy or actuality. Edison's *Raising Old Glory Over Morro Castle* (1899), part of the company's Spanish-American War coverage, is clearly filmed in front of a hand-drawn set. Before photographs were widely used in the press, countless etched illustrations dramatized the events depicted for an audience that was neither "duped" nor stupid, but rather one that understood that images were figurative, not literal. The introduction of photography, its later inclusion by the printed press, and the "actuality" claims made by film would eventually change things, granting the image new power and putting the weight of credibility into the editor's hands. That historical shift in the public's relationship to the image seems relevant as we today experience a digitally induced shift in the epistemological status of the image.

process and by situating them as part of a larger cultural code. Unfortunately, rather than emphasizing media literacy, cultural arbiters skewed towards technological and legalistic fixes, confronting the user with constraints and threats, but only rarely appealing to their better natures.

Shifting the burden of ethical responsibility to the user assumes an embrace of media literacy, civic engagement, and social control. Alas, I write this at a moment in history when electorates in many nations are polarized in a way that involves fundamental uncertainty regarding the source, let alone the truth-value and representational capacities, of media texts. Depending fully upon users' ethical sensibilities at such a cultural juncture seems untenable even if desirable. What about the second alternative, a collaboration between designers and users? An anecdote offers an entry point.

Fig. 1: Nazi officer's uniform in the exhibition of the Zekelman Holocaust Center. Some visitors used the uniform as a background for selfies. The museum therefore added images of soldiers lounging at ease or leading victims to mass shooting sites.

Source: https://holocaustcenter.org/one-hope-from-changes-at-this-holocaust-museum-fewer-nazi-selfies/ (last accessed: June 11, 2025)

The Zekelman Holocaust Center outside Detroit had a problem: Nazi selfies (Blumenthal 2024). Visitors regularly posed and took selfies in front of a display case containing an SS uniform complete with red NSDAP armband and whip. And surveillance footage indicated that some visitors even raised their arms in salute. The center neither censored the exhibit nor policed it (top-down solutions), but rather responded with a design fix. They wanted users to connect the uniform to the actions of the person who wore it, and so placed photographic images on the surface of the glass display case of soldiers lounging or leading their victims to their deaths. Visitors remain free to take selfies, but auto-focus cameras will invariably pick up the photos on the exhibit case's windows rather than the uniform inside, and manual overrides will still connect the uniform with the period's atrocities. This fix demonstrates a collaboration between the intentions of the museum's designers and the desires of its users, offering an alternative to exclusively "top-down" control and "bottom up" autonomy.

Museums have much in common with interactive and immersive documentaries: An exhibit's designers populate a space with artifacts, exhibits, and explanatory material; and the visitor, while constrained by pathways and hard-wired sequences of exhibits, is free to wander, skip over things, and direct their attention where they will. Museums, like interactive documentaries, are reality-facing assemblages, the former being composed of material artifacts and the latter of sounds and images. In both cases, user behaviors can range from dutifully attempting to anticipate the designers' intent, to testing the limits of the system and attempting to break it.[9] Fortunately, most users seem to fall somewhere in between. The example of the Zekelman Holocaust Center illustrates the importance of what might be termed *ethical design* in organizing settings for interaction. The designer builds affordances as well as constraints into the system, and the user is free to explore and make creative (and hopefully meaningful) use of the available options.

The power of interactive and immersive documentary forms lies in the quality of the experiences they afford – in contrast to the quality of the rhetorical argument excelled in by linear documentaries. Interactive experiences – and again, Carey's notion of *ritual* with its emphasis on exchange, contribution, and community is helpful – function as a heuristic rather than a statement. They are rooted in the dialogic, as users interact with and make creative use of the system's affordances. Like a museum, interactive and immersive documentaries enable users to wander, to stop and immerse, to re-sequence, to explore. Ethical design accommodates user agency, and better, works with users for experiential engagement. Of course, to the extent that the design is not preoccupied with containment, whether of concept or user behavior, it is also potentially open to abuse. And this is the core dilemma facing experience

9 Stuart Hall's classic trifurcation of reading positions comes to mind: dominant, negotiated, and oppositional, cf. Hall 1973.

designers, especially, as we've seen from the discourse of key institutional players, when the legal implications of responsibility are given paramount intention.

The frustration is tangible, particularly as the pace of technological change surpasses institutions' abilities to impose top-down controls.[10] One way to approach the challenge is inspired by engineering: The more specific a problem, the more tangible the fix. This is where documentaries, whether interactive or immersive, offer something of an experiment or research lab for the larger field of emerging media.

Challenges in Interactive and Immersive Forms

What, exactly, are the emergent issues in these documentary forms that might be mitigated by collaborative design and greater margins for user intervention? Several stand out:

As already discussed, an important difference between interactive and linear documentary forms might be summarized as experience vs. argument. But the experience that emerges from the user's navigation of textual possibilities comes with a price *vis à vis* the stability of argument: The ability to alter sequence and context brings with it the ability to alter causality. An early example of these challenges appeared in the form of an MIT learning environment created by Shigeru Miyagawa and John Dower and entitled *Visualizing Cultures* (2002–), which dealt with Japan and the modern world through readings and images, and enabled students to recombine images to support their essays.[11] A decontextualized Japanese woodcut image, "Illustration of the Decapitation of Violent Chinese Soldiers", provoked a cyber-attack by outraged Chinese protesters, ultimately crashing MIT's servers and provoking deep discussions by administrators, academics, and students. How to both give students freedom to create their own narratives and yet protect against misuse, whether intentional or not? In the case of interactive and transmedia projects, what are the implications of manipulating context, sequence, and implied causality, whether inadvertently or maliciously? And how might designers work with users to mitigate this while celebrating user-agency through interaction?

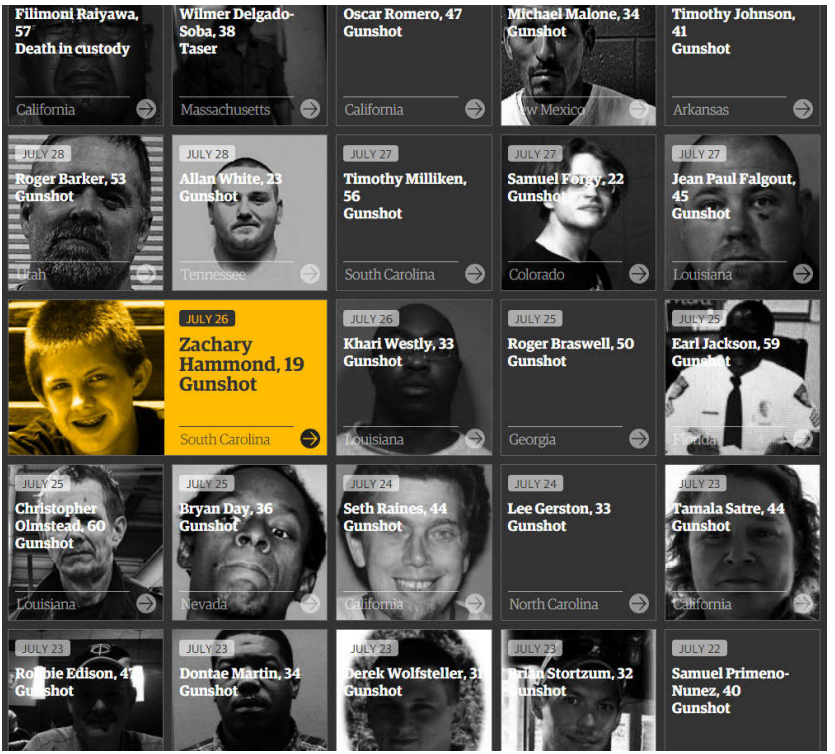
User contributions to interactive projects have proven to be quite important in documentaries such as *I See Change* (2012–), in this case, enabling the collection of fine-grained environmental data, tangibly supporting the work of climate scientists, and building an engaged and informed community in the process. But what guarantees the veracity of the data contributed? How can user data be protected?

10 "Tech, of course, is only part of the solution. If people really believe a photo of a 122-year-old woman with a cake she baked herself is real, then it isn't going to take state-of-the-art image generators to trick them into believing other, more harmful, things. But it's a start." (Hern 2024).

11 MIT 2002. See also Perdue 2006 and Callahan 2015

And how can assurances be made that user contributions are neither exploited nor "harvested" for business on the back of unpaid contributors? The Guardian's *The Counted* (2015–16), a two-year-long, crowd-sourced endeavor to collect data on killings by police in the USA (which lacks a centralized database), illustrates a good balance between editorial control and user freedom. Using a collaborative model, the project encouraged members of the public to submit information on local events, which members of *The Guardian*'s staff fact-checked before uploading to the publicly accessible database. The viewing public could access the data by date, location, race, gender, age, manner of death, etc., as well as linking to local news sources, offering the most complete picture of verified deaths-by-police in the US.

Fig. 2: The Guardian's project "The Counted". Using a collaborative model, the project collected data on police killings in the USA.



Source: https://www.informationisbeautifulawards.com/showcase/699-the-counted-people-killed-by-police-in-the-united-states-in-2015 (last accessed: 11 June, 2025)

A number of scholars claim that the experiential character of immersive media such as virtual reality has psychological implications, and can be used to help in the treatment of PTSD and certain phobias.[12] The argument is double edged: If carefully structured VR experiences can help to mitigate psychological conditions, often through desensitization, then by the same logic, less carefully structured or even maliciously structured VR experiences can generate psychological problems (a claim made, for example, by critics of first-person shooter video games). In the case of VR, documentaries about the Holocaust stand out as a particularly sensitive site, since users can include Holocaust survivors, deniers, and people with very different thresholds for the depiction of trauma. A recent spate of productions[13] walk a careful line between triggering traumatic memories ("it's like being back in the camp") and desensitizing users to the event's horrors ("it's like a game"). To the extent that such claims are accurate, how can perceptual and psychological manipulation, for example, for purposes of de-sensitization, be mitigated? How should traumatized users be protected from re-traumatization? What is the user's role in this "media effects" notion of immersive media?

In an era of epistemological uncertainty, are there techniques such as deepfakes that should be simply "off limits" to documentary makers, or are there creative and critical ways to deploy them with good effect? On one hand, organizations such as Leica, *The New York Times*, and the company formerly known as Twitter have created the Content Authenticity Initiative to police image authenticity; on the other, documentary makers such David France have used deepfakes to protect witnesses while making them empathetic (*Welcome to Chechnya*, 2020). How can producers and publics work together to make use of the affordances of the new, while not falling victim to the power of the unknown in the process?[14]

Lurking behind these questions are issues of class, knowledge, and power – issues that are too often stacked in favor of media producers. How do we ensure that participants in interactive and immersive documentaries don't exploit themselves or those around them? What should be done with the data-tracking features required to make some projects work – who is responsible, and what codes of conduct should prevail? And how can we guarantee that media forms built upon dialogue with their users are both legible in implication and transparent in their operations?

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12 Mel Slater (Barcelona) and Jeremy Bailenson (Stanford) are prominent proponents of this view.

13 For example, *The Journey Back* (Winikur & Efron 2022), *The Last Goodbye* (Arora & Palitz 2017), *Night of Broken Glass* (Knoblauch, et al. 2024), *Letters from Drancy* (Emerson 2023). Some of these productions have been supported by The Shoah Foundation and the four mentioned are shown in the carefully controlled setting of Holocaust museums.

14 See WITNESS & The MIT Open Documentary Lab's Co-Creation Studio, *JUST JOKING! Deepfakes, Satire and the Politics of Synthetic Media* (2023) https://cocreationstudio.mit.edu/just-joking/ (last accessed May 28, 2025).

Every advantage and creative possibility of these new documentary forms brings with it challenges to the old certainties of the stable text, clearly defined authorship, editorial control, and the plethora of supervening structures that police user behavior. As noted at the outset, parallels abound to the situation in emerging media forms more broadly, with interactive and immersive documentaries offering something of a laboratory for the exploration and interrogation of these issues. But such questions also matter for the documentary as such, particularly at a cultural moment (the early 21st century) marked by the willful deployment of misinformation and disinformation, and a larger sense of epistemological crisis. Will these new forms simply exacerbate the reigning uncertainty, allowing individuals to create their own texts and versions of reality? Or will the deepening of experience and engagement enabled by these dialogic media offer a way to bring users closer to a common sense of truth?

The larger situation of media, and with it the interactive and immersive documentary, is further exacerbated by several conditions.

1) Moore's law, and the doubling of processing power roughly every two years, shows signs of faltering but nevertheless manages to hold. The implication is that micro-processor-based technologies will continue to develop exponentially, something evident in the current development of AI.
2) Business models continue to change at a rapid pace, as evidenced by the "platformization" of everything from social media to labor; the counterintuitive economic success of "free-to-play" games; and the behaviors of crypto-currencies.
3) Globalization means that media flow across legal jurisdictions and cultural norms, making them difficult to standardize and regulate.
4) Competing stakeholder interests complicate assessments and enforcement mechanisms. Moreover, competing analytic frameworks (legal, sociological, political, technological, etc.) greatly complicate decision-making.
5) Given all this, it's no surprise that media literacy, let alone a critical perspective, is sorely missing. And given media's centrality as an information source and social glue, a lack of familiarity with emergent media's capacities can have profound real-world consequences.

This set of issues simply underscores the inability of top-down systems to control the unknown, and points to the challenge of hoping for the best from one's fellow users. An alternative seems the way to go, focusing on an ethical design strategy that encourages users to deploy their agency responsibly while encouraging designers to work with users in a spirit of collaboration, attentive to the affordances of their system and clear about their expectations for its use.

Looking Ahead

The problems facing the media sector are as formidable as they are pressing. And in this context, interactive and immersive documentary are more than mere flourishes on the long tradition of non-fiction media. They offer a site of systematic experimentation, a laboratory for figuring out unfamiliar textual forms, exploring new user affordances, and interrogating a battery of emergent ethical conundrums. Unlike the vast scope of "media-in-general" questions, concerning oneself with the "documentary-in-particular" has a specificity in its relationship to reality as well as a concreteness in its corpus that renders it strategic. Interactive and immersive documentaries face specific problems, like those just itemized, and therein lies their opportunity for the larger field.

The challenge of trust in today's interactive and immersive media, like the larger mediascape, turns on the operationalizing of ethics in a setting where the strategies of the past are largely ineffective, and emergent strategies remain experimental. Embracing the dialogical character of these forms, with users interacting with designed systems and with one another, and doing so in a way that balances freedom and constraint, will require significant creativity. Fortunately, interactive and immersive documentary makers can learn much from architects, city planners, and museum designers, all of whom afford their users freedom to wander and pursue their interests, but in ways that support a common mission. The representational character of documentaries and the modalities of user experience obviously bring with them dimensions not covered by this analogy, and that's where the medium-specificity of ethical design matters.

Each of the issues mentioned in the previous section – malleable sequence, re-traumatization, user-generated content, etc. – is a site of active experimentation. And because these tend to be responsive systems, in which users can and do press against their affordances in unexpected ways, and designers can track user behaviors and modify their systems in real time, conditions are right to extend the dialogic character of the experience to the larger design process itself. The collaborative character of interactions between users and designers needs to be acknowledged and embraced as both parties work towards ethical design that accommodates both user freedom and the designers' goals in creating the documentary experience. Just as this will require an expanded conception of design, it will also require a new and informed attitude on the part of users.

A shift from the long-entrenched logics of producer/consumer to a dialogical partnership is the call to action; and the laboratory of interactive and immersive documentary its site.

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Media Analysis Interdoc

Approaches and Suggestions for Analyzing Interactive Documentaries

Tobias Conradi

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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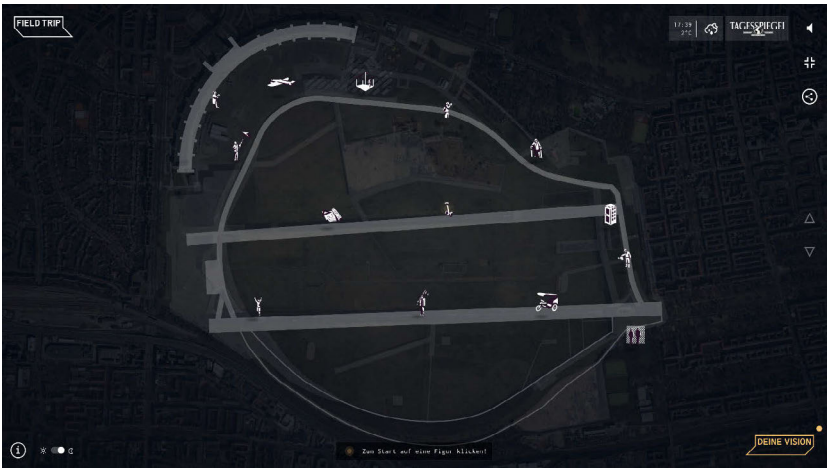
sificatory schema is both a tool for the analysis of documentaries and an important systematization for documentary film theory, which was derived from previous analyses. The modes describe broad, categorical differences in the argumentation of films. They serve to communicate what has already been realized 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.

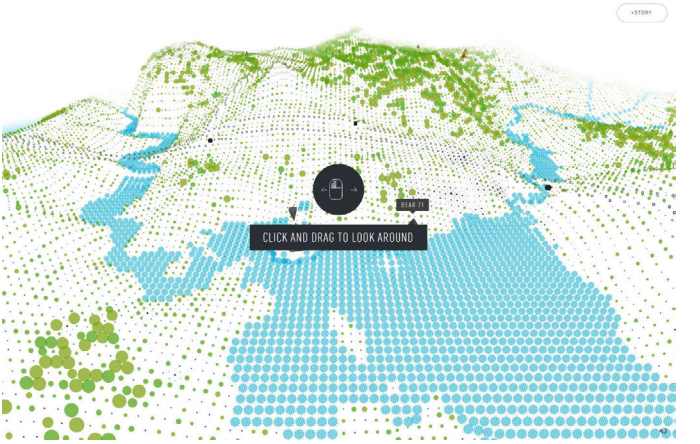
The Importance of the Interface

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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"In the beginning, there was only one mistake we could make and that was not to try."

An Interview With David Dufresne and Anita Hugi on Their Interactive Works

Florian Krautkrämer

David Dufresne is one of the most successful directors of interactive documentaries. *Prison Valley* (2010, co-directed with Philippe Brault), about the prison industry in the USA using the example of Cañon City, a small town with 13 large prisons in its area, and *Fort McMoney* (2013), about the exploitation of nature and people using the example of a small Canadian town, were both co-produced by Arte and have strongly influenced the genre. As both projects are based on Flash, they are currently not available online. Dufresne is also the author of several novels and non-fiction works. As a journalist, he achieved awareness for his observations of police violence during the yellow vest protests, which he shared on Twitter ("Allô Place Beauveau"). In 2020, he presented his (linear) documentary *Un Pays qui se tient sage* in Cannes (released under the title *The Monopoly of Violence* in English), which features various interviews with witnesses and eyewitness videos. Since 2021, he has regularly broadcast the interview program *Au Poste* on Twitch, which deals with public issues, police violence, politics, cinema, and literature.

Anita Hugi was the editor in charge of Swiss Radio and Television's (SRF) documentary program *Sternstunde Kunst* from 2005 to 2016. In 2016, together with David Dufresne, she realized the web project *Dada Data*, a project about the art of Dada in the form of contemporary internet art. Together, they also realized the phone-based interactive documentary *Die rote Hanna/Hanna la rouge* in 2018. Their projects have won numerous awards. As a director of (non-linear) films, she most recently made *Heidis Nightmare* (2022), which was broadcast on Arte, SRF, RTS, RSI, and NHK. Hugi was director of the Festival International du Film sur l'Art in Montréal from 2016 to 2019 and of the Solothurn Film Festival from 2019 to 2022. Since 2023, she has been head of the film department at the Geneva School of Art and Design (HEAD).

We meet Anita and David in the Césure, the old Sorbonne-Nouvelle building, which is currently available for temporary use and provides space for various artists. *Au Poste*'s studio is also located there, *as is the Narrative Boutique production office*.

Q: In 2009, interactive documentaries were no longer new territory, but they were not yet a medium with an established audience or significant reach. What motivated you to make Prison Valley *about the prison industry in the USA as an interactive documentary?*

D: I think the term "web doc" was first used in 2007 and *Prison Valley* is from 2009, so we were actually very early. I've also been publishing online since 1995, I've always been very interested in the interactive nature of this medium.

At the time, it was not possible to place certain kinds of content on television, and some people therefore migrated to the net. There was money to try some new things out and people took advantage of that. Back then, there were very few popular interactive formats, unlike today, where almost everything is interactive. Even if I want to order at McDonald's, I have to press an interactive button. We shot *Prison Valley* in the USA at the time Nicolas Sarkozy had the idea of privatizing the prisons in France, and we thought, let's show what it looks like here in the USA.

Q: Prison Valley *and* Fort McMoney *were produced with Arte, the CNC, and the NFB, among others. Was there still a certain amount of freedom?*

D: Absolutely. The sums weren't huge (€250,000 for *Prison Valley* and €600,000 for *Fort McMoney*). We benefited from that, but so did Arte, which was also able to rejuvenate its audience through these experiments. At the time, the NFB had Monique Simard, who decided to primarily promote digital projects.

Q: So there was this freedom because it was new, but probably also because it was a marginalized medium, because funding and broadcasters were still interested in linear projects. But if you look at the projects at the time, it's noticeable that there was still a sense of euphoria and optimism among those responsible for such new formats, which is lacking today.

D: That's true. There's a lot more competition today and even Netflix has interactive formats, so it's become a bit standardized. But we've also seen that interactive formats have been discontinued in order to invest the money in VR and then later focus more on streaming. The people at Arte told us that we had to reach viewer numbers in the seven-figure range. *Fort McMoney* has reached around 700,000 viewers, which is not bad. People always say that you don't know how long people watch, then I answer, yes, but with *The Irishman* (USA 2019), which Scorsese made for Netflix and which lasts three hours, nobody knows that apart from Netflix, and I would not be surprised if many viewers stopped watching after 15 minutes.

Q: What were the technical challenges back then?

D: There were a lot of them. We had to invent and try out a lot of things. It actually went back and forth. In *Prison Valley*, there's this hotel room where you can select the different stations. A designer spent a long time working on it. Today, I can do that in seconds with my iPhone. A lot has changed since then, also in terms of what Roger Odin called "*La compétence spectatorielle*" (communicative competence, see Odin 2022). When you make a linear movie, you imagine an adult spectator who knows what a flashback is, etc. But with interactive documentaries, it was new for all of us, we didn't know how best to set up an interactive scene, where to position the objects, which ones to choose, etc. Everyone had an opinion about it; there was no experience.

Q: How did you make your decisions? Experimenting? Testing?

The very concept of webdocs is experimentation. For viewers, as well as for authors, developers, designers and producers. We spent our time doing what's known as "agile development", adapting, depending on the tests and possibilities.

Q: Have you done any test screenings?

D: No, we didn't want that. But we got a lot of feedback from people about the content, but also about the operation, what they found illogical, etc.

Q: What were your hopes for the new format back then?

D: It was clear to us that we couldn't continue filming the way we had for 40 years. With the interactive format, we wanted to put the audience at the center. The authors are also important, we didn't want to do get rid of them, but they should no longer be above the viewers.

A: There was some headwind for these new forms at the beginning. I remember the pitch of the web documentary *Gaza Sderot* at the IDFA Doc Lab in 2008 (International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, the film was made by Alex Szalat, Joël Ronez and Susanna Lotz). It was presented on the big market, but there was a headwind.

D: People felt attacked, threatened, even when we pitched *Prison Valley* there. In terms of design, *Gaza* is the best Inter-Doc project for me. It's about the border. You, the viewer, are directly at the border, you go back and forth.

A: Yes, in terms of both form and content, it's an excellent project. We tried to do the same with *Dada Data*: looking for an interactive form that takes the content even further. I like this maxim: not doing documentary *for* the internet, but *by* means of the internet.

Q: What changed between Prison Valley (2009) *and* Dada Data (2016) *in terms of funding and technology?*

A: I knew that there was almost no documentary film ever made about the Dada art movement and I wanted to do something that wasn't just a documentary, but really reflected the spirit of Dada. It shouldn't just be a website. When co-producing with Arte, we were really able to rely on the experience of several years of interactive projects within public broadcasting. It should be possible to create artistically ambitious, precise, non-conformist projects that at the same time reached out to all kinds of audiences.

D: But there were also difficulties because more and more people now knew what they wanted in this area. Nevertheless, it has to be said that we also had a lot of freedom. We were also able to work with a company that was ten times bigger than the team of *Prison Valley*. And we were able to work with HTML5, which is why the site still exists, unlike *Prison Valley* and *Fort McMoney*. But there were more and more discussions about making it suitable for cell phones and so on. It was the last big project we were able to do. The strategy at Arte has already started to shift its focus more and more towards streaming and web series.

That's a pity, because with *Dada Data* we realized that we no longer had to explain many things to the viewers, since they had been able to gain experience with interactive films on the net for a good seven years.

Fig. 1: "DADA-GAFA", still from "DADA-DATA" (David Dufresne, Anita Hugi, F 2016)

Fig. 2: Photo of David Dufresne and Anita Hugi at the press conference at Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, 05/02 2016 (100 years of Dada movement), copyright by Dufresne/Hugi.

A: Today, this viewer competence is even greater, Covid has initiated another leap forward in terms of broad audiences being familiar with operating different interfaces. But this development is not reflected on the production side; there is simply no more money for non-linear work, which is crazy surprising, because the place this innovation comes from is also part of the cinema sector, but people still hesitate to invest in it.

Q: On the one hand, you're right that competence is increasing because people are using more things, but at the same time you can see that the most popular formats that are being used have become very simplistic. There are interactive movies on Netflix, but they are mostly just YES-NO questions to choose from.

D: Yes, there is a routine, a boredom, too. It has become commonplace. Maybe you have to wait and see. Change happens very quickly. A few years ago, everyone made fun of it when you filmed in portrait format, today it's more accepted due to the rise of Instagram and TikTok. That happens very quickly.

A: Absolutely. I remember I did a project on portrait format in 2010 with artists in Basel, back then it was still quite different. It was called *Hochformat* [German for portrait format] and was an invitation to artists for videos only in portrait format. Maybe this is where the feeling that little is moving comes from, because it's being standardized so quickly. It's the same with cinema. It's about conventions, some of which were previously only used by the avant-garde.

D: But it's true, in terms of form, it's become a bit more monotonous. In the beginning, there was only one mistake we could make and that was not to try. We tried everything and it worked. Today, in terms of design, it's less so because the iPhone has set standards to which everything has to adhere. Hovering, for example, doesn't exist on a phone. Apple and Android are very fussy about code and prevent creativity from expressing itself: Everything has to fit into their technical standards.

A: Yes, and with streaming you remain passive as a viewer to a certain extent, but with interactivity you are at the center, you participate. The TV channels, including Arte, which rely so heavily on streaming, want to have masses of viewers who can also be a multitude of individuals. Beyond streaming, you could also do great things, for example with the iPhone, stories that interact with your perception of daily life, that send you messages, like with *Hanna la Rouge*.

Q: But these examples are often also examples of failure. Hanna la Rouge *is no longer available, your first two early films are no longer running because of Flash.*

D: Eighty percent or so of the films of early cinema are no longer available today.

Q: True, but they didn't all disappear in the first ten years after they were created.

D: Even though I'm a passionate archivist, I don't see it so critically, because it's a bit like going to a concert: You only have the memory of it. That was a lot of work for three years …

A: … somehow paid work …

D: That's right.

A: But it was also a decision. A lot of money was and is spent on preserving the cinematographic heritage, but hardly any at all for online projects.

Q: Finally, I would like to come back briefly to the question of the documentary. You mentioned your reasons for starting to make interactive documentaries back then. From today's perspective – and I'm also thinking of David's latest film Un Pays qui se tient sage *– what do you see as future developments that could perhaps be just as ambitious as this decision back then?*

D: For me, *Un Pays qui se tient sage* is a continuation of my work with interactivity. I wanted the original images of violence that were circulating as short clips in the social networks to be in the film in a completely unexpected way. It should be like when you're on Facebook or Twitter and suddenly someone posts such a shot. A sudden intrusion of the real. For me, that's direct cinema. I've been working on the web for over 20 years, I know the power of these shots, for me they are also cinematographic shots.

Q: What would be a new format you would choose for your future work?

D: Today I think that AI could bring me back to interactive documentary film. Because it's a new tool that shouldn't be left to the wrong people. And because it's generative. *Fort McMoney* is seven hours long, which is not an insane amount, but still. Any computer game can easily generate new material. If you can achieve that in a movie, that wouldn't be bad.

But even today, the young generation has all the means at their disposal not only to make documentaries, but also to distribute them. That's actually revolutionary. There is an enormous amount of energy on some of the platforms. That's excellent, something has to come of it, something will come of it.

Fig. 3: "Un Pays qui se Tient Sage" (David Dufresne, F 2020). In this documentary, footage showing the police brutality is screened, while witnesses watch it and discuss it while viewing it – another form of interactive engagement with heterogenous footage.

Source: Still image from the film.

Fig. 4: & 5: David Dufresne at his studio where he records his show "Au Poste"

Source: Florian Krautkrämer

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Have You Seen Everything? Accessing Content in Web-Based Interactive Documentaries

Vanessa Zallot

Introduction

Interactive documentaries are based on databases, which they often draw attention to in some shape or form. Lev Manovich suggests that the process of engaging a database is "fundamentally distinct from that of watching a film or reading a story" (Manovich 1999, 81). In the case of interactive documentaries, filmmakers have nevertheless "sought in one way or another to 'coax narrative meaning out of an interactive database,'" as Kate Nash adds (Nash 2022, 18). Referring to N. Katherine Hayles, she continues:

> Databases, Hayles argues, are not unstructured collections, but rather collections that are ordered in particular ways to focus user attention and choice. They create a field of possibilities (that may be more or less explicit), within which specific actions become possible (or impossible) and meanings emerge. (Nash 2022, 19)

Such "possibility spaces" then, as Hayles dubs them, are not simply to be described in terms of "objects accessed, or paths taken". Even database elements that are "not selected […] nevertheless contribute to understanding and shape action" (Nash 2022: 19). Incorporating this in her engagement with database narratives, Nash analyses "their organisation, and the ways in which this might foster or resist users' inclination to make connections, the extent to which the database is visible to the user and so on" (Nash 2022: 19). One aspect of Nash's analysis is the concept of "database voice", which refers to Bill Nichols' idea of "voice" as that which constitutes a "text's social point of view", and conveys this perspective to the viewers (Nichols 1983, quoted in Nash 2022, 24). The database voice, then, is constituted by the way in which the above-mentioned "possibility space" is created, within which the documentary elements are organized (Nash 2022, 24). The interface is, according to Nash "the most visible dimension" of said database voice and is where most of this voice is conveyed to the viewers. Apart from promoting "aesthetic experience", this database voice also "frame[s] engagement [and] provide[s] tools for action".

The interface is the decision point that determines what parts of the database are made accessible or visible, what is hidden, while "engaging users in processes of deduction, inference, or aesthetic appreciation" (ibid.).

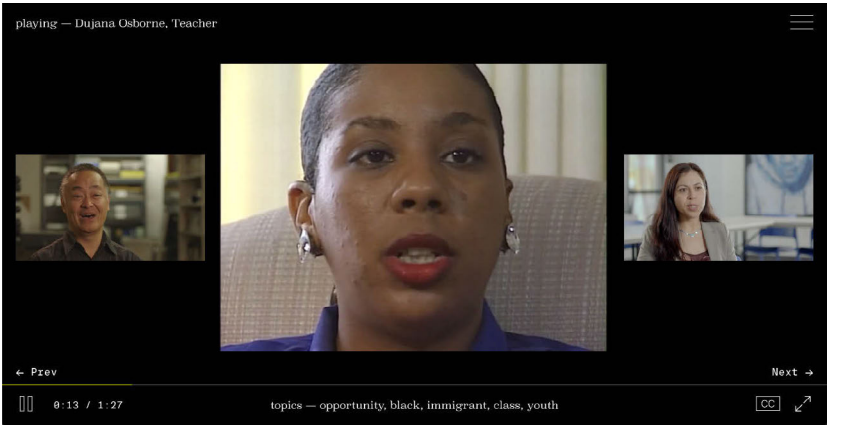
I would like to take the concept of database voice as an entry point into engaging with how different interactive documentaries structure access to the documentary, the viewing experience, and movement through a database. The question of how database voice is expressed through the visual interface will be approached by means of two examples: The interactive documentaries *K-Town'92* by Grace Lee (2017) and *Pregoneros de Medellín* by Ángela Carabalí and Thibault Durand (2015). Both of these are structured by databases and engage with means of making the fragmentation of their documentary knowledge visible. Nevertheless their approaches to the documentary and the access they provide reveal differing structures: between clarity and a lack of transparency.

Spreading Out the Database

The interactive documentary *K-Town'92* by Grace Lee (2017) deals with the civil unrest in Los Angeles that took place in late April and early May 1992. The film's aim is to give a platform to the voices that were not heard at the time and thereby to challenge and re-contextualize the way in which the issue was reported on TV news in 1992 (cf. Lee, quoted in Warren 2020). For this purpose, an archive of around 1,850 video clips was created, containing TV and archival footage from 1992 as well as newly recorded material from 2017.

After an opening segment that introduces the general topic of the film, a video sequence starts playing on a black background. It shrinks after a few seconds, which allows for one-to-four additional sequences to appear beside it, playing at the same time. In this "spatial montage" – that is, in its "simplest case" according to Manovich, a juxtaposition of two images "appearing on the screen at the same time" (Manovich 2001, 322) – only the sound of one of those videos will be activated, while the others are muted. By default this will be the sequence that had been playing from the beginning, but by moving the cursor over the other sequences, their sound can be activated, replacing the sound that had been playing previously. Furthermore, clicking on another sequence moves it to the middle.

Fig. 1: K-Town'92 Interface (Lee 2017)



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

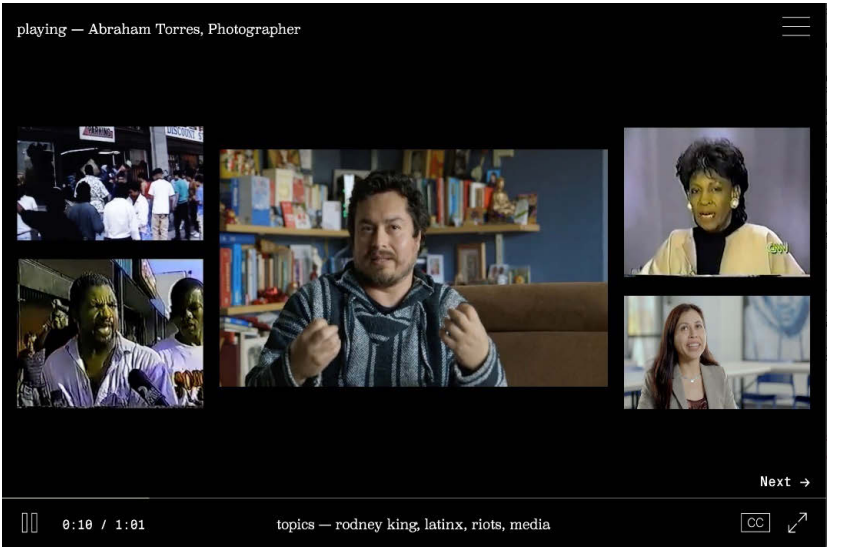
The interactive options here concern the selection of the sound and the position of a sequence in the spatial montage, i.e., the arrangement of the images in the interface. The fact that many of the sequences in the database consist of talking-head interviews leads to spatial montages of up to five such interviews playing at the same time – a format that does not usually present a lot of knowledge visually but rather via the spoken word. The arrangement of sequences in a spatial montage draws the viewer's attention to how much of the material – and hence the information – they are missing. Adding to this is the sheer size of the database, as it is effectively impossible to watch all 1,850 clips or at least to retain an overview of what has been seen and what has not.

In this montage "a number of separate 'micronarratives' […] accessible to the viewer at once" (Manovich 2001, 322) and the database on which the film is based are visualized in a "database aesthetic" (cf. Krautkrämer 2012). The film literally spreads out the complexity of the discourse that the film wants to highlight on the screen and visualizes a multiperspectivity that, according to the film, was missing in the reporting of 1992. Employing a "mosaic" structure highlights "complexities and contradictions", while at the same time drawing attention to the "impossibility of definitive understanding" (Nash 2022: 35). *K-Town'92* is informed by counterpublic ideas, which Hito Steyerl understands as discourses that strive to "create an alternative or critical public sphere", supporting the underlying idea of replacing "false" information with "true and good" information (Steyerl 2006: 97f., freely translated).[1] Apart from this

1 In the German original: "Hier wird die Herstellung einer alternativen oder kritischen Öffentlichkeit angestrebt" (Steyerl 2006: 97); "Dahinter steht letztlich ein lineares und zutiefst auf-

counterpublic idea, introduced by an opening sequence, *K-Town'92* abstains from a clear and singular message. It is the interface, organized by these spatial montages (Manovich 2001: 322), that gives the film its coherence – and that bears a message in itself.

Fig. 2: Screenshot K-Town'92 Talking-Heads Interviews (Lee 2017)



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

K-Town'92 is a database narrative in the sense that it consists of narratives "whose structure exposes or thematizes the dual process of selection and combination that lie at the heart of stories and that are crucial to language," in the words of Marsha Kinder (Kinder 2002, 8, quoted in Nash 2022, 19). Database narratives constantly "reveal […] the elements from which narratives are constructed" (Nash 2022, 19). By doing so, they do not suggest "inevitability, completeness [and] singularity". Instead, "the database draws attention to contingencies, alternatives, and the process of construction" (Nash 2022, 18).

The film overlaps with Groys' description of media art in the museum to some degree. Groys describes the impossibility of a "definitive understanding" and overview of an artwork as an inherent quality of media art in museums. According to him, the aesthetic value of the media installation lies above all in its lack of clarity. While

klärerisches Kommunikationsmodell, dem zufolge es ausreicht, die 'falschen' Ideen durch die 'richtigen' und 'guten' zu ersetzen" (Steyerl 2006: 98).

in cinema "the movement of the images is compensated for by the immobility of the viewer" (Groys 2003, 269, freely translated),[2] in media installations in museum spaces, both entities can be in motion. The visitor lacks the same degree of control over their time and attention they would usually enjoy in the "museum space" (Groys 2003, 271, freely translated),[3] which is also something that some installation works explicitly pick up on. Groys cites Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1965) as an example of this – an installation lasting more than eight hours, consisting of a static view of the Empire State Building played back in slow motion (Groys 2003, 273). In a similar way, *K-Town'92* also demonstrates to the recipients their lack of control by showing them everything they "miss".[4] In *K-Town'92*, statements must remain fragmented and can only be considered partially "correct". This is also helped by the fact that *K-Town'92* is web-based, which allows it to grow constantly.[5]

Simulations and a "What-If" Mode of Knowledge-Making

When Kate Nash writes about database narratives, she draws attention to how they make us aware of the "limits of knowledge" in documentary representation. But she does not only highlight this with reference to narratives built around a database. The same potential exists, according to Nash, with respect to simulations, specifically in interactive documentary games or interactive documentaries that use game elements. The concept of simulation is central to Nash's understanding of interactive documentary games. She writes that in such simulations, the "enacting body of the user provides a way of vivifying real events and experiences" (Nash 2022, 88). Capacities such as "[I]magination, performance, exploration, experimentation, and play" are employed as part of an "engagement with reality" (Nash 2022, 82). Referencing William Uricchio, Nash writes:

2 In the German original: "Im Kinosystem wird die Bewegtheit der Bilder durch die Unbewegtheit des Betrachters kompensiert."

3 In the German original: "Der ästhetische Wert der Medieninstallation im Museum besteht also vor allem darin, die Unübersichtlichkeit, die Ungewißheit, die fehlende Kontrolle des Betrachters über die Zeit der eigenen Aufmerksamkeit in musealen Räumen explizit zu thematisieren, in denen bis dahin die Illusion der vollständigen Übersichtlichkeit herrschte."

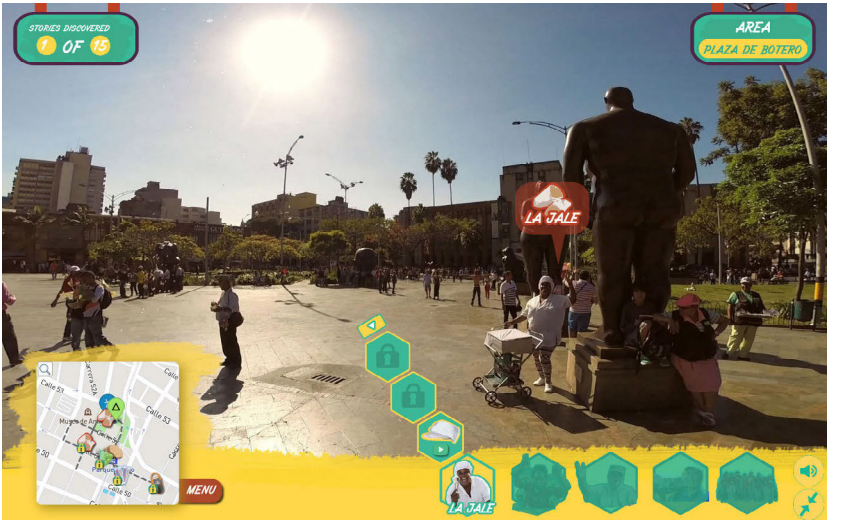
4 This can also be recognized in other interactive documentaries. One that demonstrates this very clearly is *Thinking about Restitution* by Martin Doll, which he also discusses in this volume. At the end of this film, the interface shows the viewer all the clips that they missed – while making it impossible for these clips to be selected and watched.

5 While there are 1,853 clips in the database at the time of writing, there were roughly 1,700 in 2020, according to an article in Film Independent (Warren 2020).

> [S]imulation games are "machines for producing speculative or conditional representations", arguing that in their ability to foreground alternative realities and promote a "what if" mode of engagement that simulations have the potential to challenge notions of "fact" and "fixity" in historical representation. (Nash 2022, 85)

Through the subjective, bodily, and performative processes that underly them, simulations make apparent that the truth shown is only a "'truth' as it is provoked, simulated, modified, or catalysed," as Kate Nash continues (Nash 2022, 91). What Nash describes highlights qualities that are frequently cited as what we could call "core motivations" for the project of interactive documentaries, such as "openness, fluidity, dialogue, and multiperspectivity" (Aston/Odorico 2022, 7) and the lack of "a clear dramaturgic arch" in such documentaries, which, rather than showing a linear sequence of images, open up a "field of possible relations" (Miles quoted in Wiehl 2018. 40).

Fig. 3: Screenshot Pregoneros de Medellín Interface (Carabalí/Durand 2015)



Source: Screenshot *Pregoneros de Medellín* (Carabalí/Durand 2015)

Like database narratives, simulations in interactive documentary games also have the potential to make us aware of these "limits of knowledge": They show processes and let users engage with "the ways in which different, oftentimes competing, forces shape real-world outcomes" (Nash 2022, 101). I would like to engage with this field of potentials that has been opened up concerning database narratives and simulations with reference to the example of *Pregoneros de Medellín* – an interactive

documentary that involves both simulation and the database, and which therefore asks what it would mean to activate the potentials of refusing completeness and embracing openness, though it arrives at an unexpected result.

Scrolling through the Database

Pregoneros de Medellín (2017) by Ángela Carabalí and Thibault Durand is an interactive documentary that uses game elements. The film's subjects are street vendors in Medellín who use chants, shouts, and songs to sell wares such as soup, sweets, or fruit. The film uses a scroll story with a Google Street View-like aesthetic as its interface. By scrolling, viewers can stroll through the streets of Medellín's city center, meet street vendors, and get to know their stories. When moving forward, the viewers are asked at certain crossroads where they want to turn. Every now and then, a street vendor announces themselves, their chant getting louder and louder as the viewer moves closer, until they can finally be selected. Once selected, one of three videos per vendor will start playing, each of which shows the vendor at work, the roles their chants play in it, and their personal lives. There are five vendors or vendor groups that can be encountered. By selecting them and watching their stories, the viewer unlocks their icons in a bar at the foot of the interface.

In the text he wrote documenting the making of the film, director and backend developer Thibault Durand describes at length the various ideas that were tested out to produce the effect of "meeting the vendors", such as animated pop-ups. Not having reached a satisfying result, they then came to a different solution: "[W]hat if the street vendors are actually in the street when we will shoot? This solution raised some logistics complexity, but it was clearly the best way to go. It's 100% reality!" (Durand 2015).

This film offers viewers a simulation that could be understood in terms of a "microworld", i.e., "a virtual world that contains a condensed version of the most important variables and characteristics of a given domain" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2007, 263). It provides the viewer with a simulated experience of seemingly coincidental encounters with vendors, together with a first-hand experience of their life stories, which here serves as a strategy of authenticity. Kate Nash calls such things "reality effects" as they "link media experience to truth claims" via "modelling, representation, and experience" (Nash 2022, 83). The film achieves this largely through its map-based structure, which can be recognized in other interactive documentaries as well. One of these is *Refugee Republic* (Visser et al. 2015), which uses a drawing of a mental map as its interface. Another, *Jerusalem, We Are Here* (Naaman 2016), uses informative maps as well as Google Street View as its underlying interface. In both, the idea is to navigate through the space provided and, by doing so, gain information about it. *Pregoneros de Medellín* also builds upon this existing media practice of

leveraging Google Street View, but that product was not available in Medellín when the film was produced. Therefore a Google Street View-inspired aesthetic was created using a bicycle and a head-mounted GoPro, as Durand described in his making-of.[6] Within this microworld, it is not possible as a viewer to influence the landscape. Rather, the idea is to become a part of it while moving through it. As Durand writes in his narrative: "*Pregoneros de Medellín*'s story is: stroll through the street, enjoy the urban soundscape, be surprised by the *pregones* (street-vendors shouts) and meet them" (Durand 2015). Thus, a key technique of this interactive documentary is a certain "*flânerie*", to use a term invoked earlier by Lev Manovich. This *flânerie* takes place in navigable space, which is, according to Manovich, a "popular construct in new media" (Manovich 2001, 268). He borrowed the concept of *flânerie* from Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire, who described the "*flâneur*" as "the new modern male urban subject". As Manovich writes:

> An anonymous observer, the flâneur navigates through the space of a Parisian crowd, mentally recording and immediately erasing the faces and figures of passersby. From time to time, his gaze meets the gaze of a passing woman, engaging her in a split-second virtual affair, only to be unfaithful to her with the next female passerby. (Manovich 2001, 268f.)

The quote of course expresses a tremendously male gaze. But the concept of *flânerie* proves to be very fruitful for the discussion of *Pregoneros de Medellín*. The *flâneur* is described as someone who is part of the city, interacting with it and its movement while constantly searching (Manovich 2001, 268f.). Manovich transfers and translates this figure from the urban to the digital space. It is not a city this *flâneur* is moving through, but a database. Manovich continues

> The navigable space is […] a subjective space, its architecture responding to the subject's movement and emotion. In the case of the flâneur moving through the physical city, this transformation of course, only happens in the flâneur's perception, but in the case of navigation through a virtual space, the space can literally change, becoming a mirror of the user's subjectivity. (Manovich 2001, 269)

It is thus not only the "simulation of movement through a physical space" that matters in navigable space, as this would, as Manovich puts it, "defeat[…] the computer's new capabilities of data access and manipulation" (Manovich 2001, 275). "[S]uch operations as search, segmentation, hyperlinking, visualization, and data mining" are, according to Manovich, "more satisfying" than just the simple and simulated movement through space (Manovich 2001, 273). Instead of an overview page or spatial

6 For production-related reasons, this does not offer the same possibilities as Google Street View, such as a 360° image (Durand 2015).

montage as in *K-Town'92*, the database in *Pregoneros de Medellín* is organized in a way that tries to simulate physical space spread out on a map. In this way, it provides a surface for and gives coherence to the individual elements of the database. The database here, as is the case for all databases, is therefore not an "unstructured collection", but a collection that is "ordered in particular ways to focus user attention and choice" (Nash 2022, 19). In this regard, I return to the game elements mentioned above, as they – and the visual interface that is created with them – are organizing factors in this database and provide what Manovich calls "search" or "data mining" functions, which is an "intrinsic motivation" as a result of the positive feedback that will result from it.

The use of game elements, appearing here in the "non-game context" of an interactive documentary, can thus be understood in terms of gamification (Deterding et al. 2011, 10). Such game elements can appear on five different levels: Game interface design patterns, game design patterns and mechanics, game design principles and heuristics, game models, and game design methods (Deterding et al. 2011, quoted in Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2007, 271). The elements of *Pregoneros de Medellín* I am concerned with can be found on only one of those levels: interface design. The interface of *Pregoneros de Medellín* includes an indication of which area the viewer is currently in, a display of stories discovered (from a total of fifteen), an expandable map with the displayed locations of the vendors, as well as a footer with five icons that are initially covered up. Behind these icons, there are also three icons for each vendor, which start out locked, each of which reveals an icon and one part of the vendor's story.

The stories that can be discovered are here visualized multiple times, by a number and by icons on the map as well as in the footer. The map also contains a visualization of which streets the viewer has already visited. This display of discovered stories, and the unlocked icons of the stories watched, can be understood as a "score" or "points", and therefore as the "ultimate device for keeping track of the game state" (Raczkowski 2014, 142). As there is no actual competition for the user, these points are generally "worthless": There are no other players, no leaderboard and no time restraint that would serve as the basis for competition. These points and badges may therefore be an irrational goal, but even though they are "worthless" they are still a form of validation (Dignan, quoted in Raczkowski 2014, 67). With Niklas Schrape, we can say they signal "game progress, victory conditions" and "feedback". Schrape further notes that points and badges can also create a sense of "group belonging", serving additionally as positive feedback. This does not exist in the same way in *Pregoneros de Medellín*. The only group belonging viewers may feel is with the vendors. The topics discussed in the three clips per vendor become deeper and more personal with each clip. As the viewer progresses, therefore, they get a sense of growing closer and more intimate with the *pregoneros*.

Unlocking the vendors in the footer visualizes the viewer's achievement – i.e., their progress in the film – by means of changes in the interface. The mechanism resembles the assembling of a character inventory in a traditional game, but here it fulfills different tasks. Viewers do not assemble them to be used later. They do not serve any function, other than visualizing the viewer's progress in the film and allowing them to assess the length of the overall documentary. The unlocking animation of this feature provides viewers with positive feedback: They have achieved something – they did well! This is then used to further their curiosity. All the remaining locked icons on the interface are blank spaces to be filled. Each is intended to produce a feeling of dissatisfaction that can only be satisfied by completing the next task – i.e., finding and watching all the stories. It is a search for the sake of the search.

Here it is also worth mentioning that the aesthetic of this inventory-like visual interface suggests a challenge for the viewers. At the same time, the film tries to avoid giving viewers a sense that they have failed – and the accompanying negative feedback – as much as possible. All the vendors are indicated on the map, and by clicking on the respective icons it is possible to jump directly to them. Finding the vendors is therefore not a very complicated task. Furthermore, no matter where on the map the vendors are found, the three videos will be played in the same order. It thus becomes quite apparent that these game elements do not really have a functional role, but rather a symbolic one. It is through them that searching and data-mining take place – operations that for Lev Manovich constitute the *flânerie* in the database.

The knowledge produced in *Pregoneros de Medellín* is – something that is inherent to simulations – based on the performance of the viewers and is therefore, to a certain point, embodied. They scroll through the city, decide which street to follow, where to stop; they decide which vendors to get to know. In doing so, they encounter an elaborate soundscape that includes geo-spatialized sounds of the chants and songs of the vendors, which get louder and louder as they move closer to them. What the viewers see, how fast they are moving, and what they listen to in the elaborate soundscape of the documentary is to a certain point determined by their choices. It is a performance supported by a database, here presented in the form of a microworld that visualizes its own fragmentation by allowing the viewers to identify the elements that constitute the database.

However, in *Pregoneros de Medellín*, this performance via the database is subject to evaluation. This evaluation takes place by means of the game elements detailed above, which make changes in the visual interface, as well as other strategies employed to encourage viewers to keep looking, keep scrolling, and keep watching the stories until they have seen them all. This is exemplified by a pop-up message that will appear once the viewer has seen and discovered the first story: "One video is not enough to know all the facets of Jale! There's more! Look for her in other streets." There will be no actual negative feedback if the film is not watched until the end. But

there will be a lack of positive feedback. By watching all the content, a viewing experience that the film affords, the viewer is led to understand that they know "all the facets" of each vendor.[7]

Conclusion

Taking Nash's idea of the database voice as an entry point for my engagement with knowledge-making in these two interactive documentaries, we have encountered two examples that do, in theory, not differ much in their approaches, but nevertheless end up at different results. Both films are built around databases and structure the elements in the database via a visual interface. Both films provide overviews of all the content in their database in some shape or form. But in one case, the experience of and movement through the database is structured by an obscurity and lack of transparency, while in the other it is structured by clarity. *K-Town'92*'s database narrative constitutes a knowledge-making that focuses on "contingencies, alternatives, and the process of construction" rather than "inevitability, completeness [and] singularity" (Nash 2022, 18). It is a "what-if" mode of knowledge-making (using the term Uricchio applies to simulations) that results in statements being constantly undermined by their visualized fragmentation. The idea is to never arrive at a point of satisfaction or to create a feeling of "knowing everything there is". *Pregoneros de Medellín* exhibits the structures that Nash highlights as potentially creating such open, fragmented forms. However, the fact that the database narrative here is heavily structured by its gamified character demonstrates an understanding of documentary knowledge-making that is self-contained, fixable, and complete. One that – reflecting a "Gotta Catch 'Em All" rhetoric – presents knowledge as something that can be captured and accurately represented in its entirety – which is framed here as something to be achieved.

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7 Viewers can also create an account that will save their progress, allowing them to complete the film over multiple sessions.

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"I don't think we're going to face a disaster like we faced with Flash again".

An Interview With Jimmy Fournier and Louis-Richard Tremblay of the National Film Board of Canada

Tobias Conradi and Florian Krautkrämer

This interview was held on June 27, 2023, at the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) headquarters in Montreal. The interviewees are Jimmy Fournier, Chief Technology Officer (CTO) of the NFB, and Louis-Richard Tremblay, Executive Producer of the NFB Interactive Studio. Jimmy Fournier is the Director General of Technologies and is in charge of all the technological aspects of the institution, which includes the IT department, technical resources, post-production, digital platforms, and all the technical aspects of production and distribution. He has been at the NFB for nearly 20 years and has done considerable work on various aspects of archiving, as well as on the NFB's digitization plan. The plan contains three main objectives: 1) digitizing all the NFB's works and making them available via digital media; 2) restoring works; and 3) ensuring the accessibility of those works. The NFB's interactive productions are also part of the digitization plan. Louis-Richard Tremblay, as an executive producer, oversees programming decisions such as: What project gets to move forward; in what capacity; in what context? He manages a team of around a dozen people and produces 20–30 percent of the projects. In 2023, at the time of this interview, close to 400 people were working full time for the NFB. Three-quarters of the staff are located in Montreal and the other 100 are located across the country. About 125 people are responsible for the technical backline (IT, technical services, digital platforms etc.), which includes ten to 15 people doing technical maintenance. At any given time, there are around 200 projects under production in different phases. The NFB's annual budget is 65–70 million Canadian dollars.

Since this interview was conducted, the NFB has shut down its interactive studios. Responding to a request for the reasons for this step and what this means for the future and archiving of interactive productions by the NFB, Jimmy Fournier explained: "The NFB has decided to invest in and explore new forms of innovation, by reinvesting in production, distribution, and audience engagement, which will serve not only the NFB but the Canadian audiovisual sector."

Historical Background of NFB Interactive

Florian Krautkrämer: The NFB is one of the leading institutions worldwide when it comes to interactive works and also the archiving of those works. When you go back in history, can you think of certain key moments that led to this position for the NFB? What were the central decisions to make interactivity one of the most important things in the NFB's agenda?

Louis-Richard Tremblay: A profound question! I can. The NFB is rooted in a tradition of exploration in media. I think it's been true since 1941, when John Grierson reached out to his friend Norman McLaren.[1] Then there were multiple stages. There's a long history of synchronization in the field of sound. In 1967 there was the renowned multi-channel projection *In the Labyrinth* during Expo 67, which led to IMAX theatres and the first computer-animated films.[2] And so I think it was almost natural at the end of the 2000s ('08 and '09) that the decision was made to move into and introduce the digital era. It was in a context where the decision makers at that time were mostly well grounded in Montreal, very well positioned in the Canadian industry also, and really understood what was happening. They wanted to digitize the NFB's collection and render it available to the public directly – to explore and to contribute to what was happening in the field of the internet at that time. The Quebec ecosystem was pretty rich already because of an early 1990s injection of funds into the multimedia industry. There was lots of investment to bring all the big studios into Montreal and nurture a middle ground of multimedia creators.

There was also a big move when the Government of Canada created the Canada Media Fund, which was financing what we called at that time the "convergence", or converging funding: When you do a TV series or a movie for cinema, you add money and incentives to do something for the web, so that also spurs a middle ground.

FK: When was that?

LRT: That was in the early 2000s. I can't recall the exact time, but roughly around then, after what we usually refer to as the end of the first internet bubble, around 1999, something like that. So that created an ecosystem, and they decided all the talent was pretty much out there. And it was really an opportunity. Arte was also in

1 Norman McLaren (1914–1987) was a Canadian animation film director who worked for the NFB from 1941 and founded the NFB's animation studio.

2 Cf. also: Government of Canada, "Key Moments in NFB History". https://www.canada.ca/en/national-film-board/corporate/archives-and-history/history.html, last accessed: September 25, 2024.

the field at that time, and there were a couple of interactive documentaries on the web, inspired by some of the converging funding projects.

Montreal was a place where the talent was available, but the documentary format was never explored. Eventually the question was: What should an interactive documentary be with all the [digital] means of today? And I think that's where we started, both in Vancouver and in Montreal at the same time.

So, I think, those are the key elements. It's not only the capacity to do it, but also the willingness of an institution like the NFB to say, "Okay, so we don't know what you're doing, we have confidence in you, make it work!"[3] which was pretty much the same thing that happened at CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) before. It's like, "We don't understand, but we think there's something interesting there. Let's explore it," which is, I think, the spirit of the NFB from its very foundation. It's in the culture, I would say.

Jimmy Fournier: I think, at that time, they made a really good decision by giving the studios the opportunity to learn and not putting obstacles or boundaries in their way – as can happen with large institutions like the NFB. They gave them the opportunity to build two different studios. They gave them space to do that. Not trying to include it directly into the current structure of production, but regarding it more as a lab, with the ability to explore…

LRT: … and to sometimes fail. (*laughter*)

JF: But failing is part of the learning process, right? And I think it's very important for an institution like the NFB to have this kind of vision. At that time, not everyone involved had seen the potential. But ten to 15 years later, we realized that without taking those chances, we would not have what we have now. Because now we are more in the process of consolidation and have established the ability to teach other studios and institutions as well.

Technological Development, Perseverance, and Archives

Tobias Conradi: On the NFB website, you will occasionally find the sentence: "Technology is moving fast, and we were no longer able to support this format." See *Highrise – Out My Window* (Katerina Cizek, 2010), for example. So when you say that there was a certain lab character to the early interactive work, was that something that took you by surprise? Was the archival problem something that was underestimated at the beginning, or was it something that you already had on your minds as a future

3 See also the article by Frédéric Dubois on the "sandbox-mindset" in this volume.

problem? You now provide creatives with an extensive guide.[4] Is this the outcome of a painful learning process?

LRT: I think it's part of the spirit of early experimentation. Creators in 2009–2010, and I would say almost up to 2015, were excited about the possibilities and the field of creation it opened. And from a creator's point of view, the question of how the work will live through time comes second. Was it a consideration amongst producers? A little more, but not much. It was kind of the same spirit, where it was too soon to even understand what exactly we were doing. We were just trying to figure out how things were playing with interactive documentary formats. So from the creator/producer point of view, I wouldn't say it was much of a concern when going into different projects. However, it became more and more urgent when Adobe started to send signals about no longer wanting to maintain Flash. Then suddenly people realized that, "Whoa, okay, so this is something we had neglected." For whatever reason, it was neglected. I think the decommissioning of Adobe Flash was the turning point where people said, "Whoa, okay, we have to think about that." And afterwards this pretty much changed; now we ask ourselves what will remain of a certain project in ten or even 50 years from now. The work has become more mature in that sense.

FK: And do those questions already reflect back on the production process?

LRT: Yeah, like, well, we're putting that into place, I would say. Now we're starting to implement it. Very early on we can decide not to go with one technology because the technology is not perceived as stable enough or is not supported enough. We ask those questions as early as possible now. Sometimes we may decide to move forward anyway. But the question is asked, which was not the case five years ago.

JF: There is also a connection to the answer to the previous question. At the beginning of 2010, I was one of the engineers that raised their hand and said: "It won't last. It won't last. Warning, warning, warning!" … and – Thank God! – it did not stop the process, because if they'd taken only that into consideration back in the day, they would have probably stopped and we would have lost not only the project, but also all the lessons we were about to learn. Now we know: How do you build an audience? How do you build a project? The lessons prevailed, and we still archive 95% of the projects and have them accessible internally at the NFB. When people from univer-

4 The guide we refer to here is not accessible on the public internet. We were provided with access ahead of the interview. However, some basic information for creators who want to work with the NFB is available online: NFB, "Journey of an NFB Project". https://production.nfbonf.ca/en/journey-of-a-project/, last accessed: July 17, 2024.

sities do research on a particular project and they want to have it back, we give them access to the archive.

TC: Failure is part of the pioneering spirit.

LRT: Yes, exactly, I think so. Also, what remained were the navigation videos. So if someone ten years later wants to figure out how something worked, this is possible. The project *Fort McMoney* (David Dufresne, 2013) is a good example because it's connected deeply to servers in real time, to APIs (application programming interface) and stuff like that. This part of the experience is lost.[5]

At the moment, we have a project that uses machine-learning processes of different kinds. It's connected to GPT-3. Will we connect it to GPT-4? No, the decision has already been made. So at some point there's going to be some loss of that experience. But something of it will be preserved. For me, an interactive project that is connected is kind of a living thing. So the question becomes: "How do you archive a living thing?" That's one "*allegoria*" that I think sometimes works.

TC: This was also one of our specific questions: What do you think about how you can archive the experience? This is a question that is also important for video games. People know how to archive a game, but how do you archive the play?

LRT: … and even more: How do you archive the human experience of it?

TC: Do you archive screencasts or something similar?

LRT: I can only think of one project. It was about Twitch and we used the Twitch platform. It was about the streaming culture and how it's a very community-based structure. We have archived the project. It is still there in HTML5. But what's interesting in terms of the human experience of it is, because it's a Twitch-based project, some of the best value is the captures of people taking the cast and just casting it to their twelve friends. This is when you have a human experience of our time. But that's the only specific example I can think of, and here it was because of the nature of the project that we used screencasts.

TC: However, for the conservation of the experience of playing, you can use the exhibition room downstairs, right? And it is possible for some of the older projects to put a vintage computer there, that still runs Flash, let people play it and make it also accessible to the public. So not exclusively for universities, that is … Is that something you are planning to do?

5 See also the interview with David Dufresne and Anita Hugi in this volume.

JF: Yes, that is something that is feasible. Remember, at the conference (*Doing Interactive Documentary*, Lucerne, Switzerland, March 18, 2023), I was connected via VPN to the infrastructure here.[6] We use our internal collection system, which collects all the information on all of our work. All the media-asset management (MAM), so we can give access through the MAM, because it's close to our infrastructure, to people who want to have access.

But – the beauty of what we have developed with Rhizome[7] is the possibility of emulation. The web-based emulation is integrated into the playback system. So we don't need a vintage computer, we have something better.

FK: Do you have an example where you said at the start of the production, "We can't go on with this or with certain parts of the project because it will not be accessible in five to ten years…"?

LRT: It happened one time in the studio. It was one of the reasons, not the only one, but we were working on a project called *Marrow*. It was developed in co-production with Atlas V in Paris, France, financed by us and the CNC (Centre National du Cinéma). It relied heavily on AI learning models and it was based on scenes. It was a complicated project and at some point we said, "This is not viable. It's not something we can put into circulation, distribution. We don't know how we will archive it outside of just filming it." One of the considerations was, "What will remain of that in five to ten years?" It was too much of an original piece, more like a performance. There were three main reasons, but that was definitely one of them.

JF: From what we've learned from capturing interactive web-based works, we know that we have some limitations when these works access external services, simply because we can't capture the entire range of external services.

TC: Like *Prison Valley* (David Dufresne, Philippe Brault, 2010), which linked to Facebook.

FK: You just mentioned the cooperation with CNC. A lot of the regional film funds have their own philosophies of archivism. Do you see that your approach and your philosophy of archiving those projects also influence other institutions like the CNC or other film funds? And are you in conversation with them about those questions?

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6 You can find a recording of the talk on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YywAy6gAUBk, last accessed: September 25, 2024.

7 See: https://rhizome.org/about, last accessed: September 25, 2024.

LRT: I was in a couple of conversations. Do we influence them? I don't know. But there is definitely conversation, dating back a number of years and to the collaboration with Arte. All the early players that were in the interactive documentary, all had to ask themselves basically the same questions. I think we were amongst pretty much the first to actually find out how to do it.

JF: So I think we have been an early important player. And we worked with a partner like Rhizome, who is also in the field.

LRT: One important event was the *Update or Die* conference in 2017.[8] I think that was definitely a tipping point where the people at MIT Open Documentary Lab, with Phi Centre and us, from the NFB, worked together. The spirit was, "Okay, we didn't think about archiving. We should," and then it went on.

Possible Future Problems

FK: Do you now feel relatively safe when it comes to those questions? Of course, compared to ten years ago, but are there also some things happening now or in the near future where you're saying, "Okay, this could become a real problem for us", maybe comparable to the discontinuation of Flash? Or do you think that, well, now you have learned such a big lesson and the infrastructure is so good that you're relatively safe for the next ten to 20 years, or more?

LRT: I don't know if we live in an era where we can say, "Yes, we have it all figured out. We're safe!" Things are still moving fast. Just think of what is happening with machine learning… It's just that it's tough to follow. But I think we're definitely in a better position. We've learned to ask the right questions much earlier in the process. However, to me the question of "How can we archive the experience?" is still pretty open. The essence of the experience is really something tough to capture.

8 Update or Die, May 5, 2017. Centre Phi, Montreal. "A one-day conference curated by the MIT Open Documentary Lab and Phi, in collaboration with IDFA DocLab and the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision. Unstable platforms, rapidly changing technologies, and shifting investment priorities are the new normal in today's media landscape. As attention turns to the next big thing, digital games, artwork, interactive news features, and web-based documentaries made as recently as five years ago face obsolescence. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Open Documentary Lab and Phi propose a one-day multi-disciplinary conference to discuss the pressing issue of disappearing digital documentaries." https://10timesmes.com/future-proofing-emerging-digital-documentary-forms, last accessed: September 25, 2024.

JF: The web is more mature. I don't think we're going to face a disaster like we faced with Flash again. That is, as far as the web is concerned! The world learned from that, not only us. But when it comes to new formats, questions still remain: With the VR-experience applications, for example, we don't have the answers on that. But for web-based works, we are more mature.

TC: We already touched upon this question, but in your guide for interactive productions, you say, "Choose mature technology over new when possible (recommended)." Isn't this a bit of a double-edged sword? New technology gives you new opportunities; you can do new stuff with it. But, as we have talked about already, it's not clear if it will persist. Mature technology, on the other hand, may be something that becomes obsolete at some point. What do you think about this relationship? How would you prioritize this question?

LRT: I think things are moving fast. We're still in a creative thought process of exploration and creation. We have to follow the public: Where do people stand? What are they looking for? What do they resonate with? And like you say, sometimes old things don't resonate anymore with a critical quantity of the population, and as a public service we have to ask ourselves this question: "Okay, what are people curious about?" And these are usually the spaces where we try to do the creation.

It's a puzzle in many ways. You want to do something that's cutting edge. But as a producer, we're not the creator, so we have to kind of spark the desire to explore during the creation process.

JF: You know, we at the NFB own one of only two working pinscreens. We're going to continue to do things with old technology in the digital world. But we serve the story, not the technology, above all.

TC: It is a bit like Polaroid photography, which is still used because it serves a specific aesthetic.

LRT: Right, it's really the notion of how you detour technology to amplify a story, or the experience of the story? I think that's the philosophy.

Production

FK: I would like to ask one question concerning production. You mentioned contemporary technologies, and when we look at the genre of interactive documentary, we see signs of a decrease in bigger productions. For example, if you look at TV stations like Arte or the BBC, they're not as involved in producing interactive works as they

were ten to 15 years ago. Do you also notice something like this within the NFB? Is the amount of projects that are proposed to you in this genre also decreasing, or is it remaining the same?

LRT: It's decreasing. For many reasons. I think the first five years of the studio were the core of production, both in Montreal and in Vancouver. After taking all the steps back on the archival and the engagement part, we noticed that we may have big and varied projects, but when you see the statistics, you have to say: "Well, we're doing something wrong." Because the audience doesn't get deeply involved in those types of projects. So for us that was definitely part of the question. Often projects were pitched to us, inspired by *Fort McMoney* or similar projects, because we're about exploration in media forms. We had induced something, but we didn't want to do the same thing twice.

Also, the web culture evolved massively between 2010 and 2016. We followed VR, XR, got a little more into installation, more into the game format. The latter is something very interesting because there are a lot of young creators who are gamers and who are coming out of film schools. They understand interactivity and they adopt a gaming approach for the web format. We've had some pretty great success with games. AR came into place. *East of the Rockies* has been a very successful AR application with impressive numbers for a narrative experience.

I think it also has something to do with users' consuming habits. People are on social media. So we've done Facebook projects, we've done Instagram projects, we've done a number of projects to reach people and to be relevant to audiences in the format they are accustomed to and familiar with. We have tried to explore interactivity by playing with the "sound off, sound on" feature on Facebook and how to detour it to say something, to tell a story. We – and other partners as well – know there is potential in experimenting with social media, but we have to match it to the attention span of the typical web consumer – and *mobile* web consumer. We moved away from big formats that need two hours of users' time. Mature web creators work with narratives that prompt you at 18 seconds, then at one minute, and then at three minutes. This is different from early web docs where the interaction and decisions were given to the user. Now the relationship between maker and user is more balanced. There is a better understanding of what the user reacts to, basically.

TC: Is this also a lesson learned from game development?

LRT: Oh, of course, absolutely. In many ways, not just on the engagement part of it, but also on the pipeline, on the approach to the design. We've learned a lot from the games we produced in cooperation with the more mature video game industry and with independent developers. But we do not usually work with big production stu-

dios (AAA), but with the independent studios, where you actually see their pipeline. The culture of interactivity is a game culture. (*laughter*)

Distribution: Infrastructure, Amazon, and YouTube

TC: Two questions concerning the field of distribution are the most interesting to me. One is your relation to YouTube. I have seen that in April 2023, you had 1,613 videos online on YouTube. Which means they are hosted by a private institution, whereas the NFB is a public institution. Is there a discussion about this?

The second question leads towards the NFB infrastructure: I have seen that you also offer internet domain purchasing, managing, and cloud hosting services. These are reserved for projects that were done in line with the interactive project guide. The question is: How big is the infrastructure that you are offering? Is all of this self-hosted? Is this *your* infrastructure or do you also buy, for example, Amazon cloud services?

JF: Yes, our cloud infrastructure is part of the Canadian government cluster provided by Amazon Web Services (AWS).[9] This is very secure, and it is offered for the projects that we produce. However, we don't offer that to everyone who wants to have their projects in the cloud infrastructure. The Development Guide is dedicated solely to creators who work with us. Projects that are produced by the NFB are hosted on our infrastructure.

LRT: Co-productions are also hosted by us most of the time, because the value of that is immense. An independent producer we would co-produce with knows that if everything is hosted by the NFB, there is a future for this project.

JF: Yes, because even if we don't revisit the works and update them as often as they may need it, we still keep the infrastructure alive. You have to distinguish the work and the infrastructure it is based on. By maintaining and securing the infrastructure, the works stay alive much longer. This is part of the technical aspect of our job: to maintain that infrastructure. Creators have to use the tools that we give them, the sandbox that we give to them, and if they follow those rules and these services, we're able to maintain their project. There are some exceptions for projects that build on

9 AWS, "The Trusted Cloud for Government in Canada", https://aws.amazon.com/canada/publicsector/government/; Government of Canada, "Government of Canada Cloud Guardrails", https://www.tbs-sct.canada.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=32787, last accessed: September 25, 2024.

other technologies that we have more difficulty supporting. In those cases, we try to find an external partner, to help us maintain the infrastructure for the production.

About the YouTube perspective: You're talking to the guy who's in charge of the NFB.ca streaming platform. For me, YouTube is a competitor! But we see the numbers. We determined that, when we release a new film, and we put it on our platform and on YouTube, it doesn't reach people on YouTube. The numbers that we have are for the long tail and for the whole collection. What makes me proud: When you search for a film on Google and it's on our website and on YouTube, our website comes first. Because our search engine optimization (SEO) is very, very powerful.

Also, we realized that views on YouTube result mostly from just parts of our films being embedded into a playlist with a small clip going viral. This means there is no attachment to the brand, no attachment to the movie. For us there is no value in these views. But if a person comes to our website and is dedicated to spending tens of minutes on the film, this has more value than small clips embedded into a playlist that is seen in India.

I try to calculate and determine the value with our Google Analytics profile. Here we can determine that people come to our platform and then come again. We can trace a digital journey and do things better for our users. With YouTube, I don't have these numbers and can't determine as precisely what we're doing well or poorly.

Should Everything Possible Be Archived?

FK: You said before that it's impossible to archive everything, every aspect of an interactive film, game, or project. We have been wondering: Should everything really be archived in the first place? How do you discuss this? Is there some kind of selection process, where you assess the importance of projects or negotiate the resources (time and money)?

LRT: We definitely discuss this, although we don't have a framework for those discussions. We decide more case by case and context by context. But definitely there is a conversation. And sometimes it starts just within the process of creation. The first question is: "What is the experience about? What will people take away from the experience?" But later we talk clearly about archiving. We don't have an "archivist". But we try to figure out: How do you estimate the archival value of a project? We try to figure out, sometimes with expertise from friends and people who are actual archivists, what may be the value of something in 20, 50, or 100 years. This is definitely not my expertise, but this is how we do it. We have the conversation and try to take the best decision – and, of course, based on our resources, that's for sure.

JF: Exactly! And as we said: we won't stop the process of creating new projects and devoting resources for archiving. Because creation is our primary mandate.

You Take Orders From Me Now

(Re-)Considering Digitality, Interactivity, and Decision-Making

Jan Distelmeyer

One fascinating characteristic of interactive documentaries, it seems to me, is that they test. They do this on several levels. They invite us to try out different forms that non-linear documentation can take. They test one's ability to make decisions. And they are also a test for the viability and precision of established concepts. "In a wide diversity of projects with varying modes of interactivity and technological possibilities depending on the software used," as Vanessa Zallot has put it, "standard terms such as narrative, production or authorship are challenged" (Zallot 2022, 70).

The reason for this plurality of testing is rooted in a certain understanding of interactivity. According to a pioneering definition by Judith Aston and Sandra Gaudenzi, "any project that starts with an intention to document the 'real' and that uses digital interactive technology to realize this intention can be considered an interactive documentary" (Aston and Gaudenzi 2012, 125). As Aston and Gaudenzi note, characterizing the close association of the "digital" and the "interactive", "interactivity requires a physical action to take place between the user/participant and the digital artefact" (ibid.).

At first glance, this "physical action" could be the link that holds together the "interactivity of the documentary" and the "mediality of the decision" – those two aspects that give the research project of this volume its contours.[1] For Tobias Conradi, Florian Hoof, and Rolf F. Nohr, who write "wherever decisions are made media are present to prepare them, document them, announce them, archive them or, if necessary, make them themselves" (Conradi, Hoof, and Nohr 2016, 10), the aforementioned digital interactive technology seems to be crucial here. But how can this technological narrowing of "digital" and "interactive" be understood (today)?

While it is obvious that this combination of interactivity and digitality challenges the traditional concepts of film (aesthetics), documentaries, and narration,[2] this established understanding of digitality and/as interactivity has itself been subject to scrutiny for some time now. I would therefore like to take the connection

1 Cf. HSLU 2022.

2 Cf. Krautkrämer 2012.

between interactivity, digitality, and decision-making as a starting point for some reflections on historical and contemporary developments. From the multitude of possible facets and examples that are constantly increasing due to the expanding diversification, embedding, and networking of computer technology, I will concentrate – bearing in mind the context of interactive documentaries – especially on film-related examples. My interest thus leads from specific promises and practices, once called interactive, to decisive characteristics of computers and of digitality in order to discuss some – discursive and programmatic – changes with regard to the interactive and (its relation to) the decisive qualities of digitality.[3] These changes promote new ways of understanding, dealing with, and deploying digital technologies, which I will discuss as "programmatic relations". Along the way, I will draw particularly on examples from the U.S. film industry, beginning my retrospective in the 1990s.

"Whatever You Want": Interactivity as the Hottest Ticket

In the first half of that decade, the term "interactive" rose to prominence as one of the key concepts aiming to make the technical and cultural shift to "the digital" comprehensible and vivid. Until well into the 2000s, it served as a kind of identifier for what the digital could mean – a kind of participatory signal of this turning point in history, often described as the "digital revolution" or "digital era".

Two bestsellers of the 1990s offered paradigmatic examples. In *Being digital* Nicolas Negroponte praised the "intrinsically interactive media, made possible by the digital lingua franca of bits" (Negroponte 1995, 63). In *The Digital Economy*, first published in 1996, Don Tapscott concluded: "The New Media are interactive, however. The user has control" (Tapscott 2014, 379). Wendy Chun discussed and analyzed this dominant interlocking of digitality, interactivity, and new media in 2006 as follows:

> The term "new media" came into prominence in the mid-1990s, usurping the place of "multi-media" in the fields of business and art. […] The singular plurality of the phrase ("new media" is a plural noun treated as a singular subject) stemmed from its negative definition: it was not mass media, specifically television. It was

3 Digitality is a complex and challenging concept. In the humanities (in German media studies since the early 1990s), it is used as a kind of counter or complementary term to more prominent notions such as "digital transformation", "digital revolution", "digital era", etc. Like these other umbrella terms, digitality aims at an elusive totality – but explicitly combines the technological with cultural, social, political, economic, and ecological issues. In this sense, digitality refers to the totality and peculiarity of the conditions and consequences of electronic digital computing in all its forms (cf. Distelmeyer, 2022; Franklin 2015; Hassan 2020; Stalder 2016).

> fluid, individualized connectivity, a medium to distribute control and freedom. Although new media depended heavily on computerization, new media was not simply "digital media": that is, it was not digitized forms of other media (photography, video, text), but rather an interactive medium or form of distribution as independent as the information it relayed (Chun 2006, 1).

This widespread promise of "interactivity" left its mark on the film industry. What I have described elsewhere as the urgency of digiti(li)zation[4] was particularly evident in Hollywood's interest in interactivity at that time. As *Variety* reported in 1993, the year in which the annual Digital Hollywood Conference was founded: "Clearly: interactive entertainment – where pictures, sound and text are merged into one compact disc – is the hottest ticket in town" (Rothman 1993).

The crucial question was: How to participate in the hype of digital progress so as not to be left behind? Before this hottest ticket was finally sold so successfully by the film industry with the launch of the DVD in 1996/97, the hotness was repeatedly paraded. Particularly striking and telling was its appearance in the world's most successful blockbuster of the early 1990s, *Jurassic Park* (1993).

Fig. 1: "It's an interactive CD-ROM!", Jurassic Park (Steven Spielberg, 1993)

Source: Jurassic Park (Steven Spielberg, Universal, 1993), screenshot.

4 Cf. Distelmeyer 2012, 225–251.

Here, two children, self-ironically introduced in the film as "our target audience," get to marvel at something quite contemporary rather than prehistoric animals as the dinosaur park's first attraction. Immediately after their arrival, the teenagers discover a computer monitor with touchscreen capabilities in one of the park's exploration vehicles. In close-up, the film testifies to what is jubilantly described thus: "It's an interactive CD-ROM! You must see: You just touch the right part of the screen and it talks about whatever you want!"

Interactivity was indeed a kind of hallmark of "the digital" in the 1990s. And it really helped to sell DVDs. The success of the DVD format was as enormous as it was fast – in 2002 (just five years after its launch) the DVD was already the most important revenue driver in the film industry worldwide. For advertising purposes, the concept of the digital was used to promise a new audiovisual quality that was supposed to be clearer and more brilliant than analog VHS technology. At the same time, paired with its multimedia capabilities, the digital was also associated with a certain type of control dubbed "interactivity".

In an exemplary manner the Sony commercial "This is DVD" from 1999 highlighted the interactive form of selecting bonus material ("8 languages", "32 subtitles", "fullscreen or letterbox format", "alternate camera angles", "entertaining extras", "trailers", "behind the scenes interviews", "'making of' features", "director's commentary") presented alongside the film. An expert explained into the camera: "Because its data streams are digital, DVD gives you lots of playback options to choose from" (Sony 1999).

The film industry thus tried to participate in the interplay of interactivity, flexibility, and empowerment that shaped the myth of digitality in the 1990s.[5] A hard task for an industry, whose productions, linear film, are far away from these promises of, in Negroponte's words, *being digital* and, in Tapscott's words, *users having control*. Brian Sebok summarized the outcome: "DVD was described as a tool of empowerment for consumers, enabling users new degrees of control and access to content" (Sebok 2007, 3). This gesture of power was also remarkable because the actual possibilities for access and control were kept within fairly narrow limits, partly for technical reasons.

Productions such as *I'm Your Man* (Planet Theory/DVD International, 1998), whose interactivity consisted of "choice-points" that required viewers to make decisions during the movie were quite rare, and the task of highlighting interactivity primarily focused on the DVD menu. In the spring of 1997, when studios released their first DVDs in the U.S. market, the covers of DVDs such as *Batman, Twister, Blade Runner – The Director's Cut* (all Warner Home Video, 1997), and *Singin' in the Rain* (MGM/UA Home Video, 1997) advertised their "interactive menus" on the cover. The announcements, commentaries, and advertisements that accompanied the

5 Cf. Rothman 1993; Distelmeyer 2011.

introduction of the new medium reinforced its interactive potential. In January 1997, DVD advertisements by Warner Home Video started enumerating "additional features" which "DVD users" could select from "an interactive, on-screen menu system" ("Warner home video announces" 1997). In October of the same year *Variety* stated that "DVD is actually evolutionary, blurring the lines between games and movies, linear stories and interactive stories" (Pursell 1997).

Menus tried hard to prove the interactivity of the new medium. They sought to fulfill digitality's promise of empowering flexibility, which was of great importance for the development of flexible capitalism. For DVDs, menus were something like the ostentatious certificate of their digital character – proof of the completed transition "over to the digital era" (Brookey 2007, 205).

Fig. 2: DVD-Cover The Mask: "Interactive Menus!"

Source: Cover *The Mask* (New Line Home Video, 1997/1998)

The emergence of (laserdisc-inspired) "additional features", which became standard as "special features" and "bonus material" on DVDs, was in no small part due to this pressure to embrace interactivity. And it is therefore not surprising that in the early years of DVDs, these options for decision-making were among the most prominently highlighted and often first-named "special features" on DVD covers:

"Interactive Menus". They not only provided access to attractions, but were produced and advertised as attractions themselves. The latter applies both to the elaborate design of the menus, for example, and to the attraction of being able to make decisions. The fact that menu-based interactivity only allows for very limited options – especially in comparison to computer games – led to a tendency in the early/mid-2000s to design particularly elaborate menus featuring complicated animations, which provoked criticism of "over-produced menus".[6] Menus can be seen as gestures assuring audiences (now: "users") that both they and their movies were living up to the promise of the future: by being digital.

The (Inter-)Activity of Programmatic Machines

Among the changes that have taken place since the late 1990s, it appears that interactivity is no longer being pushed as one of the key promises and explanations of the digital. A few remarks on the basic attributes of computerized interactivity and its relation to computer technology in general will help us to trace some of these changes. This background is also crucial if we wish to further explore what interactivity can actually do for documentaries. As Florian Krautkrämer has emphasized for "database cinema", the fact that "these films are *more or less* interactive or suggest interaction" applies no less to interactive documentaries. This then raises the question of "what effects" a relevant concept of interactivity "can have on the image design" and on the documentary form generally (Krautkrämer 2012, 305, emphasis added).

The idea of interactivity encompasses very different forms of relations. Computer-based interaction works differently from other (and older) forms of interaction between people, such as "interactive teaching", in which "the teacher," as Arbona Xhemajli puts it, is "the basic instigator of interaction with his/her pupils" (Xhemajli 2016, 31).

As many students and teachers learned while using platforms such as Zoom or BigBlueButton during the Covid-19 pandemic, *the basic instigator* in such environments is quite different. Any interactivity in these cases is conceptualized, enabled, and limited insofar as it is first and foremost something I perform and experience using software and hardware. Thus, every form of (inter-)action must have been planned and programmed beforehand and exactly foreseen to become feasible at all. For each possible (and then maybe spontaneous) human activity, a decision must have been made in advance in the programming.

In addition, computer-based forms of interactivity follow the patriarchal-military "Yes, Sir" logic, rooted in the pre-history of software in the 1940s, as Wendy

6 Cf. Distelmeyer 2012, 108–117.

Chun has shown (Chun 2013, 29–34). In our interaction with computers, our inputs consist of nothing but orders; and if these are not followed immediately, something seems to be out of order.

Hence, how computers and their functions open up to me, how I can react to what is made available to me via user interfaces, has to be determined in detail by programming. A question of decision-making: My freedom of action exists only because and insofar as it is granted. These conditions of interactivity do not automatically lead to an increase or a reduction in freedom. But they lead directly to a simple but essential characteristic that distinguishes computers from other machines: Computers are programmable. That is why they have been known, since about 1945, as "general-purpose machines". Electronic digital computers can and will adapt to the most diverse purposes. In this sense, computers are "programmatic machines": What they accomplish, they do both based on their programmability and through the execution of specific programs (that is why I call them programmatic machines and not just programmable machines).

Computers become productive because they are programmable and they execute programs. As programmatic machines, computers can fundamentally distinguish between two states. If one follows Alexander Galloway's abstraction that "the digital is the basic distinction that makes it possible to make a distinction at all" (Galloway 2014, xxix), this fundamental distinction becomes concrete for electronic digital computers as a voltage difference (conceived in the human sign system as ones and zeros). For Conradi, Hoof, and Nohr the "specific 'computist' decision rationality" based on "the binary code of the computer and logical circuits" is a prime example of "decisions inscribed in the functioning of technical media" (Conradi, Hoof, and Noor 2016, 13). Programming itself means (not least) making decisions in special ways and environments.[7] All programs written in programming languages with their "logical 'if-then-scheme'" are, as Dieter Mersch has put it, ultimately "decision calculi" (Mersch 1991, 111).

Current machine-learning methods are changing these decision-making processes in a certain way. The processes of what is called "artificial intelligence" (and which Algorithm Watch has much more accurately termed "algorithmically controlled, automated decision-making (ADM)", Alfter, Müller-Eiselt, and Spielkamp 2019, 9) operates differently from classical programming. Nevertheless, it also involves decision calculi. The goal of these programmed forms of automated optimization is "to enable a computer to learn from experience in order to solve specific tasks and make predictions without having been explicitly programmed to perform this function"(Sudmann2018, 10). Patterns are detected within collected data, from which probabilistic assessments and decisions are derived in order to – first – stabilize the detected patterns (by predicting the past) and – second – handle future

7 Cf. Soon and Cox 2020.

decisions.[8] Hence, what is referred to here as "learning" and "intelligence" is a specialized, automated quasi-independence of decision-making which must first be created, aligned, and trained. "AI systems," Kate Crawford concludes, "are not autonomous, rational, or able to discern anything without extensive, computationally intensive training with large datasets or predefined rules and rewards" (Crawford 2021, 8).

Without being able to here delve further into the diverse forms of computing that exist, we can draw the following preliminary conclusion: Issues of interactivity and decisions related to computers and digitality are intertwined for different – fundamental and historical – reasons. In order to enable interactivity with and through computers, decisions (by "users") are not only requested, but are made possible in the first place by decisions taken in advance. The 1990s showed that interactivity functioned as a kind of hallmark of digital progress, which the DVD format used in its own way to establish a special form of "new media".

Always On

I have taken a somewhat technical detour to return to the beginning and thus via decisions once again to interactivity. For this development towards algorithmic decision-making a.k.a. AI belongs essentially to those changes in the understanding of what today (if it can be said at all so generally) is more and more associated with the term "digital" – and has complemented if not partly supplanted the former hallmark of interactivity.

This change in the understanding of the digital became particularly visible during the 2010s. Something has been added to the earlier demarcation from the analog that was articulated – especially in the 1990s and early 2000s – in the mythical promises of immateriality and flexibility of the digital, which includes the gesture of being interactive. The word "digital" is no longer used only in the context of computerization as such, but refers more and more to a specific organization and multiplication of computing: the processing of data in distributed networks. The attribute "digital" is increasingly ascribed to what can be processed and is available online (i.e. thanks to the infrastructures of the internet).

This can be seen for example in important theoretical works on digitality and digital objects. Felix Stalder describes digitality as a "set of relations that is currently

8 As Wendy Chun has pointed out, what is special about this decision-making and prediction technology is that these machine-learning programs are considered successful and productive when they are proven correct in tests on data that has already been captured. So their first task is not to predict the future at all: "The models were then tested on their ability to predict this meticulously pruned past" (Chun 2021, 45).

being realized based on the infrastructure of digital networks" (Stalder 2016, 14) and Yuk Hui cites as examples of "digital objects" online videos and images as well as Facebook profiles, because "the significance of the recent development of data processing, that which we have since proclaimed as the digital, demonstrates the extension of data-exchanging capabilities beyond individual computers such that we can process large amounts of data by establishing connections to form data networks that extend from platforms to platforms, and from databases to databases" (Hui 2016, 49).

The debate about the importance of digital technologies in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 onward strengthened this conceptual movement. "Digital" here repeatedly signified a state of programmatic networking. In this context, "digital tools" were quite naturally understood as the means of an "online culture" (Roose 2020). And articles like "The digital now holds us together" (author's translation from the German) identified computer-based networking (exemplified as "social media" and "streaming") as "our sanctuary" that kept "work processes, learning opportunities and social interaction" up and running in the "catastrophic situation" (Rosenfeld 2020). Just as, especially in Germany, the Covid-19 pandemic may have promoted the acceptance of digital transformation,[9] it may also have further normalized the equation digital = programmatic network.

Fig. 3: Wakanda Forever Advert, 2023, "Own it on Blu-Ray"

Source: Wakanda Forever Advert, 2023

9 Cf. Müller 2020; Bär 2020.

Once again, however, it is the film industry that provides particularly telling examples of how the understanding of "digital" has changed. In promoting the sale of their products, both through digital formats such as Blu-ray and DVD as well as online via streaming and downloading, subtle distinctions have been established since the mid-2010s. DVD and Blu-ray (data-storage formats based on digital-optical discs) are now contrasted with online availability, with the attribute "digital" being granted only to the latter. The release date "on digital" is juxtaposed with "DVD and Blu-ray", while advertisements state "get it on digital" versus "own it on Blu-ray."

That is how Amazon's streaming platform came to announce the availability of the German series *You Are Wanted* in July 2017 with the absurd addition that "the series will soon also be available on DVD – completely analog" (Amazon Instant Video Germany, 2017). The Digital Versatile Disc, whose digital quality was once so extensively advertised and promoted as a unique selling point ("Because its data streams are digital…") proven by its interactivity is no longer digital enough. Data storage media are nothing, data traffic is everything. Needless to say, this shift fits perfectly with the rise of the platform economy.

An important role in establishing this new understanding of "digital" as synonymous with "internet-based" has been the success of touch-screen user interfaces of mobile computers, which followed the launch of the iPhone in 2007. The coexistence of apps for calculation or word processing next to the "Weather", "Stocks" and "YouTube" app, which in contrast to apps like "Calculator" and "Notes" always require an active internet connection, started to familiarize "users" with this new meaning of digitality. This novel way of thinking, which seems almost too obvious to mention now, stipulates that an internet connection is nothing additional, but the standard. *Always on* is – and has been for a long time now – the new normal. The energy consumption required for this has of course far-reaching ecological consequences. If digital goods and objects require not just my phone but a permanently functioning network infrastructure based on vast numbers of network machines, the entire planet is not only traversed by cables, masts, and server parks, but is also being consumed (from materials to energy consumption to the cooling power of water and ice).[10]

These well-known developments suggest that digitality's formerly important promise of interactivity has been supplemented, or even partially displaced, by another promise in recent years: The promise of permanent technological activity (and the accompanying desire for relief from conscious human activity) based on globe-spanning (and consuming) infrastructures, currently also reflected in the concept of the "technosphere".[11]

10 Cf. Parks and Starosielski, eds. (2015).

11 Cf. Schneider 2019.

This promise combines the *always-on* of persistent internet services and the algorithmic decision-making of AI. Comprehensive programmatic automation, a goal of computer development from the very beginning, thus reaches a new level. It may therefore not be so far-fetched to rephrase Don Tapscott's late 1990s summary of the mythical promise of the digital, "the new media are interactive," into the no less mythical "the new digital is always active."

The fact that the technical realization of this activity requires a permanent recourse to human work, decisions, and responsibility, so that the relief of some always creates a burden for others, is not the focus of these promises of automation.[12] However, it is this ongoing technological activity on which so many current and coming programmatic relations, so many forms of digitality, rely. Our everyday use of smartphones and voice assistants is just as much a part of that as developments in autonomous driving and concepts of smart cities, in which we no longer have to consciously interact to provide input – thanks to the sensors of the computer-based and networked elements that detect and regulate, the various systems communicating via a range of interfaces (all kinds of inputs and outputs as well as communication within and between computers).

New Orders: Detecting, Evaluating, and Automating Decisions

Once again, the example of the film industry shows in its own way how permanent technological activity and automated decision-making have now complemented and perhaps partially supplanted interactivity as the hallmarks of digital progress. For the gesture and promise of streaming platforms such as Netflix is not so much a form of (digitality's) interactivity that requires series and movies to be presented with many special functions and click options. Rather, the promise of streaming – which applies in the same way to other major providers such as Amazon Prime, Disney+, and Paramount+ – is the supposedly permanent availability of a rich (and constantly advertised) selection of content.

Against the media-historical background that the quality of what is called digital no longer needs to be demonstrated interactively, but rather proves itself in reliable always-on network processes, there is no longer any urgent need for a vast amount of bonus material, at least not for this reason. The previously established association between "the digital" and a variety of "options to choose from" is no longer apparent (Sony 1999). In the case of Netflix, which started out as a DVD rental company before becoming a streaming platform, it is particularly noticeable that the "special features", which used to be so important for DVDs, are conspicuously rare or

12 Cf. Crawford 2021, 7–21.

absent here (with the exception of language or subtitle variants and occasional trailers). More important is the promise of availability as the *always on* – the preferably never-ending data stream of a constantly updated portfolio of titles, showcased in the menus of platforms that list films as a software service.

That is why – and because for the big streaming platforms user data is now an important special feature on its own account[13] – the gesture of interactivity has shifted to the portfolio menu. One could simply say that the former causality of digital data streams and choices has moved to the choice of titles presented as an "order of selectivity" (Distelmeyer 2017, 100). It is no longer a film but the platform itself (as a resource for films and user data) that is the focus, and, accordingly, it is not the menus and additional features of individual titles that matter and are carefully designed, but the menu of the platform itself.[14]

As in so many media constellations based on computing and once sold as "new media", this order of selectivity relies on the idea of the grid (Krauss 1979). More precisely, the traditional grid of operational images, which has become a constant and close everyday companion since the introduction of the smartphone at the latest, organizes the mode of choice here: The aesthetics of command appears as a grid of operational images of films and series.

Moreover, this mode and gesture of interactivity is complemented by a slightly different activity. Based on algorithmic decision-making, Netflix and others are constantly offering suggestions to assist the user in choosing the next title to watch (thereby keeping them on the platform) that no longer require human agency alone. Netflix promotes this, stating that "machine learning powers our recommendation algorithms" (Netflix 2023). Thus, in addition to the order of selectivity that enables me to make decisions, recommendations in the thumbnail grid of titles or in the form of presentations directly following titles I have already watched represent another (no longer human, but machine) form of decision-making.

This presence of automated recommendations that complement (or replace) human decision-making with on algorithmic decision-making (which is also co-produced by humans in significant regards) was taken to the extreme in 2021 by a special service offered by Netflix. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and hence the height of streaming service use, Netflix introduced the "Play Something" mode. It was later renamed "Surprise Me" and described by the Netflix Director of Product Innovation in April 2021 as follows:

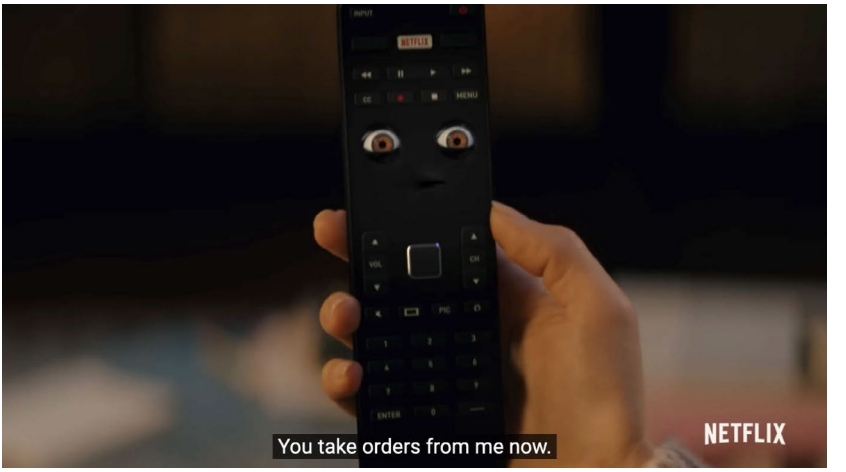
> There are times when we just don't want to make decisions. A Friday evening after a long work week. A fridge full of food but nothing jumps out. A family movie night where no one can agree. We've all been there. Sometimes you just want to open

13 Cf. Srnicek 2017.

14 For an exploration of the metaphorical interface design of Netflix, see Fahlenbrach 2023.

> Netflix and dive right into a new story. That's why we've created Play Something, an exciting new way to kick back and watch. When you hit the "Play Something" button, you'll be instantly met with a series or film we know you'll love based on what you've watched before (Johnson 2021).

Fig. 4: Play Something (Netflix, 2021)



Source: *Play Something* (Netflix, 2021), screenshot

The new feature was advertised in a video in which an initially astonished, but then happy couple is enlightened by their talking remote control – after being strongly admonished to refrain from pressing the buttons all the time:

> "Would you knock it off with those giant thumbs?"
> "Sorry, we're just looking for something to watch."
>
> "You never thought that maybe pushing my buttons all day was going to be harmful to me? You take orders from me now! I'm going to show you a little thing called 'Play Something'. […] Netflix will drop you right into a new show or movie, and it's all based on what you've watched" (Netflix 2021).

The remote control takes over, the couple clicks "Play Something", and happily settles into the movie that starts, clearly enjoying it. The audience's instruction ends with: "Sometimes the best choice is not to choose" (ibid.).

Whether this radical innovation – taking orders from the apparatus – went too far or the automated recommendations of this "something" simply turned out to be too infrequently a desirable "surprise": two years later, the service was discontin-

ued. In February 2023, a Netflix spokeswoman was quoted as saying that the company "will continue to explore other ways to give members more options and ways to explore and discover content they want to watch" (Deighton 2023). Nonetheless, this intermezzo and the way it was promoted provides a vivid example of how the promises of digitality, interactivity, and decision making (and their relationships to each other) have changed since the 1990s.

This includes, not least, the fact that human decisions are now increasingly being captured, stored, evaluated, and used to derive automated decisions. My decisions are not only made for myself – they are part of evaluation procedures, which in turn (are intended to) enable further decisions by machines and humans.[15] *Sometimes the best choice is not to choose*: In today's programmatic relations, it is not always necessary to make one's own decisions, because, according to the promise, the next decision can be aptly predicted from the history of those that have previously been captured. And of course, the interactions that enable this involve more than just "users" and "digital interactive technology" or "participants" and "the digital artefact". The process requires a global – material and conceptual – infrastructure and relies on always-on computers and persistent practices.[16]

Reflecting this shift in terms of digitality, interactivity, and decision-making could be an ideal task for the field of interactive documentaries. For it is precisely the characteristic of being shaped by "modes of interactivity and technological possibilities depending on the software used" that is particularly challenged by these developments of digitality (Zallot 2022, 70). The interactive documentary *Made to Measure* (Group Laokoon, 2021) gives some indication of where this might lead. Its starting point is the question of whether a person's life can be replayed using their Google data:

> *Made to Measure* is an experiment that asks if you can reconstruct a person based solely on their digital data trail. Can you build a doppelganger of a person you don't even know? Record, recreate, and replay the life of someone and their personality in detail? […] We chose a data record that documents five years of a person's life. It would have been difficult to combine all the data that Google, Facebook and other data brokers have collected about this person. Therefore, we limited ourselves to the data Google is legally required to release, according to EU laws. We discovered Google had accumulated over 100,000 data points about the person over the last five years ("About Made to Measure" n.d.).

For this experiment with a volunteer's data, the Laokoon group asked an actress to play the unknown protagonist based on the collected data, with the climax of the film

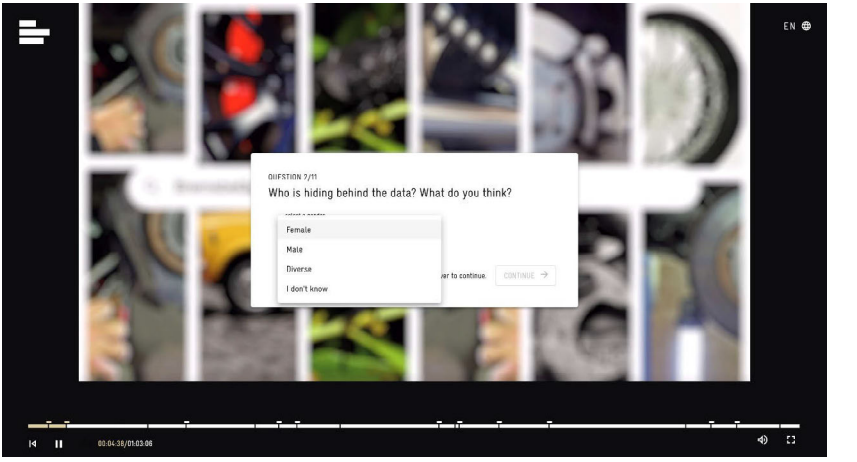
15 Cf. Netflix Technology Blog 2020.

16 I have described this multi-layered interaction of various operations and processes elsewhere as an "interface complex" (cf. Distelmeyer 2022, 51–92).

being a confrontation between the original subject and her double. While the project already presents exciting (self-) observations as a classic documentary,[17] the internet version of Made to Measure gains another dimension (Laokoon n.d.). The user can only gain access after ticking the usual cookie and privacy consent boxes, which include the phrases "you agree to access data about your website usage in your browser while visiting the website of GRUPPE LAOKOON GbR […] to track your activities based on device and browser settings […] for the purpose of integrating streaming content, statistical analysis and individualization of content as part of our experiment on our website. […]. Without your consent, we cannot offer the experiment in its entirety" (ibid.).

The capture function requested here is indeed important, because in the course of the documentary, about a dozen questions are asked about the content shown (e.g., "Will the person behind the data recognize themselves in the ad?"), which one has to answer by choosing from a selection of possible answers to enable the film to continue. However, the special feature of this form of interaction is not the usual procedure of having a different scene follow depending on the decision made. What makes this deciding interaction so interesting is quite another consequence.

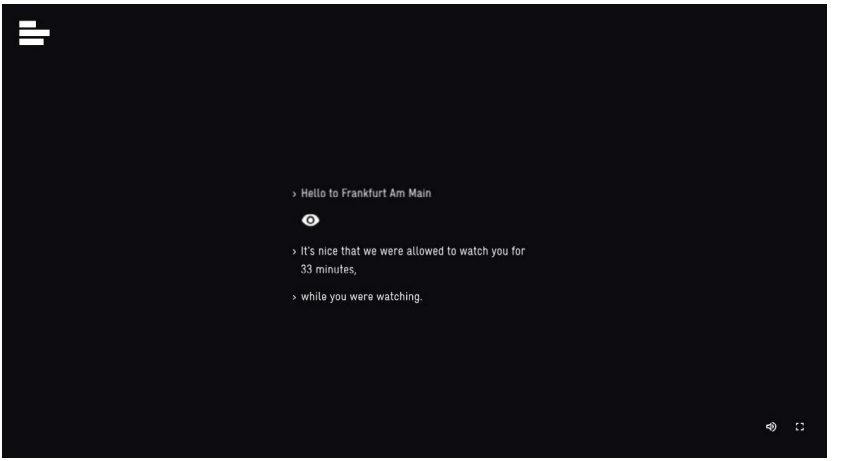
Fig. 5: Screenshot Made to Measure (laokoon.group, 2021)



Source: *Made to Measure* (Hans Block/Moritz Rieseweck/Cosima Terrasse, 2021)

17 A linear version was broadcast on television in June (Westdeutscher Rundfunk) and October (Deutsche Welle) 2023: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CEeAkNmMms.

Fig. 6: Screenshot Made to Measure (laokoon.group, 2021)



Source: *Made to Measure* (Hans Block/Moritz Rieseweck/Cosima Terrasse, 2021)

Based on one's click patterns, decisions, IP address, viewing duration, and information about, for example, one's browser and screen resolution (all information that is continuously conveyed at the software level for the purpose of displaying websites), one's own profile is evaluated at the end. This is presented in a fairly detailed record that segues into a psychogram. As a result, the evaluated personal interaction and that of one's own device become, with (self-)ironic comments, perhaps the actual highlight of this experiment, in which those who supposedly only watched took part themselves. Each programmatic bulletin begins with "Hello to [location via IP address]. It's nice that we were allowed to watch you for [personalized number] minutes, while you were watching." In this, the quality of the assumptions about the user's personality structure ("We can see you have a critical mind by your choice of browser: Firefox") is perhaps less important than data captured and represented in the *Made to Measure* project.

This interactive documentary, about which much more could be said, cleverly and surprisingly puts up for discussion what interactivity actually might mean today: a combination of human and machinic agency, in which decisions do not only stand "for themselves" but are part of further decision-making processes that the human agent does not always have to be aware of. In any case, who and what is interacting here, who and what decides what on whatever basis, and which decisions were necessary beforehand or become possible afterwards, are among the crucial questions for the discussion of present-day digitality.

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From Taking Part to Having a Part?

Interdisciplinary Theoretical Considerations for Participation Research in Media Studies

Jasmin Kermanchi

Introduction: A Differentiated Approach to Participation

Tell us your story! Join the conversation! Get involved! These are typical calls for participation in interactive documentaries on the web (i-docs). Users are often able to participate in multimedia web documentaries by providing content or comments (Gaudenzi 2014, 130). Some i-docs also enable co-creation, allowing participants to take part in documentary projects on an equal footing with the initiators in various phases (Cizek and Uricchio 2022, 19, 24, 36). It is particularly common for i-docs dealing with social issues to seek to involve "community narrators" (Ryan and Staton 2022, 11) in media production processes. The people affected become participants or producers and tell their own stories. Many of these projects assume that media participation enables those involved to assert themselves in the public sphere and with respect to the dominant culture (see the i-doc *Dadaab Stories*, U.S. 2013) or to become part of a community (see the i-doc *The G Word*, U.S. 2015). In media studies, such promises raise the question of the extent to which the aesthetics, affordances, and practices of the projects fulfill the prerequisites for promoting socio-cultural and community participation.

Media and communication scholar Kate Nash states that i-docs "offer distinct resources for nurturing citizenship and convening publics" (Nash 2022, 80). In her study of co-creative projects, Mandy Rose finds that "[i]n taking part, participants become a community to interrogate a theme of shared concern" (Rose 2014, 208). 'Taking part' seems to enable participants to 'have a part'[1] in the cultural sphere, the

1 In this chapter, I deliberately use the expression 'having a part' for a passive dimension that focuses on 'being part of something' instead of more common English terms such as 'partake'. I do this first because 'partake' can also mean a form of active participation in something, which I would describe as 'taking part'. Second, the expression 'having a part' is a reference to the philosopher Jacques Rancière and his expression "the part of those who have no part" (Rancière 1999, 30), as I will explain in detail later. Third, by using this unusual expression,

public sphere, and a community. What are the conditions, however, under which media participation can lead to cultural, democratic, and community participation? It is unlikely that we can answer this question solely using the methodologies of media studies. Rather, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary, one that takes account of theories of participation in philosophy and political science, among other tools. Operationalizing these theories for media studies research can contribute to examining the relationship between 'taking part' and 'having a part'. This perspective is neither interested in measuring the impact of participatory projects nor in the participation of citizens in political processes. Rather, the focus is on cultural practices and cultural forms of democracy, as opposed to formal-institutional forms.

In this chapter, I use the example of i-docs to argue that we need to incorporate an interdisciplinary perspective into media studies research on participation in and through digital media cultures if we want to examine its transformative potentials. To this end, I will first present a taking part–having a part model and will then mainly use philosophical and political theory approaches, particularly those of Jacques Rancière, Michaela Ott, Nancy Fraser, Chantal Mouffe, and Jean-Luc Nancy, to clarify the conditions for three recurring forms of 'having a part' in i-docs, namely cultural participation, democratic participation in the public sphere, and participation in a (virtual) community. This chapter deliberately pays little attention to approaches taken to 'participation' in the sense of actively 'taking part' within the field of media studies (see, e.g., Schäfer 2011) as a means of showing how media studies can benefit from using other theoretical approaches when examining forms of 'having a part'. I will illustrate this by applying the theoretical concepts in analyses of various i-docs. The hypothesis is that 'taking part' in i-docs does not lead to 'having a part' per se, but that a specific interplay of various human and non-human actors is decisive.

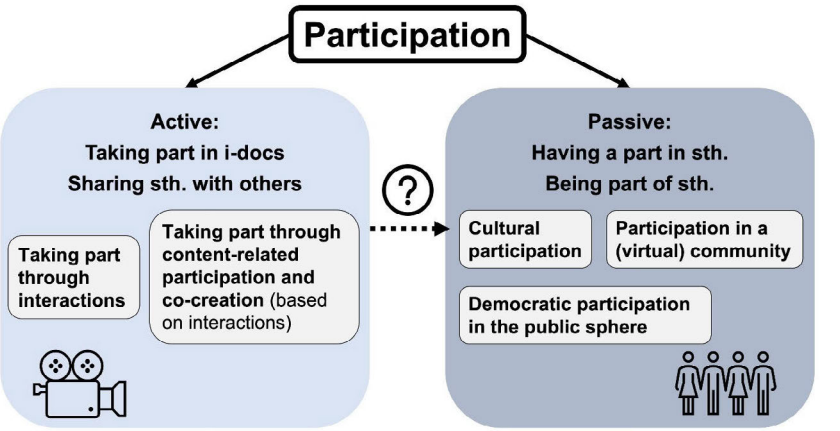
The Taking Part–Having a Part Model

In research on i-docs and online practices in general, the term 'participation' often appears alongside the term 'interactivity'. By 'interactivity', I mean possibilities for interacting with media, such as navigating, as well as forms of interpersonal interaction, which can take place in both a digitally mediated form and face-to-face (cf. Bucher 2004, 135–137). My taking part–having a part model assumes that users *take part* in the i-doc through *interactions*, for example, by selecting options. This type of

I would like to draw attention to the fact that there are different forms of participation that have not yet been sufficiently differentiated in relation to i-docs. The approach proposed in this chapter is based on my German-language monograph *Dokumentieren – Partizipieren – Intervenieren. Teilnahme und Teilhabe in Interactive Documentaries* (Kermanchi 2025).

participation must be distinguished from participation with one's own content or through co-creation. Nevertheless, these practices are themselves based on interactions: Contributing content to an i-doc can mean, for example, clicking on a button such as 'Tell us your story' and selecting a video to upload. This is called "user-to-documents interactivity" (McMillan 2009, 213). Similarly, co-creation can only take place through interpersonal interactions, for example, between professional media makers and non-professionals (cf. Cizek and Uricchio 2022, 24). Therefore, my taking part–having a part model proposes understanding 'participation' as a generic term and categorizing interactivity under its active dimension (Fig. 1). 'Taking part' is based on interactions.

Fig. 1: The taking part–having a part model. © Jasmin Kermanchi, 2024.



Source: Jasmin Kermanchi 2024

This leads to the distinction between active and passive participation, representing 'taking part' and 'having a part' or 'being part', respectively. In German, there are separate nouns for this: *Teilnahme* and *Teilhabe*. Media scholar Anna Grebe understands active participation, for example, as claiming a right, and passive participation as having a part in a larger whole, such as society (Grebe 2013, 36). This should not be mistaken for the distinction between "participation in the media" and "participation through the media" proposed by media and communication scholar Nico Carpentier (Carpentier 2011, 67–68). "Participation through the media" refers, for example, to "mediated participation in public debate" (Carpentier 2011, 67), which is rather an active form.

For 'having a part', I differentiate between cultural participation, democratic participation in the public sphere, and participation in a (virtual) community (Fig. 1). These three types cannot be strictly separated but are closely related, as I will show. Furthermore, each of the types does not describe a static state but rather a dynamic phenomenon (cf. Grebe 2013, 37).

Distinguishing between 'taking part' and 'having a part' and clarifying the conditions for forms of the latter can help to avoid hastily equating media participation with socio-cultural participation and community participation. In the following, I will address the question of the extent to which 'taking part' can lead to 'having a part' (see Fig. 1), both on a theoretical level and using the example of specific i-docs.

Conditions for Forms of 'Having a Part' and Examples of I-Docs

Cultural Participation

To what extent can media participation via the contribution of content and co-creation enable participants to 'have a part' in the cultural sphere? To answer this question, the writings of the philosopher Jacques Rancière can be productive. He explains that "forms of partaking" are inscribed in "modes of perception" (Rancière 2010, 36). Rancière's work deals with the realization of equality through artistic practices. He assumes that aesthetics and politics are interdependent. For Rancière, the term "politics" refers to the intervention in an existing order, the so-called "police order" (Rancière 1999, 30). In his understanding, the police order determines the hierarchical organization of society and assigns "bodies […] by name to a specific location and a specific task" (Rancière 1999, 29), which causes exclusion. According to the philosopher, art can create spaces where "the part of those who have no part" (Rancière 1999, 30) receives a platform as speaking subjects and challenges prevailing identity attributions (Rancière 2010, 139). Rancière explains:

> Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise. (Rancière 1999, 30)

This idea is important for an understanding of cultural participation. Rancière assumes that 'having a part' is preceded by a "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2010, 36), which determines who can share in the commons and who cannot (Rancière 2010, 36). Accordingly, claiming participation can take place by intervening in sensory experience (Rancière 2010, 140). "The part of those who have no part" (Rancière 1999, 30) must move into the realm of the visible and audible.

One example is the participatory i-doc *Dadaab Stories* (U.S. 2013, Ryan Jones, Rafiq Copeland, and Liz Manne). It was conceived to make the voices of the residents of the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya heard. The project is the result of co-creation with the refugees on-site. It gives an insight into life in such a refugee camp by asking the residents to tell their own stories. While European mass media tend to reproduce the marginalization of refugees' voices (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017, 630), *Dadaab Stories* offers a space for precisely these voices. By producing videos themselves, the refugees were able to question existing identity attributions. In clips such as "Ifo Town Market" or "The Gym", they present their colorful everyday lives, which the mass media rarely sheds light on and which therefore remain largely invisible outside the project.

A closer look at Rancière's approach, however, reveals that to 'have a part', it is not sufficient that the refugees speak for themselves. In addition, a "redistribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2006, 43) is necessary, which no longer expresses an inequality but rather creates space for new participation. This implies that (self-)representations of participants must overcome dominant patterns of representation. Challenging the "police order" requires emancipating oneself "from the place assigned" (Rancière 1999, 30), which means "to rupture given relations between things and meanings" (Rancière 2010, 141). 'Taking part' must entail emancipation from prevailing images that express inequality if 'having a part' is to emerge. Philosopher Michaela Ott, for example, advocates a reflexive approach to participation. Her premise is that human identities – as well as other entities such as artworks (Ott 2018, 140) – should be understood as *dividual* rather than *individual* because they are "multiply subdivided" (Ott 2018, 7) through their participation in various processes and, for example, cultural techniques. Based on this fact, Ott explains the need to consciously select, modify, or interrupt the various involvements (Ott 2018, 126). Media scholar Thomas Weber concludes that this reflection also implies that the self-image "detaches itself from old dependencies" (Weber 2023, 45). Emancipation from existing images and narratives is, therefore, another prerequisite for cultural participation.

In *Dadaab Stories*, the aim was for the refugees, some of whom have been living in the camp for 30 years, to present themselves differently than in the stereotypical representations of the mass media (Ronik Design n.d.). The news media often reduce the portrayal of refugees to their need for help during crises (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017, 1173). In addition, the refugees are "deprived of their personhood, as unique individuals with their own live [*sic*] stories" (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski 2017, 628). In *Dadaab Stories*, by contrast, numerous videos in the category "The Arts" do not show victims but creative camp residents presenting poems, songs, and dances. As participating refugee Liban Rashid explained in an interview with Clar Ni Chonghaile:

> There are so many talented youths in the camp, who know about music and singing, […] and they think nobody needs their talent. Now, they can share their stories, and some people might like what they are doing, and might give them a market. (Rashid quoted in Ni Chonghaile 2013)

In Rancière's terms, this is an intervention into the existing order of the visible and audible, resulting in an alternative perception of the camp. The camp residents confront the mass media's portrayal of refugees as passive victims with a much more active image. By emancipating themselves from the victim narrative that reduces them to their need for help, they demand cultural participation.

However, in some cases, the i-doc displays stereotypical self-images – failing to question and challenge the prevailing distribution of the sensible, which perpetuates inequality. The video "Caring for Abidirsack", for example, focuses on the suffering of an overburdened father. The video "Gilo River" highlights the suffering caused by a dried-up river. In these cases, the potential to "[shift] a body from the place assigned to it" (Rancière 1999, 30) is lower than in the depictions that break with mass media images.

Another example is the i-doc *Question Bridge: Black Males* (U.S. 2012, Chris Johnson et al.). The project offers Black men a space in which they can share experiences and represent themselves to deconstruct stereotypes ("About", *Question Bridge*). Participants can upload videos with questions for other Black males or answer existing questions posed in other videos. The conversations show the diversity of Black masculinity. In some cases, however, participants take up stereotypes by asking generalizing questions, such as "Why do we keep going around killing each other?" (Jermayue C. Edwards), "When will you realize violence will bring us down?" (William Bunn III), or "Why do blacks fight in public places?" (Larry Witherspoon). The danger is that people with prejudices who watch the videos will see existing stereotypes confirmed (cf. Petersen and Six-Materna 2006, 432). Yet *Question Bridge* also contains many cases of alternative representation that promote cultural participation and a reflexive approach. One example is the question "Why are we so quick to believe the negative stereotypes about ourselves?" (Bayeté Ross Smith), although the "we" can again be interpreted as homogenizing.

So far, it can be stated that content-related participation and co-creation in i-docs do not necessarily result in cultural participation for those who take part. Some of them fall into victim narratives or stereotypical patterns. However, a "change in the distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2010, 141) can also emerge in other ways than just by deviating from stereotypes, for example, by breaking with perceptual conventions. This can offer a new form of experience that draws attention to the excluded (Rancière 2008, 77). Similarly, Ott argues that various forms of alienation, appropriation, and recontextualization (Ott 2018, 38, 242–243) can intervene "in the visibility zones" (Ott 2018, 246).

One example of this is the i-doc *Unquiet Voices* (Romania 2019, Ioana Zamfir) about women in Romania who are victims of domestic violence and whose voices are suppressed in the country. The initiators paired the audio testimonies of seven of these Romanians with scenes from old silent films showing fictional domestic violence. The project assumes that films influence society's perception of aggression against women (Anais Association n.d.). It reflects this media-conditioned public perception by combining scenes from old U.S. silent films, in which violence served as a means of entertainment, with the testimonies of today's victims of abuse. The distribution of the sensible that is expressed in the old films, such as the role of women, becomes visible through a new distribution using the voices of the participating Romanian women and the strategy of recontextualization. The discrepancy between image and sound breaks with conventions. A further source of irritation also arises when users are required to interrupt the videos to listen to user-generated content added later by numerous other women affected. In this way, aesthetic strategies challenge the power structure regarding what is actively heard.

The examples of i-docs discussed here show the connection between cultural participation and democratic participation in the public sphere. In an interview with Henry Jenkins, media scholar Nico Carpentier explains that "participation in the cultural sphere" has a political-democratic dimension because it is linked to questions of "power and conflict" (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013, 269). Rancière's approach, too, can be read in terms of democratic theory. He considers dissent to be constitutive of democracy, as it enables the excluded to claim the right to participate (Rancière 2010, 54).

Democratic Participation in the Public Sphere

One form of democratic participation in the public sphere is the expression of the excluded by 'counterpublics'. These can democratically expand the public sphere if they accept democratic values (Fraser 1990, 67). 'Counterpublic' is an alternative concept to the universal bourgeois public sphere described by Jürgen Habermas (1989). According to the philosopher Nancy Fraser, democratic participation requires practices that react to the exclusion mechanisms of the broad public sphere (Fraser 1990, 67). She describes "subaltern counterpublics" as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses […]" (Fraser 1990, 67). In this context, participation would mean being able "to speak 'in one's own voice'" (Fraser 1990, 69). A further prerequisite for a counterpublic is to address strangers with the counterdiscourses (cf. Warner 2002, 424).

Nancy Fraser's concept of democratic participation implicitly distinguishes between 'taking part' and 'having a part'. Fraser criticizes Habermas' theory by pointing out that even if everyone formally could take part, "informal impediments to participatory parity" (Fraser 1990, 63) would exist, which, in my understanding, prevent

'having a part'. For example, public debate can exclude certain interests by invoking privacy with regard to a given topic (Fraser 1990, 73–74). The i-doc *Unquiet Voices* addresses this by creating a platform for the Romanian women's voices, which had not been heard publicly before the project due to "biased points of view" (Anais Association n.d.), although they had not been formally denied the right to take part.

Similar to Fraser, the political scientist Chantal Mouffe assumes that "a variety of agonistic public spaces" (Mouffe 2013, 95) that challenge dominant discourses can promote democratic participation. She explains that "[a] well functioning democracy calls for a clash of legitimate democratic political positions" (Mouffe 2005, 30). I argue that this clash of positions can promote democratic participation on two levels. The first level concerns the circulation of counternarratives *by* media projects such as i-docs. The second level refers to the clash of positions *within* the projects.

I have already illuminated the first level by outlining Fraser's approach. One example is the *Dadaab Stories* project mentioned above. It creates a counterpublic by expressing marginalized positions, differentiating itself from mass media practices by the use of self-representations, allowing the participants to speak in their own voice and language, and addressing an audience of strangers. The counterpublic created by *Dadaab Stories* offers an expansion of discursive space by sharing the stories worldwide using social media. However, there was a lack of funds to finance broad distribution, as the initiator Liz Manne explained in a personal conversation on September 29, 2021, referring to the exclusive funding of production processes. The small counterpublic of *Dadaab Stories* thus only circulated counterdiscourses to a limited extent and barely promoted democratic participation. Another obstacle to the refugees' participation in the public sphere was the lack of digital infrastructure in the refugee camp. When public debates arose in response to the videos, such as social media discussions (see #DadaabStories on X), the camp residents were usually excluded from participating because the internet connection on-site was very poor, as Manne told me. Accordingly, the refugees themselves were rarely able to watch the videos on the online platform. Manne explained that the funding of the project by the Tribeca New Media Fund was linked to the condition of innovative technology, which did not consider the needs of the camp residents on-site. This reinforced participation inequalities.

Looking at the second level of the clash of positions, namely *within* i-docs, further limits to democratic participation become apparent. On a theoretical level, Mouffe refers to the clash of positions as *agonism* instead of *antagonism*:

> While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. (Mouffe 2005, 20)

According to Mouffe, "being bombarded by different views" (Mouffe quoted in Carpentier/Cammaerts 2006, 968) is a characteristic of democracy if everyone in the agonistic struggle is oriented towards democratic values such as equality, so that adversaries do not become enemies (Mouffe 2005, 20, 31). Matthew Jones addresses this with the criticism that "[…] insisting that participants view each other with agonistic respect may be difficult to achieve" (Jones 2014, 26). This can be illustrated using the example of an i-doc.

In the i-doc *Whiteness Project* (U.S. 2014, Whitney Dow), White people discuss what it is like to live as a White person in the USA. While the protagonists of the project express their opinions in individual videos, visitors to the website can click on a "Discuss" button on the right of the screen, which moves the comment area in front of the video, allowing them to participate themselves. Different opinions on the topic collide *within* the project and its open comment section, which seems to facilitate democratic participation. However, the democratic dispute – the agonism between *adversaries* – occasionally gets out of control and turns into antagonistic relations between *enemies*. For example, the user Emerson Sanders comments "Don't care for other People. White America!". Sanders does not acknowledge the legitimacy of other positions. In another example, Jim Hamilton insults Erin Writes, calling her a "lunatic" and an "idiot" after she has accused him of making racist remarks. Clearly not all the participants in *Whiteness Project* recognize the legitimacy of other positions. The freedom to participate by making comments, which will not be checked, therefore has the downside of potentially enabling disrespectful treatment of other people.

In the aforementioned project *Question Bridge: Black Males*, by contrast, no antagonistic relations arise. This may be because users must create an account and upload a video of themselves. Most importantly, however, there is a common goal that counteracts antagonism, namely, to *collectively* demand participation as Black men ("About", *Question Bridge*). Some participants discuss, for example, whether it is acceptable to use the N-word. Even if they hold very controversial views, they don't attack each other but recognize the legitimacy of other positions. One explanation for this could be the sense of community created by the Black men's similar experiences. For example, some men share that they have a problem with "eating chicken, watermelon, and bananas in front of White people" (question by Eternal Polk). In her theory of agonistic democracy, Chantal Mouffe states: "[T]he political is from the outset concerned with collective forms of identification, since in this field we are always dealing with the formation of 'us' as opposed to 'them'" (Mouffe 2013, 4). "Us" in this context refers to Black men, "them" to White people, whose prejudices the Black participants discuss. Their discussion contributes to collective subjectivization. This shows that the transition to community participation is fluid.

Participation in a (Virtual) Community

A virtual community is characterized by the ongoing interaction of people with a shared interest on the web, resulting in a social network of relationships (Deterding 2009, 118). The architecture of the web, social networks, and cultural practices influence each other (Deterding 2009, 129). Social scientist Howard Rheingold further explains: "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold 2000, XX). Thus, forming a virtual community requires long-term social interaction.

A rare example of an i-doc that fostered a virtual community over a long period is *Corona Haikus* (Colombia/UK 2020, Sandra Tabares-Duque and Sandra Gaudenzi). The project began during the Covid-19 pandemic and participants were very active for over a year. *Corona Haikus* started as a Facebook group, which is not unusual for i-docs (cf. Ryan and Staton 2022, 6). The aim of the project was to feel connected worldwide in times of social isolation. Participants in the project were able to contribute "visual haikus" to the Facebook group, consisting of three images and a short text expressing their current situation, emotions, and concerns (see the "Info" section in the Facebook group). Other members of the Facebook group frequently commented on the haikus, so that a dialogue took place. This almost daily exchange over a year was very caring. Participants expressed their solidarity, which, along with the shared aesthetic practices, led to the emergence of a virtual community (cf. Kermanchi 2022, 92–93). Numerous contributions from participants point this out. Maria Christoforou's haiku from May 21, 2020, in which she addresses the fact that she feels uncomfortable going outside, was commented on by Valentine Goddard from Canada with "I hear you too. […] Take care, big cyberhug". In a haiku in the final phase of the project, Gilbert Calleja wrote: "Thank you all for being fantastic companions during this trip. Farewell dear friends". This inclusive form of address expresses a sense of community. As project participant Maria Christoforou explained in a personal conversation on June 23, 2022: "I was very close to everyone even though I didn't know them". Being part of this virtual community, however, required creativity in dealing with the documentary-poetic form of expression, which is probably one reason why many participants were media makers.

The emergence of such virtual communities through taking part in i-docs is rather rare, as the duration of the users' presence on online platforms is usually temporary. In the following, I will therefore focus on *situational community experiences* using the writings of the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. Although Nancy uses the concept of community for considerations of an ontological and political-ethical nature, a transfer of his approach to a media-philosophical perspective allows one to grasp the specific dynamics of community experiences in i-docs, as he advocates

for thinking of community as relational and performative (cf. Spöhrer 2013, 87). His approach can help to clarify the relationship between 'taking part' and 'having a part'.

Nancy explains that community cannot be built, but only experienced through what he calls "sharing" (Nancy 1991, 31). As a translation of *partager*, the term refers to both a separating and a connecting momentum (Nancy 2000, 194). According to Nancy, no self-contained *subjects* exist, but rather *singularities* that are plural in themselves (Nancy 2000, 32). The prerequisite for the feeling of being part of a community would be the exposure between singularities through "sharing" as a "mutual interpellation of singularities" (Nancy 1991, 29). This does not imply that a community becomes unified in the sense of eliminating all differences (Nancy 1991, 25, 30). Rather, it means that distinguishable singularities expose their own identity and how they are different from others through "sharing" – or, as I argue, through taking part based on interactions (cf. Schwarzmantel 2007, 462). As I explained above, participation and interaction cannot be separated. Being part of an emerging community experience results from taking part, circulating that which is shared (cf. Hebekus and Völker 2012, 107), or more precisely, from the "between" of singularities (Nancy 1991, 29). In Nancy's thinking, community experiences also arise from sharing with technology and other *non-human* actors (Nancy 2000, 18). In the context of i-docs, it is the platforms in particular that influence facilitating a sense of togetherness. Drawing on the approach of media scholar Beate Ochsner, in the following, I will focus on the media as a space in-between, in which singularities can expose their differences in a way that allows them to experience community (Ochsner 2018, 131–132).

Following Nancy, 'having a part' in a community experience constitutes the participating singularities by contributing to their individualization. He states that "these singular beings are themselves constituted by sharing, they are distributed and placed, or rather spaced, by the sharing that makes them others […]" (Nancy 1991, 25). As this passage explains, singularities change through sharing. One example is the case of the participants in *Question Bridge*. Sharing experiences with other Black males and the interactions of asking and answering questions enabled the participants to perceive themselves differently and to define the "difference between them and somebody else", as the initiator Chris Johnson explained in an interview recorded in 2012 (Talks at Google 2012, 19:45–19:56). The participants placed themselves in relation to the other Black men and exposed their "being different", for example, through identity tags on the online platform such as "writer", "humorous", "golfer", or "activist".

Another example where 'taking part' facilitates 'having a part' in emerging community experiences is the i-doc *The G Word: Transforming Gender Norms, One Story at a Time* (U.S. 2015, Ishita Srivastava), which concerns gender discrimination and gender-based violence. Its website collects video, audio, image, and text contributions from those affected and promises they can become part of a community by shar-

ing their experiences. The i-doc presents these posts, which the participants tag, in clusters, forming a narrative network. In line with the project's motto, "Stories unite us" ("Story Guidelines", *The G Word*), the i-doc uses various strategies to highlight the connectedness of the participants' experiences. This includes linking posts with the same tags so that the i-doc shows the connections to similar experiences when a user opens a post in the narrative network. In addition, these "connected stories" also appear in every contribution under the content of the post. Emojis allow users to express their empathy with those who share their experiences. There are also "comment" and "add your story" buttons under each post. For example, the following comment was made by "Alina" on January 22, 2016, as a response to the post by "Alex, 23, from Texas" (orthography and formatting retained from the original):

> honestly … i cried when i read this. ive been through this and hearing stories that hit close to home brings back painful memories but also strengthens my resolution. thank you for leaving him. thank you for taking care of yourself. and thank you for being alive. You're strong and beautiful and if you can get past this you can do so much more. stay strong!

In many comments like this one, the participants collectively cope with their experiences. It is important to note that the initiators review comments and contributions before publication (cf. Ding n.d.). They therefore have just as much influence on potential community feelings as the participants, who are given a safe space for interaction on the platform but nonetheless have to expose themselves publicly in order to 'have a part'. The exposure between singularities means, in this case, making oneself publicly vulnerable at the same time.

The user-to-user interactions of those who nevertheless open up allow for mutual support. The participants share their stories with others who, in many cases, have experienced similar situations. Processes of sharing arise, in Nancy's sense. Through the relational processes of contributing and commenting, i.e. taking part, participants can experience being part of a community and may draw strength from this. Seeing how other people in similar situations cope and what their advice is can contribute to processes of change for some participants. Beyond the goal of documenting, therefore, we can speak of socio-psychological functions. Alina, for example, who was quoted above, explained that Alex's contribution strengthened her resolution. The 19-year-old participant Anne explains in her feedback to Breakthrough, the production company that made *The G Word*:

> I cannot express how much it means to me to know I have a safe place where I can be heard. It's the most uplifting thing I have done for myself in such a long time. Thank you. (Anne, quoted in Breakthrough U.S. 2015)

What the participants have in common, in other words, what is shared and circulated, is the "gender story" (Srivastava quoted in Ding n.d.). However, it is also part of the sense of community that the differences between the experiences are recognized. Everyone can feel part of the group – from rape victims to people who were pressured as children to prove their masculinity in sports. The tags with which the participants of *The G Word* label their posts contribute to the individualization described by Nancy. This happens through sharing with other participants but also through sharing with the interface. The tags result from interactions with the platform and express what distinguishes each contributing person from the others. For example, 20-year-old Danielle posted the tag combinations "rape/military/mental health", while 19-year-old Will used "gender norms/religion/LGBTQ", and 25-year-old Berta tagged her contribution "violence/state violence/parenting". Following Nancy, I argue that the platform, its interface, which presents a narrative network, and its affordances shape the feeling of being part of an emerging inclusive community. However, this community experience is temporary and lasts only as long as the practices of taking part continue. It does not constitute a longer-term 'having a part'.

Conclusion: Why Taking Part Does Not Necessarily Mean Having a Part

The theoretical model presented in this chapter enables a differentiated consideration of the practices of 'taking part' regarding the prerequisites for 'having a part'. The operationalization of the philosophical and political-theoretical approaches suggests that media scholars should conduct affordance analyses and aesthetic analyses in combination with analyses of the performative practices within media projects. For example, the practice of content-related participation alone says nothing about the promotion of cultural participation if we do not examine the concrete representations at the same time. As I have shown, promoting cultural participation through i-docs requires access to technology, a critical awareness in dealing with the technologies, and a reflective design of media (self-)representations to question an aesthetic order characterized by phenomena such as stereotypes.

The examples discussed have demonstrated that media participation as 'taking part' does not per se lead to cultural, democratic, or community participation as 'having a part'. Various human and non-human actors, including initiators, participants, platforms, affordances, aesthetic strategies, funding institutions, and economic conditions, foster or hinder participation. Enabling media participation does not mean that the intention of the project will be achieved. For example, participatory i-docs don't necessarily promote the cultural visibility of marginalized positions, even if they fulfill all the key conditions, simply because they often don't achieve the required visibility in the online attention economy. To challenge stereo-

typical images in the hegemonic public sphere of the mass media, i-docs paradoxically need to access this public sphere, from which they distance themselves.

An interdisciplinary approach, as proposed in this article, is indispensable for questions concerning 'having a part' and enriches media studies. In the future, the taking part–having a part model can be expanded in terms of both active and passive forms of participation, for example, by considering forms of media participation in the context of games and forms of inclusion as discussed in disability studies. The model is also transferable to other phenomena, such as collective narratives in social networks and weblogs, video activism in social media, participatory video projects, and participation in and through games.

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Getting Through Difficult Conversations: Co-Creative Interactive Documentary and Advocacy

Marta Fiolić

> *Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct "fictions", that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done.* (Rancière 2004)

Difficult conversations are messy but essential. Needs, necessities, and concerns cannot be completely expressed if we are unable to begin a discussion, or interaction. To start such a conversation, a very specific one about women's homelessness in Lisbon, we turned to co-creation and interactive documentary. The whole process of making and distributing the documentary, as well as the peripheral events involved, are at the same time being used to exercise empowerment among the group and political and civic action beyond it.

Throughout the last decade, documentary projects have been increasingly described as participatory, collaborative, co-creative, and interactive[1] (see, e.g., De Michiel & Zimmermann 2013; Gaudenzi 2013; Kermanchi 2022; Nash 2022; Nichols 2017; Rose 2014, 2017; Wiehl 2019). Consequently, alongside concern with the documentary text, there is growing interest in studying and exploring documentary's "configurations, practices and processes" (Wiehl, 2018), which derive from participatory practices, collaboration, and co-creation. These terms are often used as equivalents and may seem porous and interchangeable. Nevertheless, there

1 When Nichols classifies the modes of documentary film production, he distinguishes participatory from the interactive mode by linking the latter to web-based technologies, to the computer. However, they are not closed, fixed categories: "Once established (…) modes overlap and intermingle" (Nichols 2017). An interactive documentary can be produced through participation, co-creation, or collaboration, and even more so, the category of participant or co-creator can be expanded to include the viewer (see e.g., *18 Days in Egypt*, *Palestine Remix*, *A Journal of Insomnia*).

are some nuances. The concept of "participation" in documentary filmmaking emphasizes the interaction between the filmmaker and the subject [sic][2] of the issue portrayed (Nichols, 2017), and Martin Gruber traces a concern with participation to early ethnographic filmmaking, to the works of Robert Flaherty, followed by Jean Rouch's idea of "handing over the camera" and by David and Judith MacDougall's push for "filmmakers putting themselves at the disposal of their subjects" (Gruber, 2016; MacDougall, 1995; Rouch, 2003). Looking beyond ethnographic documentary and examining the contemporary media configuration, participation "within and through the media has again become one of the normative anchor points to discuss and appreciate future directions" (Carpentier, 2015). And yet again, it remained very ambiguous, and when power is directly embedded in a concept, as we could argue is the case with participation, it calls for more scrutiny of the conceptual interpretation.[3] That is one of the reasons I turn to, and favor, the terms collaboration and co-creation. The terminology itself[4] emphasizes the fact that power should be redistributed and the decision-making process should be shared as well, ultimately presenting the media product as something we truly worked on together. Finally, for clarity and to distinguish the nuances between these two terms, I will take on Longfellow (2020), who recognizes collaboration as a part of co-creation while distinguishing them by characterizing co-creation as the "longue dureé of community engagement, the explicit aim of power sharing, and the relational aspects of working with community members as partners."

In an article published in Afterimage in March of 2020, Reece Auguste et al. presented "Fifty Speculations and Fifteen Unresolved Questions on Co-creation in Documentary" (Auguiste et al. 2020). Here, I would like to examine and comment on some of these speculations and perhaps offer solutions in reference to our co-creative interactive documentary "SOMOS MULHERES".

Who are the partners at SOMOS MULHERES? The association started as an informal group of women who experienced homelessness, that was supported by CRESCER, a non-governmental organization that works across the city of Lisbon

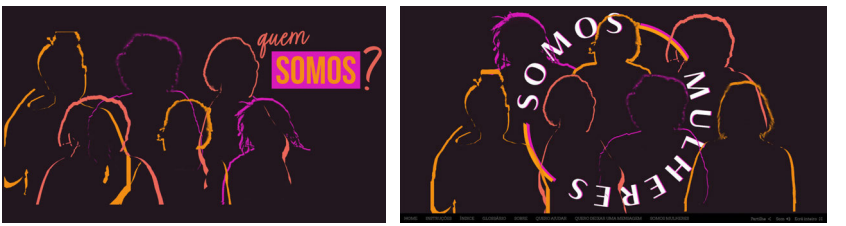
2 Or, as referred to in *Collective Wisdom*, "people formerly known as subjects" (Cizek et al. 2022).

3 In an attempt to clarify the concept of participation and to differentiate between access, interaction, and participation, Carpentier developed a theoretical model – the AIP model – that structures their different meanings on the basis of technology, content, people, and organizations, while at the same time taking into consideration the production and reception stages of a media project (Carpentier, 2015).

4 Collaboration – "an act of working together, united labor", from French *collaboration*, noun of action from past-participle stem of Latin *collaborare* "work with", from *com* "with" + *laborare* "to work"; and co-creation – *com* "with" + *creatio* "a creating, a producing", in classical use "an electing, appointment, choice", noun of action from past-participle stem of *creare* "to make, bring forth, produce, beget".

and its surrounding areas, dedicated to harm reduction and eradicating homelessness. The women were mostly part of the CRESCER's Housing First program, which prioritizes providing – without preconditions – permanent housing to individuals experiencing chronic homelessness, accompanied by personalized and professional support. Gradually, this informal group started to grow. Helped by CRESCER and a Civic Europe grant that recognized the value of including individuals who have personally experienced homelessness, and their distinctive viewpoints in providing assistance to those currently facing homelessness, they were encouraged to formally establish their own non-governmental, peer-based organization. A documentary that seeks to support the work of an association organized horizontally and the ground-breaking potential of peer assistance should follow a similar approach. This is how the idea of the need for collaboration, co-creation, and subsequently interactivity, was introduced. The incentive behind the documentary project was never to simply portray or represent, but rather to engage, open dialogue, educate, and foster relationships and actions.

Fig. 1: A screenshot from the original teaser for the project, asking "Who ARE we?" as a play on words with the name of the association (and the interactive documentary) – SOMOS MULHERES (We are women); together with the homepage of the documentary in its current state, showing that another member joined the group.



Source: Screenshots

When dealing with the subject of homelessness, it is common to encounter prejudices and stereotypes. Looking at this through a gendered lens further increases the complexity of the issue. The harrowing stories presented by the members of the group could relatively easily be represented in a linear documentary, and even though participatory practices and techniques could have been used for that purpose, and the women portrayed and their experiences treated with respect and high ethical standards, personally, as an outsider, I would be haunted by guilt at the possibility that this was nonetheless exploitative. At the same time, I wondered if the Web 2.0 technology, interactivity, and continuous long-term collaboration and co-creation on different fronts could help grasp this complex subject better,

more honestly, ensure its heterogeneity and fairness toward the women willing to participate in it, and at the same time, broker the open dialog and action we desired – both online and offline. This art aims to be political, not just by representing political themes or ideas about and around women's homelessness, but by actively engaging with the politics of perception and creating new possibilities for political action.

1. *(4.)*[5] *Co-creation assumes different forms and distinctive practices, nuanced to contested spaces, people, places, and technologies.*

Starting the project with a group of women, still in the informal phase, it was necessary to weigh and comprehend the particular stories and specific needs of each participant individually, by attending meetings, participating in informal gatherings, by getting to know each other. Throughout this process, we gradually came to understand the dynamics of the group, different identities, and struggles, with questions arising around gender, immigration, race, class, substance and alcohol dependence, mental health, chronic ailments, and so on. Taking these heterogeneous and multifaceted realities into consideration, we conceived of co-creation as an open process, malleable, and adaptable to different circumstances. In very concrete terms, this means that there were times when the group was not complete, when there were only two or three women available, emotionally and physically, to collaborate and lead the project further. At other times, it was necessary to take a break, relying on the individual support of social workers and psychologists, who, although not directly involved in content making, were crucial for the well-being and strength of various participants, and therefore for the collective as a whole. What was usually noticeable afterwards was greater cohesion, understanding, and empowerment, striving towards the actualization of the goal. All these fluctuations were made possible and manageable because of the openness and adaptability of the process itself, a very loose timeline and schedule, and the tailor-made approach that considered this specific group, with all its strengths and vulnerabilities.

2. *(7.) Co-creation enacts lateral structures, but exists in a state of constant change during a project.*

5 Numbers in brackets correspond to the original numbering in "Fifty Speculations and Fifteen Unresolved Questions on Co-creation in Documentary," the paper this work engages with. I also want to acknowledge the profound contributions of the late Patty Zimmermann, one of the authors of these speculations, to both the field and my personal journey as a researcher and practitioner.

This "speculation" is closely connected to the previous one. A lateral structural arrangement is crucial for the effectiveness of the co-creative process. Not only in situations where, as mentioned above, there are some drawbacks to collaboration, such as when co-creative tasks need to be redistributed, or when new members join, but also for ensuring the flexibility of the process. Around certain tasks, there will be more (or less) enthusiasm during development, and new skills will be gained, along with confidence to start to experiment and execute them. For instance, probably the most difficult task was keeping the meeting minutes. They were mandatory, but in a group where the education level is predominantly below secondary level, or where Portuguese is not a primary language, and where one participant does not even know how to read or write the Latin alphabet, it was challenging. On the other hand, when the group understood the importance of this weekly task and the benefits that outweighed the "dullness" of it, two of the participants joined forces and even enrolled in the special training program for administration and management, which will be recognized as a secondary-level qualification upon successful completion. Another issue was with media exposure. The fear of the microphone and camera, even the journalistic presence was not easily welcomed by every member, while for others it was a moment of validation and pride. For some, showing their face in front of the camera continues to be out of the question, but their contribution can take the form of design ideas or copywriting. However, when the task was the distribution of goods, specifically hygiene and menstrual health products in the streets of Lisbon, the willpower and the eagerness to do it were unanimous. Finally, during the whole process, participants had to deal with emotional or financial struggles that sometimes required them to take a step back and retreat for indefinite periods of time, while others restructured and redistributed the responsibilities. Constant change thus requires greater flexibility. This may call for additional dedication, patience, and perseverance; however, it also strengthens bonds and builds the community.

3. *(10.) Co-creation functions in deep time rather than by short fixes or parachuting into communities. Working in deep time requires full immersion, long conversations, and recognizing and then resolving differences in organizational or media production skills through strategies of empowerment.*

The title of one of the Industry Talks at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam in November 2022 was "Co-creation is everywhere but hard to see". It was moderated by Kat Cizek, who, in her opening statement, advocated for co-creation founded on relationships rather than following a predetermined script or objective established by a single author at the beginning (Cizek 2022). There are two main takeaways here. First, in recent years, "co-creation" has become an increasingly popular term, both to use and denominate projects and to gather funding. Along-

side the equally attractive "impact", it can unfortunately also be equally vague if used simply as a *mot juste* for a particular socio-cultural moment. Second, for co-creation to be easier to see in the multitude of projects that present themselves as such, time is crucial – the deep time that functions almost as an unawareness of time. Co-creation definitely cannot arise from parachuting into a community and disappearing after the completion of the project.[6] The work of building the documentary with SOMOS MULHERES started long before the camera and microphones were introduced into our environment. Long before that moment, through a friend of mine, I joined the group and started to participate in the meetings, helping with bureaucratic and legal tasks relating to the formal establishment of the association. We held official meetings and met privately when there were rough patches. We organized initiatives directed at women experiencing homelessness, policymakers, and the general public. There were times when producing this interactive documentary was not a priority. Looking back, it appears that it was precisely this approach that allowed us to build trust, respect, and empowerment – the long process of getting to know each other, recognizing our strengths and weaknesses through conversations and joint actions, building capacities and skills, being there for each other, learning mutually, and acknowledging the differences, but without judgment or moralization. Finally, this is not an error-free process. It therefore takes this *deep* time to get right. Even when it is messy and uncomfortable, there should be an ethical and moral standard inscribed in the co-creation process that obliges us not to withdraw, seeing that as filmmakers, we are often welcomed into and embraced by the communities, and that trust should be respected and recognized.

4. *(20.) Co-creation is frequently positioned as emancipatory and nonhierarchical. What is the distinction between this promotional, utopian image and more complicated embodied practices?*

Co-creation is not an easy and straightforward endeavor. However, neither are human relations in all their plurality. The starting point and goal of a co-creative project should be non-hierarchy. In theory, this emancipates participants and should highlight their individual agency, though it does need to be worked on continuously through open conversations and negotiations. In our project, although it would have been ideal if dedication, work, and other contributions had been distributed equally throughout the process, this was a utopian image we could only strive towards but did not manage to accomplish. In reality, the division of labor and responsibilities was never static. There were weeks when it would be almost

6 Interestingly, this brings us to another speculation – if a truly co-creative project needs this deep time, flexibility, and constant change, can it ever come to true completion? Or does it live and metamorphose as long as the co-creating community exists?

equal, but then there were weeks when one or two people would take on the burden of doing almost all work. How was it possible to manage that? It was necessary to work through frustrations, take responsibility, and express gratitude towards those pushing the project forward. This was repeated several times with different actors, but over time, it also brought up difficult and necessary discussions about the concept of safe space, group cohesion, support and understanding, and many conversations about trauma, mental health, and alcohol and substance use.

5. *(23.) Co-creation is an embodied practice produced through interpretative acts, investigating experience, building communities, and interdisciplinary media arts practices. Co-creation is contingent upon dialogue, openness, and the free play of imagination and understanding.*

Since the process we established was custom-made for this particular group of women and the advocacy plan of the association they were trying to make, we knew it might be turbulent and open to modifications. Although the group has a common denominator in the experience of homelessness, their individual stories, socioeconomic background, knowledge, and perspectives are different. To pursue meaningful collaboration and co-creation, the process depends heavily on constant dialog, open-mindedness, and willingness to learn about and understand others. Approaching it this way, we managed to create a sense of community by working together and, in particular, by presenting in public the pieces born of the co-creation, which resulted in a sense of belonging, collective ownership, and pride. Following these public presentations, the impetus to do more would also usually grow. For instance, after successfully presenting an audio-visual installation based on the individual experiences of the members of the group and a fruitful Q&A session with the audience, members were overflowing with ideas about where to present next and whom to talk to in order to broaden our network of supporters. Even those who were initially reluctant about public appearances asked me to try to get in touch with this or that journalist or public figure, wanting to talk to them about furthering our cause. When we presented the interactive documentary publicly, similar things happened, and proposals included doing a radio show, a podcast, or even a webinar. The distribution of hygiene kits in the streets was a great success from the start. Now, almost three years later, there are plans to open a fully equipped drop-in center, with a kitchen, bathrooms, washing machines, beds, clothing, medicine, psychologists, gynecologists, social workers, and of course them: the peers. And in the process of getting there, the interactive documentary and all the media and art produced around it can serve as a means of ignition, a conversation starter.

6. *(24.) Co-creation engages with ideas and contestatory spaces that engage multiscalar structures of ideas, politics, and practices. Multiscalar means multiple levels and different scales.*
   (25.) Multiscalar events and issues move from larger issues, themes, and contexts to the small and the specific.

As homelessness is omnipresent around the world, policies to eradicate it and tackle housing exclusion in general should be transversal and intersectional – we can also say multiscalar. Although the issue is large and complex, through our co-creative interactive documentary, our approach was to focus on the micro level – starting from a particular group of initially six women and their individual stories that could help elucidate the larger issue, specifically challenging the stigma and stereotypes around homelessness. Throughout the two-year process so far, the focus was always on this small group. Though some have dropped out, new members have also joined. "I don't want to change the world; I want to change Portugal. But first Lisbon," are the words of Elda, the woman who first dreamed up the idea of the association. Starting at this very personal scale and focusing on specific problems she felt and identified during her ten-year experience of homelessness, other layers started to emerge in the stories and experiences of other women, through discussions among the group and with social workers. By this means, we could start to visualize objectives and ideas around possible ways of tackling these issues, finally forming and expanding the advocacy plan – from the bottom-up.

We are using this framework to engage various actors, going beyond the group of women working on a documentary, and inviting into conversation psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers accompanying them, then other artists and cultural and civic actors, all the way to the highest representatives of policymaking and politics. They do not necessarily have to take part in media-making, but their participation and support will be crucial on other levels, namely in organization, distribution, advocacy, or political action.

7. *(31.) Multiscalar suggests multiple ways of working with people, processes, and projects. It moves toward multiple interfaces and iterations rather than a single output.*

The interactive documentary is not an entity of its own in this process. It accompanies the group and adds another layer to the broader context. Although it can function as an art object in itself, it is not a single output. Its purpose is better highlighted if it is considered to be part of this multiscalar structure. Building the documentary in parallel with the building of the association ensured that it was part of a broader sociopolitical project. The community work comes first: the street outreach and multidisciplinary intervention teams we are part of, operating in the form of peer support. The group is also directly political – publicly speaking on events

and commemorations, such as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women or International Women's Day, participating in a global campaign, the *16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence*, meeting with policymakers, public authorities, and other stakeholders, such as mayor of Lisbon, ministers, representatives of charitable foundations, and even the president of Portugal. Finally, work around the interactive documentary led to the creation of a number of other works of artistic expression, such as a short video produced and presented at Lisbon Town Hall, celebrating the formal establishment of the association, an audiovisual installation presented at the Largo Residências cultural center, and a concept for a show on the local online radio station Pavão. The more exposure the project gets, and the more interaction there is around it, the more connections are established and new ideas can emerge.

Fig. 2a: & 2b: The live audiovisual installation PASSAGES was presented at the Largo Residências Cultural Centre, followed by a Q&A with the co-authors. This installation is intended to travel to different auditoriums and venues to promote the work of the association, the interactive documentary, and raise funds for social work.

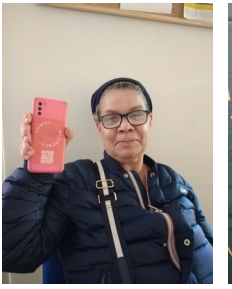
Source: Maria Irene Aparício

8. *(39.) Multiscalar events and political struggles necessitate a theory and a practice of polyphony, the construction of temporary heterotopias through assemblages of difference, diversity, and interdisciplinarity.*

We have already established that our political struggle is complex and multiscalar and includes a variety of voices and concerns. What we need to produce is an open space for "complex dialogues that reject binaries through polyphonies and which creates mosaics of multiple lenses on issues (…) where technology meet places meet people". (De Michiel & Zimmermann 2013). All of these voices bring their own experiences to the broad story. When the audience is included in the process, there is another spectrum of possible voices added to the whole. Throughout the concep-

tion, creation, and distribution of an interactive documentary, when polyphony is considered and upheld, there is no single narrative. Singular voices can turn into a "choral multiplicity" and the narrative becomes open, multi-layered, avoiding the all-knowing narrator and thus exposing "new ways to consider complex, interconnected social and political issues" (Zimmermann & De Michiel 2018). Interactivity, through its connection to the digital and to computers, itself describes "forms of responsiveness, exchange, and adaptation" (Nash 2022). This is important because it allows the project to grow and accompany the changes in narratives, issues resolved, and new necessities that arise, as well as offering insight into the different stages of life, individually and as a group that it portrays. This can create a space where different perspectives are represented and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue while acknowledging the co-existence of this multiplicity of perspectives. Here, it is not so much about interactivity being better than participative and collaborative practices in linear documentary; rather, for the purposes of our project, interactivity allowed us to build upon collaboration and, for instance, not depend on community screenings to get in touch with the audience. The easily accessible QR code spread across the city, and the novelty of the form helped us in trying to reach and intrigue a public broader than just documentary enthusiasts. Furthermore, we can expand the work and, when necessary, alter some of the clips or further elaborate on issues raised, embracing the negotiation using all means necessary to be available, present, and open.

We made hundreds of stickers with a QR code leading to the documentary's website and distributed them around the city. They can also be glued to the mobile phone, as Somae, one of the women from the group, did here. This allows her to simply take it out and show it to anyone interested in knowing more about the association, who can then see her testimony in depth, as well as that of the other protagonists.



Source Fig. 3a & Fig. 3b: Marta Fiolić
Source Fig. 3c: João Dias Ferreira

9. *(45.) Granularity galvanizes encounters in the process of creation, generating unexpected and unpredictable conversations that reshape the process and make room for commitments, mistakes, and revisions.*

The concept of granularity encourages a meticulous examination of the elements involved in the creative process. By paying attention to smaller, often overlooked aspects, we can discover new angles, possibilities, and connections. This meticulousness can lead to richer and more innovative outcomes. For example, this was visible in our project when we dealt with a very specific problem – access to menstrual hygiene among the population experiencing homelessness. Most projects working directly with this population focused on food, clothes, and other material goods, but only when the voices of women who experienced homelessness themselves entered the debate did the issues around menstruation, menopause, and related matters of hygiene enter the debate, quickly rising to the top of the agenda. At the same time, there was an attempt to turn to a more sustainable approach, with menstrual cups for instance, only to encounter another set of problems – the inadequacy and/or structural unavailability of public bathrooms that could allow for proper and safe use and care. And this debate led to the co-creation of a manifesto and petition, which now have a spotlight in the interactive documentary.

Fig. 4a: & 4b: Screenshots from the part of documentary capturing the campaign around menstrual hygiene and call for awareness and action.

Source: Screenshots

The idea that granularity can result in unexpected and unpredictable conversations aligns with the notion that creative endeavors often thrive on serendipity. As we have already established that sensitive topics – and working on them through co-creation – requires time, we can now delve into the finer details. Work of this kind can lead to chance discoveries, new insights, or alternative perspectives on the topics of the documentary, which can also infuse fresh energy and ideas into the creative process. Granularity also allows for a more organic and flexible approach, where we can adapt and refine our conceptions and ideas as they progress.

10. *(48.) Documentary must come to terms with extraction as an ethical issue. We must recognize that documentary ethics and politics are more complex than simply giving voice to the voiceless, or speaking truth to power, or having a commitment to the dialogic.*

The history of the *committed documentary* is as long as the history of the medium itself. Although the expression of ethical concerns in documentary form is nothing new,[7] there has never been a standardized written code or a set of ethical guidelines for the filmmakers and authors. Only recently, in the last couple of decades, with the popularization and subsequent commodification of the documentary genre, as well as a noticeable cultural shift, have ethical concerns and debates become more articulated and comprehensive in their examination of the practices in documentary filmmaking (see, e.g., Aufderheide, Jaszi and Chandra 2009; Aufderheide and Woods 2021; Nichols 2006, 2016; Sanders 2010, 2012). The interactive, via the digital, further complicates various ethical questions. For example, when the narrative is fragmented, how it is "patched" depends on who is tasked with doing the "patching", and their point of view, or even on algorithms tasked with this function. How will this impact our thinking about representation, trust, truth, consequence, or accountability? Furthermore, the documentary is easily available online to almost everyone – to use and potentially abuse. How does this affect the notion of privacy, consent, or vulnerability? And then there are questions of power relationships, inclusion, and availability. We tend to assume that everybody has access to the internet and digital technology, but is it really so, and how can we ensure that the people involved and concerned have access to the film?

Finally, when we talk about documentary and its connection to advocacy and social change, the move should be made from looking at "the intentions of the filmmaker or historically constructed aesthetic choices" and towards its social function and influence, and whether and if so how it "facilitates material and cultural justice for the communities and issues represented on screen(s)" (Aguayo 2019). Here lies the foundation for another difficult conversation among co-creators, practitioners, artists and filmmakers, researchers, communities, and audiences.

Throughout the project, our collaboration and co-creation tackled these ethical issues by enabling active participation in decision making, giving the same amount of power to me, positioned as a "context-provider" (Daniel 2009), and the women

7 Early concerns with ethics in filmmaking that arose in the sixties out of concerns about portrayed people and communities and resulted in filmmakers sharing at least some parts of the production process can be traced to Jean Rouch, who showed his subjects the materials as a work in progress, or filmmakers like Colin Low and Fernand Dansereau from the National Film Board of Canada, who also shared the editing process. Then, in the eighties, two anthologies came to life, sharing the concern about documentary ethics: Gross, Katz and Ruby 1988 and Rosenthal 1988, these were followed by Nichols 1991.

building the association and creating a movement. For instance, we held several meetings and discussions to define the main topics to address in the documentary, in which we try to illustrate the dominant issues around women's homelessness and the complexity of the topic in an effort to mobilize the community. To achieve this goal and live up to its activist impetus, high levels of civic engagement, personal interaction, and social commitment are present and flow both ways. As mentioned before, since the beginning of our collaboration, I have been involved in the day-to-day functioning of the association. This meant helping with bureaucracy and organizational and technical issues, building a website and designing flyers. When there were other pressing issues to deal, this sometimes meant taking a break from recording and documentary-making. In this way, we can avoid extractivism and move away from the archaic idea of "giving voice to the voiceless", while the agency of the key participants, the core group of women who started the project, can have the time and space necessary to further grow and flourish.

Fig. 5: Three members of the group, presenting at the Awareness Raising Action for the Elimination of Sexual Violence against Women Experiencing Homelessness. The SOMOS MULHERES Association organized this action to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 2022.

Source: Marta Fiolić

An open conclusion

Collaborative practices in documentary filmmaking allow for a more flexible and cooperative approach. By involving participants in the creative process, from conception and production to distribution, filmmakers can create more nuanced and authentic representations of complex issues. The advantage that the interactive documentary offers lies particularly in its openness and malleability, which make it suitable for continuous expansion. It can extend the discussion beyond the filmmaker-participant axis and invite the audience to participate, both online and offline.[8] The interactive documentary can thus instigate dialog and help us get to and through difficult conversations.

In our interactive documentary, made through co-creation, our ambition was to break boundaries, principally in accessing the public; to address challenges by tackling stereotypes; and to find opportunities to raise support in dealing with women's homelessness. Some of the most important lessons learned while planning and executing this interactive documentary were to *foster open communication*, by establishing clear lines of communication from the very beginning, and encouraging all participants to share their ideas, perspectives, and concerns. This helps build trust and creates a collaborative environment that promotes innovation and creativity. Second, to *embrace diverse perspectives* because participants will always be different, from distinct backgrounds, and with different experiences. Embracing this diversity and actively seeking out a range of perspectives can help create a more nuanced and comprehensive narrative. Third, to *be open to, and encourage, experimentation*. Since interactivity in documentaries offers opportunities for experimentation, innovation, and adaptation to different participants, projects, and needs, we should use it. Furthermore, new formats, technologies, and storytelling techniques are constantly emerging, enabling the boundaries of documentary filmmaking to be pushed further, squashed, expanded, rebuilt, and rethought to be more inclusive, to contemplate and accompany changes in our cultures and societies. Fourth, when undertaking the co-creative interactive journey, we should *plan for flexibility*. Making an interactive documentary – and making it profoundly collaborative and co-creative

8 In the first public screening of SOMOS MULHERES, there was an elderly man in the audience, who was one of the first people to put his hand up when we opened the Q&A session. After admiring the courage of the protagonists and expressing his complete ignorance concerning their realities, he confessed that he will never look the same way at another person experiencing homelessness when he passes by them in the street. Furthermore, he took his mobile phone out and asked how he could see the film again and how to share it with other people. And right after the same session, we also received private testimony, through the form embedded in the documentary open for comments and questions, from someone who had clearly been in the audience, but was probably too shy to express their reaction there in front of the people.

– is always unpredictable. This became obvious very early in the process. There was no fixed timeline or participants. The only way to deal with the frustration this can cause is to make peace with it and learn to accommodate each other's needs and difficulties.[9] Finally, it is vital to *address power dynamics*, which will inevitably emerge within co-creative projects, particularly if there are differences in resources and experiences. Being aware of these dynamics is the first step, but continuously working to create a level playing field where all participants feel valued and heard is of utmost importance.

"The marriage between interactive documentary and politics provides a new opportunity for creating and reformulating expressions of civic participation" (Cortés-Selva and Pérez-Escolar 2016). This is not a novel idea, particularly with reference to the possibility of the internet and digitalization bringing about more democratic and inclusive societies; yet so far, it has not taken us much further, and in fact seems sometimes to have led in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, we set out to test the "new opportunity" for the political and civic aspects of the SOMOS MULHERES association. Fortunately, we did this from the very beginning of the association, which allowed for the civic participation and the development of documentary production to evolve in parallel. Actively co-creating an interactive documentary required an enormous level of communication and coordination, of shared roles and responsibilities, but this effort has been rewarded during the process by honing a sense of shared ownership. And through this, the group could be empowered, the representation turned into negotiation, and the process of exchange has been effectively decentralized and made horizontal. Allowing for true polyphony of voices and perspectives, this process challenges power structures and dominant narratives and further facilitates collaborations and connections. Even structurally, the interactive documentary is all about layers and connections. Co-creating this way – thinking, creating, and designing collaboratively, through multiple layers and polyphony – we can aspire towards more refined, inclusive, and empathetic documentary production.

9 Here, we should acknowledge that the funding opportunities and grants usually don't take into consideration this unpredictability. And maybe, precisely because of that: "co-creation is everywhere, but hard to see". In the funding applications, at the same time, the impact value and community value are being highly appraised. We should collectively consider this discrepancy.

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Two Kinds of Interactive Documentary

Unconscious Associations and the Korsakowian Approach

Florian Thalhofer

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 perissótera, "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 communicate[2] 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 authors[4] 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 encoded[6] but also on what[7] one[8] is able to turn one's attention[9] 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; Rosenzveig 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/formats/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 Project[12] 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 result[13] 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 observers[14](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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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.

The Sandbox Mindset

Web-Based Documentary's Legacy

Frédéric Dubois

Introduction

Web-based documentary, also called by many interactive documentary (Nash 2021) or i-docs (Aston, Gaudenzi, & Rose 2017), had its *âge d'or* around 2013 (Dubois 2021). In the years that followed, the vanishing of Adobe Flash technology and the advent of mobile-first storytelling (shorter linear formats) as a new standard, broke the mainstream momentum of browser-based documentaries.

It had all started so well for i-docs. Audiences were left craving more hard-hitting investigations after the release of shock docs such as Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) or Hubert Sauper's *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004). The global public was enthused by aesthetic wonder works such as Michael Glawogger's *Workingman's Death* (2005). Documentary was on a roll – enjoying a revival not yet impinged upon by the platform economy,[1] not yet challenged by the onslaught of post-truth politics. It was a time of relative continuity, building upon the Californian ideology that was fueling the beginnings of the web.

By the 2010s, i-docs had made a name for themselves by embracing some of the precepts of Web 2.0, including ease of use (i.e. browser-based access that was close to users' everyday desktop use), interoperability for end users (e.g., no specific operating systems or devices required, interactive content delivered via APIs [application programming interfaces]), participatory culture (with dedicated personalized, interactive, and even live features), and especially user-generated content (not just comments, but also things like audio and video remixes that would end up having an impact on the narration).

Quite a few i-docs managed to capture large audiences, including David Dufresne's game documentary *Fort McMoney* (2013)[2] and Brett Gaylor's serial inter-

1 In this period, very large online platforms (VLOPs) such as Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006) were still to be invented.

2 *Fort McMoney* attracted 350,000 visitors within three months of launching. See Jankovic 2014 for more details.

active *Do Not Track* (2015).[3] Others caught the zeitgeist with a clever combination of narrative, aesthetics, and technology (e.g., The Goggle's photo-book *Welcome to Pine Point*; the 2D and 3D versions of *Bear 71* [2012] by Jeremy Mendes and Leanne Allison). We even saw participatory i-docs make a political difference in forcing legislative change (*The Quipu Project* (2015) by Maria Court and Rosemarie Lerner, on forced sterilization in Peru) or cultural impact at the local level (*Hollow*, by Elaine McMillion Sheldon).

In the decade that followed, however, i-docs steadily declined to become, if not a marginal practice, a niche one. I-docs were increasingly overshadowed by millions consuming their culture on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, while tens of thousands adopted virtual-reality and augmented-reality documentary. Meanwhile, the linear members of the documentary family – on TV and the big screen – remained as resilient as ever.

I-docs continue to be produced and released post-2020, but, more often than not, are restricted to specialized contexts such as education (e.g. *Ulster End of Year Show*, 2022), healthcare (e.g. *Behind the Mask*, 2023), or special purpose niche sectors (e.g. history museums in need of long-form interactive content).

Today, this raises the question of the legacy that i-docs leave behind as they silently walk away. From my own practice as i-doc maker and scholar researching the phenomenon from a production studies perspective, I argue that interactive documentary's legacy can best be found in what I call the *sandbox mindset*. This mindset, I maintain, has two main forms of heir: institutions and individuals. On the institutional side, this would be organizations such as interactive media training schools, art schools and universities, production companies, and festivals. They are the institutions in the audiovisual sector that have opened up to the "experimental character" and continue to this day to carry the flame. Additionally, there are conservative institutions such as museums, which are not directly affiliated with the audiovisual sector, yet play an ever-increasing role in furthering the sandbox mindset (see e.g., Coding da Vinci hackathons, Mediasphere for Nature lab at the Berlin Natural History Museum).[4]

Individuals are harder to identify, as some have taken on "new risks", jumping into immersive or game-like technologies, filling in leadership or teaching roles

3 *Do Not Track* attracted one million visitors in its first 7.5 months (14 April–1 December 2015). For more key figures, visit co-producer Upian's website: https://www.upian.com/en/project/donottrack.

4 The Coding da Vinci initiative had collaborated with more than 350 institutions by the time of writing. Discover more here: https://codingdavinci.de/en. The Mediasphere for Nature offers many different types of projects. For an overview, see https://www.museumfuernaturkunde.berlin/en/science/mediasphere-nature.

within institutions, or continuing the practice of i-doc-making within more specialized settings. Some of these practitioners still engage with the discourses and potentials of i-docs to this day. Katerina Cizek, Liz Miller, and Florian Thalhofer are three individuals who continue to make and think i-docs in the present.

As noted above, the most enduring footprint of the web-based documentary is not its manyfold multi-vocal and interdisciplinary projects, which more often than not have succumbed to the relatively sudden unplugging of Flash-technology (see Fournier 2023 for an account of the selective archiving of web-based documentaries at the National Film Board of Canada [NFB]), but a larger and re-awakened acceptance of the *sandbox mindset*, which blesses documentary-making as a practice of experimentation.

The research objective I am pursuing with this essay is for one egotistical: to reflect upon my personal journey, which involved facilitating and implementing the sandbox mindset in selected settings associated with interactive documentary development, production, and distribution in Canada and Europe over 15 years. More importantly, I aim to extract the knowledge gained over time, so as to define the sandbox mindset conceptually, and establish how it can be helpful for creative media production moving forward.

In what follows, I will succinctly describe my specific research angle, the methodology I used for this article, while unpacking the sandbox mindset in the form of a framework. I end the paper with a more open discussion.

Methodology

Before entering the more conceptual part of this scholarly essay, it should be noted that most of the knowledge drawn on in writing this text comes from my personal experience. My vantage point is grounded in my practice as a former employee of the NFB, and subsequently an independent maker of i-docs, an organizer of interactive documentary events (e.g., the Berlin-based monthly Netzdoku network, the DOK Leipzig *Hackathon*, and various conferences and workshops), a practice-based researcher (doing a PhD at Film University Babelsberg, working as a professor at ifs Internationale Filmschule Köln), and an educator (coaching at ARD.ZDF Medienakademie and Łódź Film School, training at several documentary festivals).

In terms of practice specifically relevant to i-docs, I should mention that I have authored and produced (*GDP*, 2009; *The Hole Story Interactive*, 2010; *Atterwasch*, 2013; *Field Trip*, 2019), developed (*Bauhaus Spirit*, 2016), and distributed (*Fort McMoney*, 2013) interactive documentary in Canada and in Germany over the timespan of 15 years.

My research on the sandbox mindset can be considered a form of "analytic autoethnography" (Anderson 2006), as I am, among other things, trying to make a con-

tribution to both practice and theory (Anderson 2006, p. 373). The autoethnography was then complemented and filled out by means of desktop research performed between November 2023 and April 2024. I consulted a range of online journals and scholarly databases, and read a number of books directly relating to interactive documentaries, which are included in the bibliography.

The autoethnographic effort is here focused on offering what the sociologist Herbert Blumer calls a *sensitizing concept* (Blumer 1954). Such concepts, according to Bowen (2006), "draw attention to important features of social interaction and provide guidelines for research in specific settings" (ibid., 14). In my case, my methodology does not seek to come up with a research agenda, but aims rather at generating situated insights, or as Charmaz (2003) would put it: "Although sensitizing concepts may deepen perception, they provide starting points for building analysis, not ending points for evading it" (ibid., p. 259).

The Sandbox Mindset

Interactive documentaries are the product of a process whose outcome is always uncertain. As in other forms of documentary, the audiovisual material can be designed, but not fully planned for, as protagonists come and go, realities in the field shift, and the storyline needs to adapt. Reality unfolds as the project is developed, meaning that a scripted narrative might be great to secure funding, but chances are that this narrative will change substantially in the timeframe of a year, as protagonists go through life events.

Another aspect is the technology. Technologies underlying interactive documentaries have changed fast, especially when looking back at the three generations of the web. Between the start of a project and its completion, an entire technical generation might already have come and gone. Some projects, budgeted for one technology, are immediately out of sync with consumer habits when published. This was, for instance, the case with i-docs that were built for the desktop, once the mobile internet established itself as the default web. The fast-paced evolution of technology is the single most important factor that rendered i-doc-making more uncertain and less established than traditional documentary making.

The notoriously difficult funding landscape of the film business is particularly tricky in the i-doc sector as i-docs are treated as in-betweens: projects that are part art, part journalism, part documentary, part innovation, and part game. This feeling that your next i-doc project will again fall between the cracks of strictly defined funds (game fund or media art fund) is shared by i-doc makers globally. Even though the funding climate might have been more advantageous for a while in certain countries, such as France and Canada, here, too, it remains a highly uncertain endeavor.

As a result of this high level of uncertainty, i-doc makers are sailing in choppy waters… and there is no compass to help them navigate. This was particularly true in the heyday of i-doc-making, when there were very few models and inspirations to provide guidance. Individuals making i-docs in the early days created from scratch, as there were no recipes to follow even given formats of screen to produce for. Reinventing the screen, coding your own video player, represents a particularly challenging production setting.

From a cultural perspective, interactive documentary-making is a significative practice of open culture. In production terms, i-doc making is similar to other digital production cultures in that it shares the methods of agile production (Dubois 2021, 25), very often also that of design thinking (Gaudenzi, 2017)and in the development stages, co-creation (Gaudenzi, 2013). Most of these elements can be traced back even further to computer-assisted innovations in a variety of fields, such as game design (Nash, 2017). This said, i-doc teams and collectives have experimented with these methods in such a variety of settings (e.g., countries, production traditions) and such breadth (e.g., mixing media types, playing with the limits of genres), that they have informed other fields of creation, such as virtual-reality storytelling (Rose 2018) and digital journalism (Dowling 2022), to name just two.

I-docs are generally quite good at pulling interdisciplinary contents and forms together. For instance, it is not rare to see i-doc projects featuring photography and illustration as well as 3D modelling and software development. The morphing and recombination of genres, between journalism and games cultures, via film and documentary theatre (interactivity, live performativity) speak to the openness with which i-doc creators experiment. This is also true for the narrative styles, where storytelling from print traditions (graphic novels for instance) are transposed onto the web (e.g. *The Boat, 2015*) or fiction onto documentary (e.g. *The Art of Pho, 2011*). In terms of story, projects such as *Gaza Sderot* (2009) or *The Enemy* (2014), but also *Alma* (2013) and many others are particularly effective in bringing polarized positions into one interface and confronting audiences with multiple perspectives at once. A possible antidote to the fragmentation of contents and the contested notion of echo chambers (Dubois & Blank 2018). This is outside the scope of this paper, but could make for a useful contribution in the times we live in.

In what might sound banal at first, interactive documentaries are situated practices. They are situated in both time and space. It is important not to see them as ahistorical. They do not come *out of nowhere*, they are rather a moment of crystallization of media, drawing-in and remediating different creative practices such as creative writing, web design, and creative coding. I-docs are a phenomenon growing out of open culture (Powell 2015), where open access to content via open licenses, open web standards, and open or commons-based peer production (Benkler 2006) are the norm. The co-construction of meaning and knowledge is particularly well-represented here, challenging traditional audiovisual single-author-style setups. At

the same time, the "everyone can take part" ideal remains an ideal, and it must be stressed that in terms of both production as well as audience involvement, i-docs in practice sometime fall short of the participatory ethos. Productions such as GDP (2009), which were geared towards participation, for instance, failed to draw in the masses either on social media or in the communities. This said, the point I'm trying to make is that the spirit, the mindset of i-docs, is to be situated a larger open movement, here trying to open up documentary practice and circulation.

I-doc productions are also situated in geographical space, with projects mainly coming out of Western countries such as France and Canada, and then further down the list Australia, the USA, The Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland. This said, there have been notable productions out of Latin America and Asia, but with a reduced output.

In most of i-doc hotspots, there is already a creative ecosystem of design agencies, web developers and artists. There are also sometimes major institutions, such as the CNC in France, which has been a critical source of funding for i-docs for several years, or the National Film Board in Canada, something of a relic of ancient, more socialistic audiovisual times. There would be more to say, but I will limit myself to underlining that as a public producer of audiovisual content, the NFB has played a key role in metropolitan centers such as Montréal, Toronto, and Vancouver to further the already bustling production ecosystems and thereby create a particularly active hive of i-doc development.

During *the i-doc decade*, it can be asserted that interactive documentaries made a substantial contribution to how storytelling is understood, breaking out of established genres and crossing over the aisle to other disciplines and sectors. The documentary sector was certainly one direct benefactor, but many (situated) institutions have taken advantage of innovations in storytelling.

Defining the Sandbox Mindset

The sandbox mindset is the most prominent legacy of the i-doc movement. I say this because beyond the beautiful and often professionally crafted i-doc works, only a handful will be ported over to the next digital age. One case in point is *Bear 71*, which after having been released on the web, got revamped as a VR experience. This is an absolute outlier, as most productions remain stuck with the affordances of the web 2.0 phase of development. The influence in terms of storytelling thus fades and gets beaten back by social media omnipresence, and what some call the metaverse (Ball 2021). Once the dust settles on i-docs' golden age, one ingredient of i-docs continues to make noise, refuses to go to rest. That ingredient is related to the process, not the – now largely broken – product, and pertains to what is most transferable and interoperable of all: the mindset.

A mindset is something that can be located on the individual and the collective (and/or institutional) levels. It is a concept that helps sensitize makers of open culture more generally to a set of attributes that are otherwise never made explicit. It is not 100% tangible, but since it stems from the behavioral sciences, it can be described with a relatively clear combination of attributes. Before characterizing the sandbox mindset, I will define it, bouncing off William H. Dutton's work on quite a different phenomenon, the "cyber security mindset". Dutton defines the cyber security mindset as: "a set of attitudes, beliefs and values that motivate individuals to continually act in ways to secure themselves and their network of users, such as by acquiring technical skills, new practices or changing their behaviour online" (Dutton 2017, 3). The emphasis on attitudes, beliefs, and values is particularly transferable to other domains.

I define the sandbox mindset as a set of attitudes, beliefs, and values that encourage individuals and institutions to continually act in a manner that fosters experimentation. My choice of this notion of the sandbox mindset has to do with practice: It appears to me as something essential to both i-doc makers and i-doc-making institutions, and to be a widespread phenomenon. Its relevance is also very much engrained in the fact that it is transferable to other creative sectors that employ prototyping. One such sector is that of computer programming, where sandboxing is an established term for describing controlled programming environments (Prevelakis & Spinellis 2001).

Let me characterize the sandbox mindset from the bottom-up, starting with the individual level. Institutions are made up of individuals, and even though they are more than the sum of the people who belong to them (see below), it seems sensible to first look at the characteristics proper to a sandbox mindset in the smallest unit.

What is the set of attitudes, beliefs, and values that fuel a sandbox mindset? As part of the set, I can confidently say that a positive and proactive attitude is the first characteristic that all sandboxes should have. When someone moves out of their comfort zone, for instance, by going on a camping trip in the wild, they take the risk of being exposed to bad weather, wild fauna and flora, and cold lakes. Not every member of a team that goes on a canoe trip or works on i-docs possess this attitude, but if the team is to thrive, this kind of constructive, positive, confident, and solution-oriented attitude should be dominant. One who can be resilient in moments of adversity and deal pragmatically with what's thrown at them is able to find a way through the hardship. Acknowledging that a catch-all expression is always a shortcut, and at the risk of eventually raising at least some eyebrows, I call this attitude *The Happy Camper*.

Second, people working on *uncertain outcomes* such as i-docs, computer games, or similar interactive cultural products need to have a profound belief in trial-and-error. Setbacks are common: there can be funding shortfalls, new tech standards may be introduced in the middle of during production, or interactive storytelling fails to resonate with the target audience. The individual can gain by anticipating

such setbacks and staying focused on versioning, prototyping, and the longer term goal. Trial-and-error is the bread and butter of the sandbox mindset. It's how an interface gets made, ripped apart, and made again. It's how a prototype gets coded, tested, left aside, and coded anew. It takes patience and coping strategies straight out of the psychologist's handbook. I call the individual facing these challenges *The Committed*. They are good at receiving feedback and facing critique. The Committed integrates the feedback and tries to improve the product while remaining farsighted.

While values are hard to define, due to the "duality of values as constructs that reside between thought and action" (Scharlach, Hallinan, & Shifman 2023), for the purpose of this chapter, I am sticking to *value as principle* only, which in Heinich's understanding is a form of fundamental compass orienting one's judgment (Heinich 2020). There are other forms of values, such as discursive constructs (ibid.), that I am consciously leaving out for space reasons. Thus, the Committed Happy Camper needs to also stick to a set of values that relate to personal ethics or *stable personal attributes* (Scharlach, Hallinan, & Shifman 2023). If I'm a committed person happily camping out, but with a hunch to perfection, I will need to respect that and deliver a design that is of high quality. My colleagues might deliver rougher parts, but as long as I am happy with my own work ethic and that I can protect it, this is what counts. The personal ethic might involve "details" such as being on time at production meetings. Some of these ethics will need to be negotiated in the team so that they do not lead to disappointment or conflict. Being transparent about one's ethics in the planning stage of a project is something that pays off in subsequent phases such as development, production, and post-production. I call the individual who stays close to their own values *The Grounded*.

When the Happy Camper, the Committed and the Grounded meet at once in the form of a single individual, do we have a leader in the field of creative media in front of us? Not yet, I would argue. Only extraordinary personalities can push innovative and experimental projects forward, and for this, one additionally needs to be a risk-taker. That means not waiting for the dust to settle, but rather moving fast and, for example, testing and adopting new tools and methods early. It means investing time in uncertain outcomes and taking decisions that might seem counterintuitive. This appetite for risk is definitely an ingredient that the sandbox mindset requires, alongside the other three key features of sandboxing.

Fig. 1: The four main characteristics of the sandbox mindset

Proactiveness	Committedness	Groundedness	Risk-taking
The Happy Camper	The Committed	The Grounded	The Risk-Taker

The sandbox mindset can be performed individually or as part of a community of practice. The idea is that users need to prioritize the sandbox, here taken as a metaphor for the framework in which one experiments in all aspects of their i-doc practice. Rather than following a learned set of practices or habits, individuals can internalize this mindset in ways that motivates them to prioritize experimentation.

The Sandbox: Not Child's Play

Institutions, as I have noted, are more than the sum of the individuals that compose them. In fact, strictly speaking, institutions have rules and formal limitations that make them independent of the single unit, the individual (Hodgson 2006).

When your community of practice is a cultural institution, there is value in taking the sandbox metaphor at face value. Strictly speaking, in order to foster the practice of the sandbox mindset for its individuals or teams, an institution needs to a) adopt a *box* and b) level the *sand*. These initial actions, not the institution in itself, frame the mindset, and it is the individuals within institutions that enact the mindset.

The box can be understood here as an ethical framework. In a recent talk opening the Conference on Interactive Documentary, the Dean of the Lucerne School of Design, Film and Art, Jacqueline Holzer, said that institutions are "thrusts of integrity and trust", calling on higher education institutions to take responsibility for creating the ideal conditions for experimentation to unfold. In other words, mechanisms need to be put in place that prevent capture (i.e., arms-length agreements between i-doc-makers and funders, advisory boards, regular audits, and other checks and balances). Although a range of institutional models would need to be discussed, this is outside the scope of this paper.

In my own research on impactful storytelling (Dubois 2021), I came across the "impact pathways framework" of Notley, Gregory, and Lowenthal (2017), which suggests a framework for generating social impact while sticking to a number of ethical guidelines. This is one of many frameworks that echo the groundedness in values presented earlier at the individual level. At the institutional level, innovators need to create that framework and to defend it against internal institutional pressures. Institutions need to allow for these frameworks to be implemented so as to ensure that the mindset can be enacted by teams and individuals. In other words, designing the box translates into defining and sticking to a vision of experimentation, a creativity mission, and a concrete innovation agenda.

Once a collectively agreed upon framework and rules are in place, it allows for the unleashing of creativity and experimenting with technology, aesthetics, and narrative at will. Experimentation-happy settings allow for re-creating from scratch. Think video players in 2004. Every larger institution with experimentation at its core

would come up with a player of its own, innovating in the nature of features. This is also true for the undoing of established production pipelines.

This second phase is what distinguishes freed up projects from those that have undergone institutional capture. In the audiovisual sector, there are innumerable examples of production cultures that don't allow for genuine originality or creativity. Sometimes broadcasters see themselves wrapped up in red tape, unable to free themselves from the chains of bureaucracy. In other cultural settings, a legal sword of Damocles stifles creative teams, with legal departments, as we can often observe, dominating the institutional culture of film archive institutions or media companies. This risk-aversiveness results in limited innovation.

In the field of interactive documentary (and science for that matter) impact measurement is smothering the sandbox mindset. For this reason, creative teams need to call for, take charge of, and shelter within institutions that have a more multi-layered understanding of impact. I have written about the shortcomings of measuring impact in the traditional quantitative way elsewhere (Dubois 2020).

In order to adopt a sandbox mindset at the institutional level, there needs to be a clear awareness among its constituents that experimentation and innovation don't come for free. They entail risk-taking and actively protecting the box against traditional or corporate institutional reflexes. It is for this reason that many institutions, be they higher education and research institutions such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) or the University of the West of England have come up with boxes in the form of studios, labs, and hubs. It is also the reason why the BBC has kickstarted its R&D department. Film schools have multiplied laboratories (cf. Skövde municipality and university's PlayLab, Film University Babelsberg's Creative Exchange Studio, Visual Narrative Lab at Łódź Film School) – enabling a production culture rooted in a research-creation approach, more or less[5] detached from institutional contingencies.

Producers have also created temporary units (e.g., NFB Interactive, Interactive Media Foundation), initially oriented towards prototyping work, celebrating work-in-progress over final works. Festivals have floated experimental sections (Visions du réel's *id w*, DOK Leipzig's *NetLab* and *Hackathon*, the IDFA's *DocLab*,[6] etc.) all of which are built around interdisciplinary creation workshops and hands-on project development.

5 Some institutional labs are dependent on the agendas of their funders, whether these are foundations or have another legal form. This can put a dent into the quality of sandboxing. This is particularly true of sponsored labs, where the mindset can be hijacked. As with most mindsets, their adoption is vulnerable to capture.

6 Out of the list of festivals here, only the DocLab is still alive, while the other festivals have partly changed the names of their innovative sections and programming.

By adopting frameworks that enable teams to play, institutions have made space for new ideas and projects to trickle through. Yet in these innovative settings, interactive documentary projects are not *de facto* in line with what film scholars would refer to as avant-garde cinema (Dulac 1994), a concept much closer to the modern one of disruption, i.e. breaking with what was there before. This is not necessarily what is meant here, since the sandbox is more open to technological, aesthetic, and narrative recombinations, assemblages, and convergences. The mindset does encourage experimentation, but not to the point of completely overhauling a genre, institution, or previous working methods. To take an approximate metaphor: It is important to keep the box and not throw it out with the bathwater.

Once the mindset is adopted, hurdles will continue to arise, even in small production settings such as DIY collectives. When working on the interactive documentary *Field Trip* between 2017 and 2019, the team I was part of had to engage in pre-conflict mediation. This was our attempt at levelling the sand within the pre-defined project. So even though the creative juices were flowing as a result of a relatively clear project box, production realities such as funding shortfalls and cumbersome partnerships kept pitting the team against challenges. Here the box continuously had to be resized. This put stress on the team members and prevented the framework from achieving stability.

Ceteris paribus, when the box is relatively stable, as in the case of labs that are funded over a longer period of time, a dynamic and iterative process guarantees innovation, as Lena Thiele and I have previously described elsewhere (Dubois & Thiele 2022). Then it is time to play with the sand. Determining how much experimentation is healthy depends on who is playing the role of masters of ceremony. In most interactive documentary works, these key people are called creative directors, interactive producers, or simply authors. They are the ones pulling the strings of the creative effort on a day-to-day basis.

Conclusion

Based on my own practitioner's journey, and observing what colleagues in my interactive documentary community of practice have reported, I have gathered a few additional insights that directly stem from the adoption of a sandbox mindset.

First, the sandbox mindset that could be observed in the i-docs community is no flash in the pan. Even if the genre is now entrenched in niche areas and has lost its mainstream appeal as a result of new consumer habits, the sandbox mindset has lasting social significance in the here and now. It is not just carrying the flame of open culture, but is shaping how documentaries are made today in tangible and concrete ways. The sandbox mindset determines how authenticity plays out today, how

the fabrication of meaning, more than the passing of truth or information, is being carried out.

Second, institutions need to take risks in financial terms, i.e., they have to allow for an innovative space that explicitly does not expect a positive return on investment. In other words, open culture projects such as i-docs need budgets that allow them to breathe, but, more importantly, they should be produced with independence: independence from the conservative and narrow-minded idea that mistakes should not be made and every expense needs to pay off. Institutions that are in it for the long haul have to permit failure, such as choosing the wrong story at the right time (cf. my book chapter on i-doc GDP [Dubois 2024]). This said, successful leveraging of the sandbox mindset is not correlated significantly with available resources, but rather with the level of risk-taking guided by a conscious rejection/active management of impact expectations.

Third, it is only possible to anchor a long-term sandbox mindset at the institutional level in a minority of observable settings. This begs for a cool-headed assessment of institutional setups beyond brand names and reputations. Creative media makers should always be on the lookout for the core characteristics of the sandbox mindset when deciding where to work or who to partner. At the ifs Internationale Filmschule Köln, the choice of partners for our students' production exercises always includes a search for institutions that have a track record of experimentation and do not need an introduction to what the sandbox mindset might entail.

While more research needs to be done to deepen the understanding of production cultures and how they are compatible or not with the sandbox mindset, especially at the institutional level, the sensitizing concept might help creative storytellers to keep the community of practice alive and kicking.

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Audiovisual Works

Alma, 2013
The Art of Pho, 2011
Atterwasch, 2013
Bauhaus Spirit, 2016
Behind the Mask, 2023
The Boat, 2015
Bowling for Columbine, 2002
Darwin's Nightmare, 2004
Do Not Track, 2015
The Enemy, 2014
Field Trip, 2019
Fort McMoney, 2013
Gaza Sderot, 2009
GDP, 2009
The Hole Story Interactive, 2010
Hollow, 2013
The Quipu Project, 2015

Ulster End of Year Show, 2022
Welcome to Pine Point, 2011
Workingman's Death, 2005

Interactive Documentary in Teaching. A Practical Report

Florian Thalhofer, Florian Krautkrämer, Vanessa Zallot, and Tobias Conradi

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

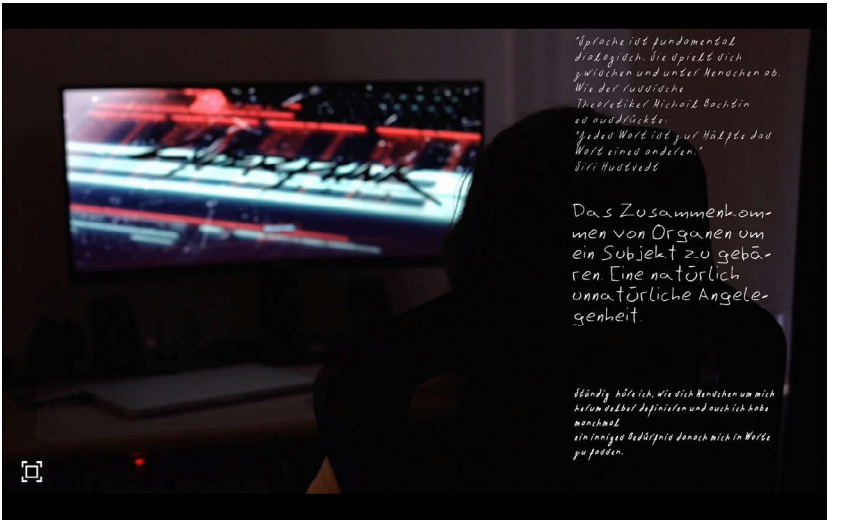
The group consisting of Dominik Maag, Lea Karabash, and Stella Bohn had set themselves the goal of creating an experimental interactive video on the subject of surface and skin, which gave particular weight to the soundtrack (Tinnitus, 2021). In a very elaborate interface, one moved among various parts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

Fig. 1: Screenshot Tinnitus Interface

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

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

Fig. 2: Screenshot Einzeln Interface



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

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

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

Florian Krautkrämer

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).

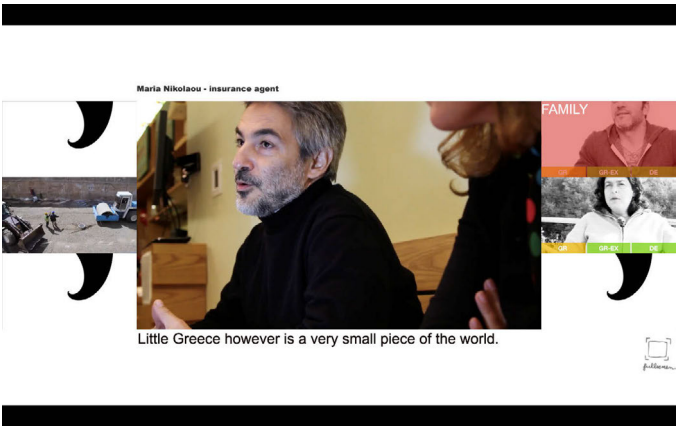
One specific form of this comprises projects in which multiple individual clips are visible to the user and the focus is on the sequence of individual videos. In *Geld.gr – Money and the Greeks* (Florian Thalhofer, D 2013), a documentary project about the Greek government debt crisis, individual clips 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 curser 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 Tempelhofer Feld 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 soughing 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 test[5] – 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.

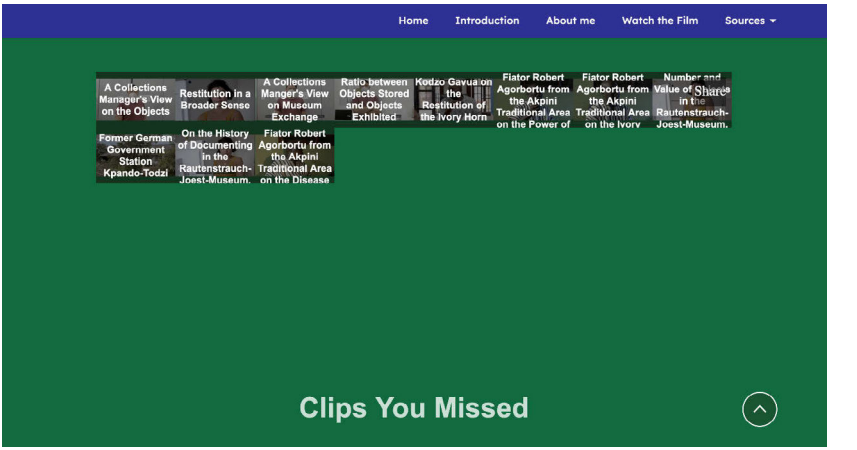
Skip

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 uprisings[6] 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 heared. 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 operationality 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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Becoming River

Daniel Fetzner with comments by Adrian Schwartz

Pissing in a river watching it rise
Patti Smith

Becoming River[1] is a sensory ethnography along the course of the river Murg in the Black Forest. A media-ecological probe – equipped with cameras, microphones, and sensors – drifts from the spring that is the river's source to its confluence with the Rhine. The object, constructed from alluvial material, is both an actor and a piece of passive flotsam. Over the course of several months, it weaves a narrative in which observations and events become entangled. The probe is collecting audio-visual micro-narratives and technical data at the same time. Whenever it gets stuck, broken, or even lost, it creates crucial intersections with the river. As sensory ethnographers we[2] explore those events, which flow as fragments into the interactive web documentation of our artistic research project *De\Globalize*.[3] This artistic research renegotiates the grammar of space, borders, and scale in order to deglobalize the notion of the global. It thereby focusses on three key questions:

1 https://becomingriver.com/

2 The "we" is our artistic research group mbody, a collaboration with the philosopher Martin Dornberg. The "we" is also the Lab for Media Ecology at Offenburg University with the sound artist and programmer Ephraim Wegner and the filmmaker Adrian Schwartz.

3 The artistic research cycle De\Globalize (2014–) is a media-ecological exploratory movement for the terrestrial. It is situated at the border between critical zone sciences, biology, anthropology, and media ecology and aims to research their relations of proximity, symbioses and critical overlaps and conflicts. Our artistic, media, and philosophical techniques therefore also use reflexive and diffractive methods and try to exhibit these and make them visible and researchable. After examining *matters of fact* in India, *matters of waste* in Egypt and *matters of care* in the Upper Rhine, the focus turned towards *matters of violence* in the Congo. From matter to mater, mother-earth, the garden to exploitation. From science, water, and climate to migration, oppression, and extermination. The results are accessible via the interactive web documentation. The platform http://deglobalize.com serves as a continuous media-archaeological archive for this speculative ethnography.

1. How to think, fold, and answer the earth in a deglobalized topology?
2. How to represent alterities, entanglements, and relational *references* through critical zonings in the parasitocene?
3. How to narrate critical zonings in nonlinear, improvisational, transmedial cuts?

The authorship of us researchers is interwoven with the co-authorship of the river Murg and a multiplicity of further non-human actants. Current weather conditions, sewage discharges, and the characteristics of the riverbank lead the search for the narration to precarious points. The probe meanders through critical zones of the Murg, passing paper mills, crossing the world of microorganisms and plants, swimming through canal systems and over the property of car manufacturers and power stations, alongside one hundred and thirty-five thousand human inhabitants.

The filmic assemblage becomes accessible in the form of a non-linear assembly, in which different velocities merge into one another: noiseless currents in the center of the river, maelstroms in the peripheral zones, calm and stagnant waters on the banks.

We use the principle of meandering by any river in order to search for the terrestrial (Latour 2018). Whenever our probe gets stuck in the undergrowth or in human-made facilities, we undertake agential cuts (Barad 2007). Wherever the strolling artefact accidentally lands, diffractive slices of reality and narrative bridges are created via cinematic interventions. We implement the organic and apparative perspectives obtained in our interactive web archive as a living meshwork (Gaudenzi 2012). Since life is knotted like a story (Ingold 2015), we consider each apparent node as an organic bifurcation. *Becoming River* is a diffractive practice which does not intend to simplify the proceedings, but to reveal its repressed complexity. A dense web of stories, techniques, actions, and coincidences in which our existence is radically embedded. We try not to disentangle the occurring phenomena nor to fetishize them as best we can.

In the lower course of the river, the straight line dominates within the industrialized modern sections of the Murg. On its forays, the floating artefact refuses the constancy of a fixed viewpoint that pretends to be outside the reproduced. *Becoming River* assumes that this linearity harms our world relationship because of its totalitarian presumption. We are therefore experimenting with an ethnographic change of perspective that abolishes the separation of subject and object, of people and environment. In our stereographic projection method (Fetzner, Wegner, & Bisig 2023) we explore an uncommon zero-person perspective to encounter the earth. New intermediate spaces and topological foldings are created by relating inner and outer zones to one another through so-called transitional objects. The aim is not a proliferating confusion of actors, but rather a co-operative struggle and negotiation between the actants involved.

This interactive application creates an embodied mirror cabinet without a rotating point of view. The multiple relationships of the objects and actants and their diffractive gaps[4] become tangible and affectively perceptible. As part of the installation and in the context of its further artistic processing in the interactive documentation, delirious images and montages are generated in order to evoke an imaginative vertigo.

This vertigo involves not only visual and auditory artefacts, but also real situations and movements (Bergson 1991). We assume that the resulting time-images (Deleuze 1989/90) tend to have a haptic-tactile component. They have a sensory, direct effect on the nervous system. In other words, their own haptic formats and textures open up new possibilities for experience and interaction. We use these interactive fragments as catalysts of a coherent, elastic, and ultimate thinking.

Our artistic research projects (Fetzner & Dornberg 2015) are generally based on Michel Serres's media-theoretical concept of the parasite (1980) and Claude Lévi-Strauss's principle of bricolage (1966). Both strategies are inherently wild-growing and uncontrolled. We favor the mode of what Deleuze & Guattari (1987) call "ambulance sciences", which are firmly associated with the nomos, the territory, and the smooth space of the sea.[5]

In our media-ecological surveys, we use Jakob v. Uexküll's term "forays" (2010) literally. In *fogpatch* (2007),[6] cyberneticist Max Bense strays across the Golden Gate Bridge and experiences a bodily collapse. In *Pickup* (2010),[7] performance artist Harald Kimmig rides through Cairo on a pick-up truck and amplifies intercorporeal phenomena with his environment via his musical instrument. In *PEAU/PLI* (2012),[8] the dancer Graham Smith roams through a working-class neighborhood of Freiburg, falls and seriously injures his shoulder. In *fuchsfurz* (2020),[9] a parasitic media probe takes off from a Critical Zone observatory in the Vosges Mountains, spirals up into the stratosphere, bursts at an altitude of 36 kilometers, and finally crashes to the ground. In *Inner Congo* (2022),[10] white men wander through their intimate heart of darkness in a foreign territory.

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4 We use the term "diffraction" in the sense of Karen Barad (2007) as in https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/d/diffraction.html

5 Deleuze & Guattari differentiate two types of epistemic procedures: The royal sciences involve reproduction, iteration, and reiteration. They are subordinate to the logos, while ambulance sciences resist predictability and specialize in inventing new problems.

6 http://fogpatch.metaspace.de

7 http://pickup.metaspace.de

8 http://pp.metaspace.de

9 http://deglobalize.com/idoc/#FUCHSFURZ

10 http://deglobalize.com/idoc/#InnererKongo

Becoming River is particularly based on three preliminary works set in Egypt:

A. 1300 BC. Moses is washed up on the banks of the Nile in a reed basket. The story raises the existential Latourian question "*Où atterrir*?" [Where do we come to rest?] (2019).
B. As part of our artistic research project *Wasteland*,[11] the philosopher Graham Harman raves about object-oriented ontology (OOO) and concepts of New Materialism amidst the waste workers at the Garbage City in Cairo. Harman first refuses to join the situationist experiment because he is afraid of exposing himself to the stinking matter. Finally his curiosity wins out, and he literally moves at eye level with his flat ontologies.
C. The performance *Nile Vodoo*[12] explores the terrestrial quality of the Nile, a ship, and alluvial land in the form of a performative drilling. A Voodoo priest reads Coleridge's Kubla Khan during a *felucca* trip and plunges me into the floods in the course of a hypnotic voodoo ritual. The two of us fight our way back into the boat with the last of our strength against the violent current of heavy metals and organic waste. The surface of the water resembles a curved spherical segment, a view of earth from space.

Fig. 1: The Murg is a diffractive universe

11 http://deglobalize.com/idoc/#WASTELAND
12 http://deglobalize.com/idoc/#NILEVODOO

Our exploration abandons the concepts of a "wholeness" or "singularity". It counteracts the seductive Gestalt law of emergence, claiming rather that the parts should be considered as more important than the illusion of a "whole". Just as we assume that there is no creator who looks upon a self-contained "whole earth" with a clear beginning and end, we reject the colonial ideology of a vanishing point in the infinite. Instead, *Becoming River* understands life as an improvisation with limited resources carrying some kind of lunacy on board.[13]

Notes

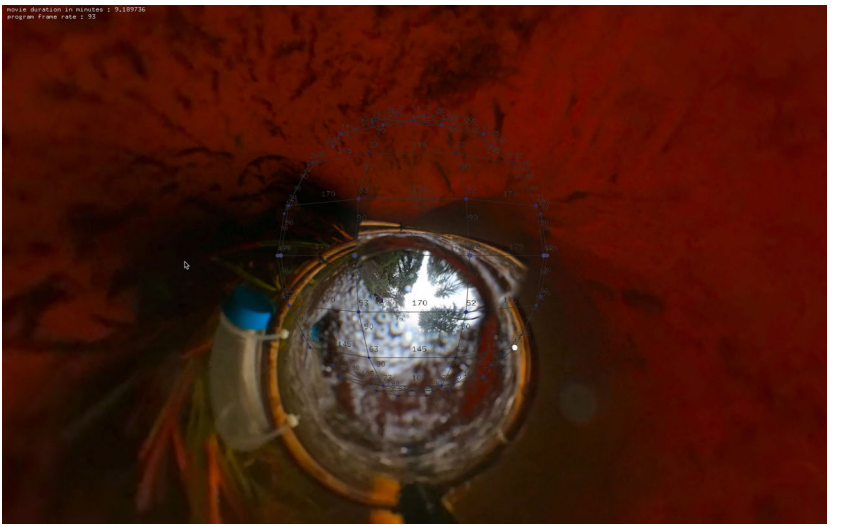
1. "A Long time ago, water was a bodily ghost. Finally the ghosts disappeared."[14] The suspension of this existential "struction" is part of the modern desperation.
2. On the riverbank, the view floats over the current. This is most impressive when masses of water carve their way after heavy rainfall. Boundless power, flowing noiselessly in the center of the stream, while the gaze is directed towards the swirling currents and maelstroms on the banks, where all the small dramas take place. Calm and stagnant waters are located in an immediate neighborhood. All flow velocities are represented and merge seamlessly into one another. Many thinkers and poets have been captivated by the magic of this stream for thousands of years.
3. Michel Foucault (2006) thought water next to madness. Both seem closely connected in the dream of the rational occidental mind. The madman is delivered to the river with its thousand arms.
4. In his metaphysics, Aristotle accorded the straight line a superior position to the curve. This can be considered as a starting point of the recurring defamation of the meander. From then on, figures of deviation are seen as pliable, adaptive, and opportunistic – but also as insidious, chaotic, and evil.
5. Today, the meander has become fashionable again. Volker Demuth (2023) puts it like this: "The meander oscillates between analysis and history, reflection and narrative. It offers insights into a radically different cultural and political ecology, into a grammar in which subjects and objects are not hierarchized. It is rather a network of relationships swinging back and forth in a fluid space."

13 Pink Floyd 1973, https://genius.com/Pink-floyd-brain-damage-lyrics

14 Jean-Luc Nancy in June 2013 during our conference at Kommunales Kino Freiburg https://www.metaspace.de/Main/MbodyNancy

6. Bruno Latour, already terminally ill but with a smile on his face: "Ghosts are not an object of belief. It is something which comes to you."[15]
7. In the topological thinking of Michel Serres, the cuts of our diffractive approach can be considered as bridges. As a mathematician, sailor, and philosopher, Serres distinguishes the general theory of routes and paths from the comprehensive theory of flow.[16]
8. The straight line can be seen as an overpowering form of order in which the world, which tends towards the disparate, converges and can be synthesized into a whole. But what if the rationalist formalism of the straight line actually proves to be grossly irrational and dysfunctional for planetary life?

Fig. 2: Basic trust originates from the uterus



Source: Daniel Fetzner

9. Rivers can be viewed from very different perspectives: As grooves in the landscape, the veins of a water system, the arteries of a biological habitat. The first image suggests that a river is primarily a drainage channel for the water and the

15 Fetzner 2019.

16 Serres (1977): "Who can fail to see that a flow never remains parallel for long, who can fail to see that a laminar flow is only ideal and theoretical? Turbulence soon appears. In relation to theory, the appearance of concrete experience is simultaneous with that of vortices. Declination is their beginning. Nothing is absurd here, everything is exact, precise and even necessary." (author's translation)

sediments it carries. The second image emphasizes that a river and its banks are not separated from its watershed. The third picture assumes that rivers provide a biological space that is inhabited by fish, snails, birds, trees, and humans alike.

10. The Murg flows into the Rhine, which has been meandering through the plain of its rift valley for 40 million years, flooding regularly, its boundaries in flux. In 1850, the engineer Johann-Gottfried Tulla drained the tributaries and directed the river into a straight line. By forcing the meander into linearity, he shortened the route between Basel and Bingen by 80 kilometers.
11. At the same time, BASF, Bayer, and Hoechst were founded next to the straightened river. In their chemical taxonomy, water is considered as H_2O. Ghosts and folds[17] are abandoned in favor of instrumental reason.
12. Michel Serres (1992, 51) doubted this concept: "Given normal weather, the Nile's floods submerged the borders of tillable fields in the alluvial valley fertilized by the great river. Floods take the world back to disorder, to primal chaos, to time zero, right back to nature, in the sense of things about to be born."
13. The project "Rendering a River" by the artist Michael Aschauer[18] follows the Danube in a linear movement from its source to the black sea. The seamless movement across borders unveils the absurdity of national characterizations of rivers like those by Bedřich Smetana and Richard Wagner.
14. Bob Dylan: "The water is wide and I can't cross over."
15. Within the research project Clim'Ability Care,[19] we observe instances of flooding and drought on the River Murg as agential cuts. Another one of these cuts is the massive earthworks and excavations for a pumped storage power station between the Schwarzenbach Dam and a water retention basin on the Murg river.
16. In our exploratory movement, we are inspired by the land art practitioner Robert Smithson (1968, 82): "One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason."
17. We add soil from our Earth Lab at the IISc Bangalore[20] and water from the performance *Nile Vodoo* to our probe.
18. We consider the River Murg as a hyperobject (Morton 2013) embedded in an Ecology without nature.[21]

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17 According to Gilles Deleuze (1988), the fold offers a way to analyze and conceptualize thinking through the lens of three integrated operations: explication, implication, and complication.

18 https://danubepanorama.art

19 https://www.clim-ability.eu/en/welcome

20 https://deglobalize.com/idoc/#SCIENCING_ZONE

21 https://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/156375/subscendence

19. Alongside "the parasite", we also make use of the idea of a "wild topology". Michel Serres understands this to refer to not only structural crossings, but ultimately all forms of mediating third parties between things, as the transgression of a boundary that, at the same time, preserves it.
20. The intermediate is central to the "wild topology": Hermes, parasites, angels, the labyrinth and, last but not least, the Northwest Passage, are therefore based on the ambivalence of connecting and disconnecting.
21. In Forbach, a local energy provider blasts a new pumped storage power plant into the granite next to the River Murg. Kilometers of pipes and a turbine power plant are to be built in the belly of the mountain. The hypertrophic project seems to come straight from a James Bond movie.

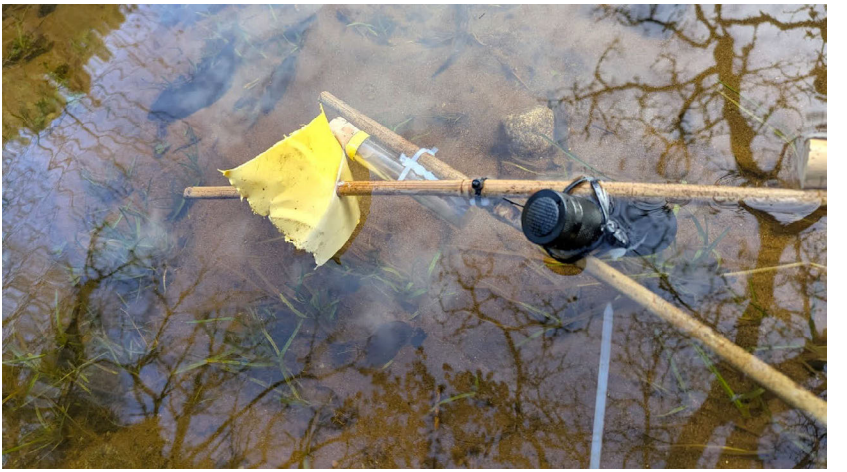
Fig. 3: Male Fantasies: final preparations for the blasting

Source: Adrian Schwartz

22. Another agential cut is my father, who spend his whole life close to the river. He is an old man who is now falling into mental confusion.
23. Gaia seems to be a topological manifoldness.
24. Perception is primarily polymorphic. The topological space creates a milieu in which relations of proximity and envelopment become possible. Ecological thinkers such as von Uexküll (2010), Guattari (2014), and Ingold (2015) have established the mesh as a central structure in their relational thinking: Like the tracing of a wasp, thoughts must constantly cross, fold, and cut the chaos.
25. We developed an interactive stereographic projection that we use like an instrument in our improvisational performances. The images and sounds generated

in this way undermine our usual perception and the anthropocentrism of linear perspective that is inherent in all our technical apparatuses. Following Graham Harman's call for flat ontologies (2016), we move on the thin ice of a critical (image) zone.

Fig. 4: The probe on location equipped with Indian soil and Nile water



Source: Adrian Schwartz

26. The interaction and handling of a projected sphere narrows the experience of time and activates specific sensorimotor schemata. This projection within the application can be seen as a virtual eyeball. Seeing becomes less of an intentional act than a psycho-material entanglement of partially embodied affects. This is the actual qualitative leap of this visual representation. The tool recognizes that our body and its environment are always interwoven into multiple zones and indistinguishable intervals.
27. Navigation through our multimodal application can be seen as an improvisational act within an inter-objective structure. Each chosen perspective implicitly creates an off-screen and thus a potential space of diverse object-related connections and arbitrary montages. These relationships are imperceptibly effective, but not evident. They literally fall out of the frame. Rhythms, atmospheres, and coincidences thus create a polymorphous flow of experiences and a correlating data stream that follows Erwin Panofsky's critique (1927) in questioning the concept of the central perspective as a symbolic and representative form.
28. According to Michel Serres (1980) a mediate system always implies noise, interruptions and lost signals. Positions, roles and controls are changing perma-

nently. The parasite keeps any system in an ever-disruptive state. It is included and excluded in the system at the same time.[22]

Fig. 5: Father Moser with cables and Jacob's Ladder blesses the site before the explosion.

Source: Adrian Schwartz

29. Watching the flow from the bank is just one way to look at it. Deleuze & Guattari (1987, 372) divide the flow of matter into strata: "Reproducing implies the permanence of a fixed point of view that is external to what is reproduced."
30. In the summer of 1990, I built a sculpture out of flotsam[23] on an old NVA[24] military training area at the Baltic Sea. Part of it was a piece of wood with a bullet lodged in it. The copper-colored foreign body has remained there ever since.

22 "The joker, in the position of bifurcation, makes it possible by the confluence of values that it insures. It is both what has been said and what will be said. It is bi-, tri-, or poly-valent, according to the complexity of the connection. The ramification of the network depends on the number of jokers. But I suspect that there is a limit for this number. When there are too many, we are lost as if in a labyrinth." Serres 1980, 162.

23 German experts also use the onomatopoeic term "*Geschwemmsel*" (floating debris).

24 The NVA (Nationale Volksarmee, engl.: National People's Army) was the German Democratic Republic's armed forces.

Fig. 6: Gardener Klumpp cooling down: no man ever steps in the same river twice

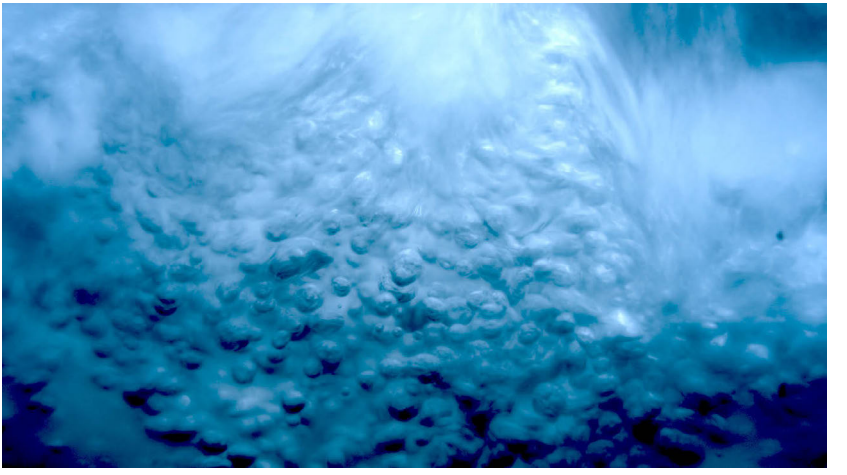
Source: Adrian Schwartz

31. One node is the property of Mr. Klumpp between the river and the B462 federal highway. A professional gardener, Klumpp has built greenhouses with parrots close to the Murg. As the water level rises, he is getting nervous. Mr. Klumpp has just recovered from cancer.
32. The topology of the interactive documentation can be considered as a meshwork, which creates entanglements within the individual media documents as well as with the visitor's thinking. Patterns of use take fragments and leftovers from the existing set of documents in order to build a new meaningful construct. This is not first and foremost about truth but about thinking.
33. From Heraclitus's perspective (500 v. Chr.) the river has a measurable before and after in a temporal dimension. The ancient thinker deals with the natural process of constant becoming and change and uses the river as a central metaphor of an ongoing metabolism and change of form. Hence: "No man ever steps in the same river twice".
34. In 1972, Christopher Stone (2010) insisted that the current division of the legal world into persons and things is neither self-evidently correct nor good for humanity. In 2017, New Zealand granted the Whanganui River its own rights. As the relevant legal document states: "Te Awa Tupua is an indivisible and living whole, comprising the Whanganui River from the mountains to the sea, incorporating all its physical and metaphysical elements."[25]

25 https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2017/0007/latest/whole.html

35. The Sanskrit word "*sindhu*" stands for ubiquitous wetness of the southwest monsoon. The meaning of *sindhu* ranges from the monsoon raindrop to the ocean. Wetness is everywhere, which is another way to think of the part being greater than the whole (Mathur & Cunha 2020). With the monsoon, the air thickens and the soil saturates, which increases the tempo of life and death. This can be applied to clouds, forests, and cellular matters.
36. Another source of relief is Alexander Kluge's speculation (2001, 44) about the rivers within our bodies: "We have a longing for the ancient oceans, which had a temperature of 37 degrees. The separation of inside and outside begins with this same water, from whose memory we have become warm-blooded creatures. Basic trust originates from the uterus, from the water, and will eventually drink from the river. We still carry the primordial oceans within us; the kidney carries its salt concentration. We have a capacity for long memory; these are our feelings. They are bearers of memory, quanta of the old world, for which a happy state 14 million years ago is therefore still present." (author's translation)
37. We regard the river Murg as such an organism, as a diffractive universe. Its surface is our seam.

Fig. 7: Any bubble is a fold of a diffractive universe



Source: Adrian Schwartz

38. At high tide in January, the probe was caught by the main current, accelerated and finally disappeared. After a desperate search, we were lucky to locate it, thanks to its built-in spotlight, downstream in a bush on the dark north bank.

The artefact could be recovered with the help of a canoeist. This was another lesson in the matter of coincidence.

39. The accelerationist Nick Land (2014) speculates about organs that crawl like aphids upon the immobile motor of becoming. We are going to follow this trail.

Commentaries by Adrian Schwartz, filmmaker:

Water becomes river when it accumulates. Stone becomes river when it sediments. Movement becomes river when it is rehearsed and repressed into the unconscious, directing the limbs. Thoughts become river when they take on a life of their own, escape from the mind's supervision. Love becomes river when two unite by disputing unity, only to find each other again. Time becomes river when it passes unnoticed. Life becomes river when it is dedicated. Memories become river when they are evoked deep in the unconscious. Animal becomes river when it hunts, preys, and tears apart.

Fig. 8: Becoming River – European Grayling

Source: Adrian Schwartz

In *Becoming River* we use the camera and the microphone as sensory instruments to translate the physical sensation into moving images and sounds. We distinguish between two types of gaze.

1. The gaze upon it

The film camera is mesmerized by the flow velocities. The more perpendicular the view from above, the more direct the shot, the more compelling the flow of water. The immediacy of the fixated confrontation with the flowing current makes the viewer dizzy. A strong current speaks not only in, but also through the image. An eerie suction force is created. Viewers cannot look at it for long. What is this flowing water all about? The film camera intervenes, providing orientation. It lingers on amphibious boulders, roots that entwine in the water, or a tentative contour, the shadow cast by a power cable high above the surface of the water, the reflection of the branches of a tree on the riverbank. It aims at something that gives the human eye a foothold. In relation to the contour of an object, we observe the speed of the flow harmlessly, almost devoutly, peacefully, lullingly. It is easy for viewers to concentrate on the aesthetics of the shot. They judge. But when the film camera is once again directed at the barren stream of water, close enough, perpendicular enough, without holding contours, without any possibility of orientation, then the laws of aesthetics blur before their eyes and the desire for a formal discussion dries up. Then only the suction force of the water speaks from the picture, showing an unruliness that makes the viewer feel uneasy. Even the smallest river then becomes an audiovisual challenge by which the viewers feel threatened and soon turn away, guided by the tolerance of their physical constitution. The film camera can introduce us to the essence of the river, but we have to deal with the incompatibility ourselves.

Therefore we need the guidance of an observational camera that is able to engage with the events and imitate the modality of a focused, steady gaze. What is needed even more, however, is an effective sound pattern that initiates the directness of the confrontation with the world and holds the gaze transfixed. The ear, as a much more sensitive, one could even say smarter organ, knows how to distinguish between the unimportant and the important. It has the task of guiding the gaze, which in turn means that the ear must be explicitly considered in the film. A detailed sound design interested in precision, which is shaped by the effects of amplification, isolation and repetition, is therefore particularly helpful in favoring the uniqueness of discovery in its physicality.

2. The gaze out of it

In order to counteract the effectiveness of the filmic participation by means of the participation itself, the sensory instruments – camera and microphone – become flotsam themselves. They drift, get tangled up, spin, and get stuck. They whirl, speed up, slow down, and rotate around every conceivable axis of their own bodies. A camera can take on the perspective of a washed-up scrap of fabric hanging from a branch. The microphone can be washed through the raging rapids and plunge into

the dredged channels of the tributaries. The camera switches between above and below the water. Both the camera and the microphone must therefore participate in the nature of the subjects. They need to physically perform the participation (artificially) in order to get closer to a being itself. The focus is on the ongoing processes that can be observed from "the gaze upon it", such as the drifting of the water, the swaying of plants in the wind, the breaking and falling of stones, etc., which are then imitated in the "the gaze out of it". This is made possible by a bare camera that refuses to obey the aesthetic laws of composition. No disturbing noise, no visual flaw can be overlooked. The camera falls, wriggles, dips, and lurches and is thereby in a constant performative state that can ultimately only be limited by the editing, where it is combined with the gaze upon it to allow the phenomena to be approached.

Unlike the perception of reality, the perception of film means a narrowing of perception to the image on offer. The gaze is channeled and captured in the aspect ratio. The ear is seduced by the sound of the film. However, the physical limits of the cinema are by no means the limits of participation, because the space on the screen can and will expand through our imagination. We understand more of what is shown than is actually shown. We imagine a world that trumps the physical state of the film projection. We generate a psychological space of experience through the sensory perceptibility of the world through cinema. It is a physical coming to the world in the transformation of the mental made possible by film. This moment of confrontation with the being of the world in film is the subject of the search of our exploratory gaze in *Becoming River*. A throwback to our own physicality before the dawn of imagination and reflection, a merging with the filmic witnessing of the river and of life within, around, and throughout.

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Moving Through the Documentary

Bodily Movement and Montage in Interactive Documentary

Cornelia Lund

Web-based interactive documentaries typically involve two types of performance or performativity: the performativity of software or platforms, and the performance of the user. In this context, physical movement or bodily interaction is usually limited to a certain set of actions related to direct interaction with the computer. At first sight, this article's title may thus elicit questions as to the importance of highlighting movement in relation to interactive documentary. This only starts to become more meaningful if interactive documentary is viewed from a wider perspective, one that leaves the strictly web-based setting and takes into account dispositifs that require more bodily interactive "exercise". This is not entirely new, as recent years have seen discussions and experimentations on performativity and the role of bodily presence in interactive documentaries from various perspectives (e. g. Aston 2017, Zimmerman & De Michiel 2018, Nelson 2022). Most of the time, however, these approaches are interested in direct exchanges and encounters between the artists or filmmakers as performers and the audience, their physical co-presence, and a collective experience, as opposed to the situation of isolation in front of a screen. Consequently, they mainly discuss live performance as taking place in a theatrical setting. Taking the open-ended definition of interactive documentary developed by Judith Aston, Sandra Gaudenzi, and Mandy Rose as a starting point (Aston, Gaudenzi, & Rose 2017, 1–2), this chapter proposes to shift the focus to an understudied aspect of how and where interactive documentary can take place, namely as part of installations. In order to connect and activate the different parts of a documentary, interaction in an installation setting involves movement: the movement performed by the viewer's body moving in and through the installation. As in web-based interactive documentary, this entails "modalities of perception, editing and temporality" (Parente & de Carvalho 2008, 50) that are very different from the "definite sequence" (ibid.) offered by traditional cinema. But, unfolding in a spatio-temporal arrangement unique to each installation and viewer (ibid.), the activating potential of the installation places the body of the viewer at the center as the privileged instrument for exploring the dispositif (Duguet 1988: 228). This leads to the question of whether or how the role

of the subject and subjectivation are affected by these characteristics, for example in comparison to the traditional cinema dispositif.

In order to ventilate this question and to explain how these installation settings can be discussed in relation to interactive documentary, this chapter will start by developing a methodological approach drawing on a critical discussion of the fields involved and relevant discourses. It will then focus on the analysis of works by Harun Farocki and Antje Ehmann, Volumen Express, and Rimini Protokoll, ranging from exhibition dispositifs to a set-design-like dispositif. The main focus here is on experiences that unfold in the physical world, but as virtual reality has become increasingly important in the field of interactive documentary (Nash 2018, 97), the chapter will conclude with some deliberations regarding VR.

Situating Documentary Installations

Documentary installations using moving images often combine and bridge various contexts of reference, depending on, for example, who produced them in which institutional context, or where they are presented. In consequence, they can be and have been discussed from a variety of perspectives, the most important ones for this article being art and cinema. With the so-called "documentary turn" in the arts around 1990, documentary moving images become part of a larger documentary field (Peleg 2010, 14) as one alongside many other artistic documentary practices. These have mainly unfolded within the context of art, which then also becomes their major framework of reference, and is where they have been widely discussed (e.g., Lind & Steyerl 2008; or consistently at the Berlin Documentary Festival from 2010 to 2014). If we shift our perspective to that of cinema, however, documentary installations using moving images can also be described, with Jihoon Kim, as part of "Documentary's Expanded Fields" (2022), the expansion being one beyond the borders of the traditional cinema context and its dispositif. The following analysis of the three chosen examples is indebted to Kim's discussion of the "multiscreen dispositif" as part of the paradigm of what he calls the "expanded dispositif" (Kim 2022, 114–123), in particular by further developing the idea of spatialized strategies of montage (ibid.: 114). Kim critically refers to a number of texts showing that this kind of spatial arrangement and the exhibition setting in an art context entail a series of implications. Erika Balsom stresses that the white cube of the gallery or exhibition room is not a "neutral container" (Balsom 2013, 39) but comes with a set of practices that are associated with it and a particular discursive and institutional framing. Referring to Francesco Cassetti and Jacques Rancière, Kim conceives the two main operations that are at work when the documentary leaves the cinema to take the form of an art installation as "relocation" and "redistribution", arguing that "documentary installations inherit documentary cinema's constitutive ele-

ments and its modes of practice while also endowing them with a new aesthetic experience" (Kim 2022, 109). The multiscreen dispositif thus functions against the backdrop of the traditional cinema dispositif, whose elements are dislocated from the movie theatre and migrate to the new context (relocation), while its formal, rhetorical, and perceptual elements as well as its reference to reality are rearranged and transformed (redistribution) (ibid.) In their seminal article on the subject, subjectivity, and subjectivation in this context – an angle of the multiscreen dispositif that Kim's approach is not particularly interested in – Parente and de Carvalho give a similar description of how these different types of dispositifs relate to each other (Parente & de Carvalho 2008, 51). It is precisely "because cinema subjectivity has been deeply interiorized" by the viewers that these installation dispositifs produce new models of subjectivation, "formed in the fissures of the dispositif", between "acknowledgement and displacement" (ibid.), they argue, with reference to Deleuze's concept of the dispositif.

At this point, I would like to open up a short parenthesis to critically reflect on the strong link to cinema that is being affirmed here. With regard to Kim's approach, it can be asked if the two operations of relocation and redistribution can fully account for all the implications of the changed framing. While some producers of documentary installations, such as Harun Farocki or Hito Steyerl, certainly have their roots in cinema and may use cinematic modes of production and practices, one might ask if this is always true for trained artists whose approach to working with moving images can be very different and does not necessarily refer to a cinematic framework, be it in terms of aesthetics or practices. Publications that address the positioning of documentary moving images in the context of art and cinema emphasize the importance of taking into consideration the different discursive frameworks. The failure to do so can lead to serious misunderstandings, for example if moving images originating in the field of the fine arts are analyzed as part of traditional history of film or cinema (Hohenberger & Mundt 2016, 18), particularly since the ethical frameworks (Ellis 2007, 59) and the reference to reality work differently (Lund 2019).

Similar concerns can be voiced regarding the concept of the dispositif. Caution might be in order when assuming a deeply interiorized familiarity with the traditional cinema dispositif and its effects, for example with respect to younger generations and their viewing habits. Furthermore, the theoretical approaches from the art context do not necessarily refer to traditional cinema in their definitions of moving images or video installations as dispositifs but define them in a wider net of modes of representation (e.g., Duguet 1988, 227).

With this in mind, we can proceed to provide a more precise definition of the approach taken in this chapter. Rather than adhering to a traditional methodology with a singular, conclusive research question, it can be characterized as an experiment that aims to foster new avenues of thought regarding interactive documentary. While Kim acknowledges in his book that documentary installations possess

interactive potential, they are not discussed within the chapter on interactive documentaries. I propose to shift the angle and analyze the installations precisely from the perspective of interactive documentary, or – as an extension of this perspective – in terms of the relationship between documentary and interactivity.[1] Even if these installations might not be perceived as very experimental exhibitions, they function as "experimentation fields" (Parente & de Carvalho 2008, 50) in which the viewer activates the dispositif through their unique experience. Seen from this perspective, these installation settings thus unfold an experimental character that can be used to further explore and expand the very notion of interactive documentary.

In this regard, I will examine how these settings experiment with and affect the defining parameters of interactive documentary. How does the interaction change in these settings? How are features such as collaboration and polyvocality orchestrated? And how is montage renegotiated when (bodily) movements define the selection and combination of images and sounds?

Before addressing these questions through the analysis of examples, there is one more instance to discuss, and that is how to refer to the person(s) engaging with these installations. Galleries or museums usually have visitors, films have viewers or spectators, depending on the context, interactive documentaries may also have users. Kim points to Dominique Païni's use of the term "visitor-spectator" for film or video installations to describe the tension between their immobile attention to the moving images and their movements in and through the installation (Kim 2022, 112). For his own discussion of the "expanded dispositifs", however, he opts for the more neutral term "viewer". This article will mostly follow him in this choice – with one notable exception – by seeking to specify the role of "viewer" for each particular context in the analysis.

As already mentioned, the multiscreen dispositif does not aim at producing one generalized viewer experience; each viewer rather generates their own experience through their specific approach to the work. Furthermore, there are no standardized multiscreen dispositifs, but each work represents its own version of said dispositif – which is precisely why the title of Anne-Marie Duguet's article on the topic is "Dispositifs" in the plural. They nevertheless share certain characteristics regarding the spatial and temporal organization and the role of the viewer's body, as discussed above. The following examples show three different approaches to multiscreen dispositifs. Of course, they do not represent the entirety of possible approaches, but their differing fields of reference and degrees of complexity in the ways media are arranged and viewers activated provide an overview of the field.

1 The perspective of "documentary and interactivity" as an expanded approach to interactive documentary was proposed by Judith Aston during the conference on "Interactive Documentary: Laboratory and Experiment" (February 1–2, 2024, HSLU Lucerne) in which framework a first version of this paper was presented.

Example 1: *Eine Einstellung zur Arbeit (Labour in a Single Shot)*, Harun Farocki & Antje Ehmann, HKW Berlin, 2015

Eine Einstellung zur Arbeit (Labour in a Single Shot) is the title of a work by Harun Farocki and Antje Ehmann. It is also the title of the exhibition that presented that work from February 27 to April 6, 2015 in the main exhibition hall (now the Mrinalini Mukherjee Hall) of the HKW (House of World Cultures) in Berlin. The project is the result of three years of exploration of "work" in a contemporary global context and is well documented on a website that presents all relevant information on places, dates, curators, participants, and the concept of the project.[2] In brief, the project consisted of 15 workshops held in 15 cities; the task of the workshop participants was to produce videos of one to two minutes in length. Each video had to be taken in a single shot, cuts were not allowed, but the camera could be either static, panning, or travelling. The short clips had to show people leaving their workplace. These strict rules and the overall topic stem from the larger context of the project, Farocki's investigation into the Lumière Brothers' film *Workers Leaving the (Lumière) Factory* (1895), which started with his video *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik* in 1995 and took different forms over the years, including texts and installations.

The website also functions as an archive insofar as it presents the results of the workshops, the short clips. All the clips are brought together on one page, with each represented by an image of the same size. When a cursor hovers over the images, two lines of text appear, giving details of the author, the workplace filmed, and the city and year of the clip's production. Clicking on an image activates the video. This mode of presentation references the exhibition (or vice versa), where the videos were shown on screens of the same size. But in contrast to the two-dimensional webpage, at the exhibition, the screens (and projectors) were hanging from the ceiling, facing in different directions, and thus forming a spatial arrangement that viewers had to navigate by moving their bodies. The hanging height of the screens, the short duration of the videos as well as the absence of seating furniture suggested that viewers should stand and move from screen to screen, watching the videos in no fixed order. By moving from one screen to the next, the viewer starts to combine the single videos into a series or ensemble of videos in what Kim calls a spatialized strategy of montage (2022, 114). The montage becomes interactive here as it unfolds through the viewer's individual choice of where and when to move next.

It is usual for film or video installations in an exhibition to run in a loop and have no fixed beginning; it is also very often left to viewers to choose the order in which they engage with the parts of an installation – or not to engage at all, to do something

2 The website documenting the project *Eine Einstellung zur Arbeit/Labour in a Single Shot* is available in German and English at https://www.labour-in-a-single-shot.net/en/project/concept/ (last accessed April 13, 2024).

different, answer a phone call, doze off, read a book, or eat an apple. But in addition to these usual elements, *Eine Einstellung zur Arbeit (Labour in a Single Shot)* offers a very open spatial arrangement. This allows sounds to mix, and not only the sounds in the videos, but also those of the visitors talking to each other. With the viewers standing next to each other and moving through the space, all kinds of sensory experiences become attached to and thus part of the viewing experience. Taking this into account, it seems to make sense to expand Kim's notion of montage and talk about a spatialized *and* bodily strategy of montage because the viewer takes in all kinds of sensory stimuli while moving their body through the spatial arrangement. The sensory experience is maybe even heightened in installations where the setting is more site specific and less abstract, as in the following example.

Example 2: *Facades of Crisis*, Volumen Express, Galerie Stadtgestalt c/o Serge von Arx, Berlin, 2010

Facades of Crisis by Volumen Express was shown in Berlin in November 2010, at the 24th Stuttgart Filmwinter – Festival for Expanded Media (January 2011), and at Club Cultural Matienzo, Buenos Aires (December 13 to 20, 2011). The work is based on research material produced in the context of the documentary theatre installation *(IM)POTENCIA* by Volumen Express, which addresses the loss of identity experienced by people in Buenos Aires following the 2001 economic crash in Argentina. Each work addresses the situation ten years after the crash using a different approach in terms of discursive framing and the respective media dispositif of the work: While *(IM)POTENCIA* is described as "documentary theatre installation" or "documentary theatre play" (Volumen Express), thus highlighting both its documentary character and the theatrical experience, its spin-off, *Facades of Crisis*, is characterized as a "multiple channel video/space installation" (Volumen Express). This shifts the emphasis to precisely the two parameters that define the montage und thus the documentary experience in this context.

Facades of Crisis combines various presentation formats to show a variety of documentary material: In the exhibition in Berlin, the viewer was first presented with larger-than-life projections of architectural security measures in Buenos Aires:[3] shops protected by massive metal bars through which goods are passed to clients and social interaction happens, such as passing a lighter. In the same room, a table with a chair and a laptop offers additional material to explore. A trap door in the floor leads to the basement. Here, the viewer can choose between filmed interviews of ten inhabitants of Buenos Aires, from different social backgrounds, talking about the financial crisis and its effects. Projections are the exception here, most of the

3 For an impression of the installation, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6m6uutas90 (last accessed April 13, 2024).

interviews are shown on a monitor and the audio is diffused via headphones. The basement is anything but a white cube, and the viewer is confronted with a somewhat untidy floor full of boxes and furniture of different types and sizes onto which the monitors are arranged and which can be used for sitting.

The sensory experience offered by this installation differs from the first example insofar as the institutional presence of the gallery is less strong and the senses have to deal with a much less rigid and more variable exhibition setting. First, it is site specific to the gallery venue; second, the two rooms offer different media environments with different viewing and sound situations; third, the viewer is confronted with different forms of visual, auditive, and haptic materiality; and fourth, the viewer has to execute a variety of movements and body positions, such as standing, walking, climbing stairs, or sitting, to find their way through the installation. The impression of becoming part of the life of the city and its problems that is created by being surrounded by the larger-than-life projections and sound in the first room is countered by the possibility of intimate concentration on the interviews in the basement. These different modes of experience contribute to a maybe even more immersive character than in the first example.

Both works show how the viewer has to negotiate the interplay of interactivity – through the spatialized and bodily montage – and immersion – in the concentrated act of perception – that is typical for this type of installation (Kim 2022, 115; Cowie 2009, 129). It is through the interplay of these two parameters that a certain polyvocality is orchestrated, another key element of interactive documentary (e.g., Aston 2017). In both examples, a number of contributions to the documentary argument are arranged and distributed among the screens – "argument" understood here, borrowing from the Cambridge Dictionary, as the subject matter and development of ideas in a work, both narrative and non-narrative. There is no linear "master narrative"; instead, each viewer creates their own documentary argument according to their choices and movements through the installation.

While the bodily movement through the installation is decisive to activate the documentary and create meaning, the participatory contribution of the viewer is nevertheless limited. Installations that happen only in the physical space of an art institution such as a gallery, museum, or project space are often not collaborative or even co-creative in the sense of giving the viewer the opportunity to contribute films or other material of their own making or become otherwise more active as a collaborative participant. If, however, the installation is conceived less as a multiscreen dispositif from the perspective of the art field, but from the point of view of theatre, the viewer's role can change, as the third example shows.

Example 3: *Situation Rooms*, Rimini Protokoll, 2013

Rimini Protokoll is a "theatre label" founded by Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzel in 2000, working on expanding "the means of theatre to create new perspectives on reality" with each work, as they put it on their website. Their works are thus rooted in the context of theatre. They are often presented in this institutional framework, but the group chooses more often than not to leave behind the traditional theatre situation to break the fourth wall.

Situation Rooms is a "multiplayer video piece" characterized as a "simultaneous cinema" experience that unfolds on a "film set" (Rimini Protokoll). The reference to cinema, its mode of production and presentation is thus already given in the description of the piece, which is no surprise considering that Rimini Protokoll's documentary theatre is often discussed as and in relation to documentary cinema (e. g. Rathmanner 2005, Cappeller 2018). The term "player", however, points to yet another genre, namely games, and therefore to a more active, participatory role for the "audience members".

But how exactly is the interplay of these elements arranged in *Situation Rooms*? What kind of documentary experience is proposed here and how does this relate to the approach to documentary and interactivity taken in this article?

Situation Rooms deals with war, presenting facets of this topic from 20 distinct perspectives: from war refugees, via a peace activist, to an arms dealer.[4] Rimini Protokoll seldom work with professional actors, turning instead mainly to people with real-life expertise of a subject. In this case, the representatives of the 20 perspectives do not directly appear in the piece (in contrast to other pieces by the group). Instead, 13 players are sent into a set or installation consisting of 15 different rooms. In the starting situation, as everyone gathers around an oval table, the players are given an iPad with videos together with instructions on how to interact with the video material, the setting, and the other players. Different doors lead into the architectural structure, and depending on the starting position and the behavior of the players, the piece may unfold in different ways, planned and unplanned. Unplanned insofar as the players are still free to ignore the instructions, do nothing, sit down, start singing, or leave the piece prematurely, for instance.

Insofar as it has an organized, fixed beginning, a suggested path through the piece, and only allows players to remain in the installation for a limited duration, the organizational context of *Situation Rooms* resembles more that of a theatre piece than of an art installation. The montage through choice and movement remains, however,

4 The architecture of Situation Rooms remains the same regardless of where the piece is presented. In this case, therefore, no specific realization is discussed. For an overview, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6iFd2EuS5Y (last accessed April 13, 2024).

a decisive parameter, as the players are free to choose the order in which they look at the various elements in a room or where to move first, for example.

The media dispositif is more complex than in the two previous examples and consists of a combination of diverse media disposed within the set-like architecture and on the iPad. Moving images are only one element in this environment; there is also audio material, written texts, and objects such as furniture that serve to characterize the sometimes meticulously reconstructed spatial situations of the rooms representing the perspectives on war that are at the heart of the piece (e. g. an operating theater in a tent in Sierra Leone, a Mexican cemetery, or an arms fair in Abu Dhabi). This makes the experience more haptic, especially since the players are asked to interact with the environment: They are invited to touch certain objects, for example, or perform actions involving them. In some rooms, the haptic dimension is complemented and emphasized by other sensations such as smell (of food, for example). Movement is also highlighted by asking the players not only to move through the architectural structure but also to perform certain actions. Players therefore interact with the installation as in the previous examples, but are also invited to interact with other players: They not only see the relevant experts on the iPad according to which part of the architectural environment they are currently in, they also take on and re-enact the role of these experts to sometimes even interact with each other in this capacity.

Overall, *Situation Rooms* is characterized, on the one hand, by elements of immersive theatre or installations (players take on roles, interact etc.), but, on the other hand, it repeatedly creates distancing moments by means of the documentary material that can be accessed on the iPad or sometimes directly on site. This material, Miriam Dreysse argues, constantly interrupts the immersion, asks the players to step out of their assumed roles, and confronts them with the friction between the piece and reality – and ultimately the question of what it is they are actually participating in (Dreysse 2021, 171–175).

This self-reflective openness in the construction of the documentary argument is paired with and relies on the polyphonic approach based on strategies of spatial and bodily montage that allows for the construction of polyphonic realities. This is also reflected in the title, *Situation Rooms*, which indicates that, in global warfare and conflicts, there is no such thing as the one situation where all threads come together, become linked in space and time and thus coherent and legible, as implied by the unitary Situation Room of the US government (Hirsch 2013, 9).

Embodiment and Interactivity

If the interplay of immersion, reflection, and interaction is supported by a heightened sensory, bodily experience that engages all the senses, what does this mean for

the interactive documentary experience? How can we describe the impact it has on the way the documentary narrative or argument is perceived and processed by the viewer/player?

The concept of haptic visuality developed by Laura Marks as a mode of cinematic perception encouraging "an embodied relationship to the image that involves the non-audiovisual senses and calls on bodily memory" (Marks 2014, 272) seems useful in this context. If haptic visuality is already at work in traditional cinema situations, we can assume that its role becomes even more prominent in installations offering explicit haptic stimuli, such as those analyzed here. Combined with Judith Aston's concept of live performance and interactive documentary as "emplaced interaction", it helps to explain the mechanisms at work in these installations, as the notion of "emplacement" stresses the element of "bringing our bodies and minds into direct interplay with the wider environment" (Aston 2017, 233). The body and the senses, and, in Aston's approach, spatial relationships, are central to these concepts, but movement is not a key element in them. It would thus seem likely that, to discuss the specific character of spatial and bodily strategies of montage, it would be fruitful to complement such approaches with ideas drawn from fields such as dance and performance studies, where the moving body is central. Concepts of bodily or embodied knowledge have been widely discussed in the humanities, particularly as a feminist approach and as a qualitative research method, and they have gained particular importance in dance and performance studies in discussions of the body as an archive of movements and with respect to the relationship of kinesthetic and cognitive processes (e.g., Parviainen 2021). As it is characteristic of the installations we are discussing here that the aesthetic experience and the cognitive process are particularly shaped by bodily movements and sensations and thus become far more physical, it may be appropriate to speak about an *embodied interactive documentary experience*. Referring back to the concept of the dispositif, it is through the specific embodied interactive documentary experience that the viewer navigates and activates the dispositif and the mechanisms of subjectivation operate. In order to define the results of these operations more precisely, it would, however, be necessary to expand this article's theoretical-analytical perspective and conduct empirical audience research.

Interestingly, the notion of embodiment also appears in the field of interactive documentary in relation to virtual reality. In his MA thesis, Halil Denis Tortum introduces the concept of "embodied montage" as an "expressive technique for creating meaning in virtual reality work" (Tortum 2016, 11–12). Similar to the discussed installations, where immersive and distancing moments are constantly negotiated, embodied montage aims to counter the immediacy of the "seamless comfortable experience" created by whole-body interaction mechanics (67) to make the medium apparent and "create new, unexpected meaning through juxtaposition and conflict" (77). The bodily movement in this case is, however, far less pronounced than in the

installations we have been considering, and the interplay between montage, movement, and other sensory influences is differently orchestrated due to the technical dispositif of the virtual reality experience. Furthermore, Tortum develops his concept of "embodied montage" for a particular type of virtual reality that he describes as the "non-fiction real-time 3D project", which he contrasts to 360° videos (25) and exemplifies in his project *Hospital with one entrance and two exits* (2016). As the findings of research are not yet conclusive, the question remains as to whether embodiment in virtual reality functions in the same way as in the physical world. This excursion into the realm of virtual reality functions as a parenthesis on the way to my closing remarks and is intended simply to pave the way for further explorations. It would require another article as well as audience research to answer this question and others related to the element of montage via movement and choice in other types of virtual interactive documentaries, such as the *Subterranean Imprint Archive* (2021), a virtual reality experience for Oculus Quest by the South African duo François Knoetze and Amy Louise Wilson from Lo-Def Film Factory. The work traces the legacy of technopolitics in Central and Southern Africa, focusing on the question of what constitutes a "nuclear place", taking the origins of the uranium used in the Manhattan project in a mine in the Democratic Republic of Congo as a starting point. The archive is navigated by moving one's hands, but, as the voiceover description in the playthrough puts it, "You are both inside and outside of your body".[5] It still remains to be explored – by means of audience research, for example – how this kind of combined bodily experience works in terms of embodied knowledge production.

Towards an Open Ending

In line with this parenthesis full of open questions and in guise of a conclusion, I would like to steer this article towards an open ending by coming back to the idea of the experimental character that the type of documentary installations discussed here unfolds when analyzed from the perspective of interactive documentaries. These installations may or may not be considered experimental in the institutional contexts for which they were produced, be they galleries, museums, or theatres. However, the aim of this chapter has been to explore them, in a metaphorical way, as a sort of lab-like experimental setting for shifting perspectives and thus the re-combination and re-arrangement of concepts as a means of creating paths to expand the idea of interactive documentary. One such path lies in conducting audience research on the embodied interactive documentary experience with regard to multiscreen dispositifs. Another lies in the emphasis on bodily and sensory

5 For the playthrough, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hty7ulifaDw (last accessed April 13, 2024).

experiences related to the concept of emplaced interaction and strategies of spatial and bodily montage. This perspective not only adds new possibilities of interactivity to the computer- and mouse click-based interactivity of the usual web-based interactive documentary. It also allows for a shift in focus from the audiovisual perception privileged in Western cultures to include modes of perception such as touch that play a primordial role in a global perspective (Marks 2014, 269). Paired with the propensity to postcolonial approaches that Kim ascribes to the fragmented polyvocality of the multiscreen dispositif (Kim 2022, 123–125), this potentially paves the way for the exploration of interactivity and documentary beyond the Western context in which the concept of interactive documentary was conceived.

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"Epistemologies of Restitution". Interactive Audiovisual Historiography on Returning Cultural Materials Looted From the Former German Colony of Togo

Martin Doll

Introduction

In this chapter, I aim to explore the extent to which a robustly theoretically grounded historiography can be manifested not only through traditional scholarly texts but also within an academically informed audiovisual project. I intend to elaborate on certain ideas and showcase materials that I generated during my fellowship at the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA) at the University of Ghana in the fall of 2021.

The interactive documentary research project is part of a three-month undertaking by the International Fellow Group 5 (IFG 5), a team of scholars from Germany, Ghana, and Togo working on the topic of "The 4Rs in Africa: Reality or Transcultural Aphasia?".[1] The research team's primary focus was not on practically resolving the specific restitution case involving at least 15 royal regalia, some of which are currently housed in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin and are presently being reclaimed by representatives of the "Akpini Traditional Area" in Kpando (a region that was part of the German colony "Togo" until 1914 or 1919, depending on how one counts).[2] Instead, the team was more focused on examining the intricacies of restitution processes as such using the specific case as a starting point.

I conceived of the documentary project before my trip to Ghana as a means of addressing the primary goals outlined in the proposal of the IFG research project at MIASA. These included "a) multiplying the voices/narratives of interest groups

1 Gertrude Aba Mansah Eyifa-Dzidzienyo (University of Ghana), Stefanie Michels (Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf), Kokou Azamede (University of Lomé), Martin Doll (Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf), Jakob Zollmann (WZB Berlin Social Science Center). The 4Rs comprise: restitution, return, repatriation and reparation.

2 1914 is the year when German troops surrendered to French and British forces who had invaded the territory. 1919 is the year when the territory was officially placed under British and French mandate by the Treaty of Versailles.

on local, national, and international levels" and "b) multiplying the perspectives on the issues" (Eyifa-Dzidzienyo & Michels, 2020, 4). I concluded that an interactive documentary film[3] might be better than a traditional written paper for effectively making these different perspectives seen and voices heard.[4] This choice would make it possible to steer clear of a simplistic, linear "realist historical narrative", to borrow a term from Vivian Sobchack (1996, 8). A film project of this nature is liberated from an overly homogeneous perspective, although it is naturally shaped by numerous editorial decisions.

Audiovisual Historiography: Integrating Film as both Method and Outcome in Research

I would like to term my specific approach "audiovisual historiography". It is a term I did not coin. You can find it in scholarly journals, where it is typically used in a more traditional sense. On the one hand, it encompasses the indispensable examination of audio-visual materials such as archival film, archival photography, and archival sound recordings that every historian must consider during the research process. On the other hand, it also entails the production of audio and video recordings by the researcher as part of the research process, serving as a foundation for preparing the final *written* results. In both cases "audiovisual" is used as an attribute, a quality of the *sources*.[5] I propose a slightly different interpretation because I want to argue that this crucial aspect of audiovisual historiography doesn't need to be replaced; instead, it should be complemented by an understanding of audiovisual historiography that extends to the research *outcomes*.

Examining the etymology of the word "historiography", the suffix "-graphy" originates from the Greek verb γράφειν (gráphein). At first glance, this might imply that history is limited to writing. However, the term *gráphein* encompasses not only writing but also drawing (e.g., *graph*ics and photo*graphy* as well as cinemato*graphy* derive from this root). Consequently, I advocate for an audiovisual historiography that integrates original audio and video recordings, particularly "oral history" interviews. This integration goes beyond treating them merely as historical sources to

3 I owe this important decision to Florian Krautkrämer, who fortunately encouraged me to experiment with this format during a longer Zoom conversation in spring 2021.

4 However, the research also resulted in an elaborate scholarly article authored by the whole IFG: Eyifa-Dzidzienyo et al (2023).

5 Sometimes, the term "visual history" is used in this context. For an overview on the growing field encompassing visual practices, infrastructures and discourses, with a strong emphasis on photography, see Paul (2017), 15–74 and the standard textbook Paul (2006).

be transcribed into textual form; rather they serve as proper media for presenting research findings.[6]

Sobchack emphasized this perspective in a 1997 paper, stating that "as filmgoers have not been able to escape the lessons of historiography, so, on their side (and try as they might), historians have not been able to escape the lessons of the movies and television. Today, then, in our culture, the binary oppositions commonly posited between the transparency of the image and the opacity of the word […] no longer hold" (Sobchack 1997, 5). To a certain extent, Sobchack's thoughts guided me through the entire production process of my film project. Specifically, I have adopted the term "historiographic heteroglossia", with which she addresses the "dialogic layering of various voices" (ibid., 7). Sobchack borrows the term "heteroglossia" from Mikhail Bakhtin, applying it to historical discourse to emphasize that it is not a single and unified historical narrative but is internally stratified into diverse, socially embodied points of view. She quotes Bakhtin: "As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically" (Bakhtin 1981, 292). However, this does not result in a mere "hodgepodge of voices", which would be indicative of an unresolvable conflict between two or more fundamentally incompatible systems of logic; by contrast, these voices "do not simply coexist, but significantly 'intersect [with] each other in a variety of ways'" (Sobchack 1997, 8, citing Bakhtin 1981, 292). Overall, the term "historiographic heteroglossia" has helped me in aiming for a complex multiperspectivity, incorporating a multiplicity of voices and narratives about the "colonial situation" (cf. Balandier 1952).

In this context, I want to emphasize a crucial point: An audiovisual historiography, even in its interactive form, should by no means be mistaken for being closer to reality than one that takes the form of writing. Like any other audiovisual product, it represents a specific form crafted by a director through decisions such as how to film, which material to include, how to tag it with keywords, and so on. Therefore, when I initially decided to produce an interactive documentary, it was primarily a decision not to get *to* something but to move away *from* something. What is this "something" in the complex field of restitution? I aim to explore this by summarizing some basic difficulties in the field of restitution and colonial history:

To quote Dipesh Chakrabarty, one challenge lies in addressing "subaltern pasts", in staying "with heterogeneities without seeking to reduce them to any overarching principle that speaks for an already given whole" (Chakrabarty 2000, 101, 107–108). In other words, the issue revolves around preventing a "colonial epistemology" (cf.

6 This approach shares similarities to Slávik's "imaginary history" (cf. Slávik 2020). Furthermore, it draws inspiration from visual ethnography, with a notable distinction – placing a significant focus on "oral history" and employing various means to emphasize differentiation and relationality within the context of historiography.

Mignolo 2006, 217; Stoler 2016) from re-emerging in research output, thereby perpetuating a form of Eurocentric "epistemic injustice" (Mudimbe 1994a; cf. also Bhargava 2013) of historiographic writing that makes African voices disappear or distorts them (cf. Sarr 2019, 72; cf. also Michels 2003). To illustrate these somewhat abstract terms: The "Open Restitution Project" has recently highlighted that in the ongoing restitution debate, the voices of African researchers and curators are once again being overshadowed by Western perspectives. This is particularly evident in the case of the "Benin Bronzes". In 2022, Molemo Moiloa's report "Reclaiming Restitution: Centering and Contextualizing the African Narrative" brought attention to the fact that non-Africans were approximately eight times more likely to appear in Google searches related to restitution in 2021. Additionally, in June 2021 there were 7,747 Google Scholar citations for non-African authors and 282 for African authors writing on the Benin Bronzes (Moiloa 2022, 16–17).[7]

Another challenge arises in addressing how, even in well-intentioned approaches to restitution issues, old stereotypes of "Africa" persist. As Stefanie Michels, a global historian and convenor of the research project in Ghana, notes: "If the former colonial territories and the people who lived there at that time are perceived and treated in the restitution debate exclusively as the stolen, the defeated, the murdered and the humiliated," this "inadequately reduces and stereotypically narrows their long history" (Michels 2022, 12, author's translation). I would like to add that this also diminishes their agency.

In view of these considerations, the theoretical framework of the documentary film project has been shaped not only by the perspectives of the film scholar Vivian Sobchack and the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, but also significantly by the insights of ethnographer Helen Verran. Building on her critical reflections on postcolonialism, one is prompted to question how to navigate the "dialogic layering of various voices" (Sobchack) by acknowledging how they "intersect with each other" (Bakhtin), i.e. without succumbing to problematic "differentialism" or "diversificationism" (Verran 2001, 32). Verran's critical terms caution against "maintaining the purities" even within postcolonial approaches, highlighting the risks of misconceptions such as stable "indigenous forms of knowledge" versus "Western forms," among others (ibid. 27). In my opinion, these old and new essentialisms persistently resurface in the audiovisual aesthetics of restitution ceremonies, exhibition openings, and recent documentary films on the topic. In light of this, I'd like to explore how we can move away from a naïve notion of authenticity that generalizes a multitude of diverse speaking positions and interest groups into a single "source community" or "society of origin" – linked to images of a seemingly

7 I am grateful to Stefanie Michels for making me aware of this.

"natural, immutable, primordial identity" (Lentz 1994, 59).[8] This oversimplification often entangles us in the complexities of essentialist identity politics.

Eventually, grappling with these challenging questions led me to choose the format of an interactive documentary. This decision is driven by the aim of portraying the contradictions and ambivalences inherent in the restitution debate, aspiring to offer a "polycentric vision" – a concept invoked by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam to emphasize that "the world has many dynamic cultural locations, many possible vantage points" (Shohat & Stam 2014, 48).[9] I seek to adopt this concept to counter essentialist dichotomies, as questioned by Verran in her notion of "diversificationism".[10] In the words of Sobchack, the goal is instead to showcase "incompatible stories from incompatible speaking positions" (Sobchack 1996, 11).[11]

I implemented this practically in the project using the functionality of the interactive documentary software Korsakow, which allows the organization of original material via keyword-tagging. These keywords operate in the background, influencing how links are offered from one clip to another. Instead of a linear film, this approach provides viewers with various entry points to engage with the material. Additionally, the polycentric interface supports this by constantly juxtaposing certain audiovisual materials with others (up to three alternatives simultaneously) combined with the option to preview – or rather pre-listen to – clips.

Against this background of multiplying the voices with "incompatible stories", one might object that this could lead to an ill-founded relativism. Audiovisual history would then be nothing but a fabrication, leaving no longer any difference between historical reality and pure invention or fiction. Needless to say, this objection is false. In fact, Sobchack explicitly speaks out against realism, positivism, *and* relativism:

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8 This approach does not devalue these self-attributions and perceptions of others, but rather reveals that "behind this essentialist facade" there is room "for multiple meanings and negotiation" by various actors with their respective interests. In this context, Lentz emphasizes the dynamic construction and redefinition of ethnic categories and institutions by various stakeholders, including "colonial administrators, newly appointed chiefs, labor migrants, Catholic missionaries, anthropologists, and an emergent educated elite". She thereby indirectly opposes a too one-sided view that exaggerates the power of "the colonizers" in this context. She suggests that ethnic discourses and symbols, originally introduced by colonial rulers to uphold unequal relationships, can be appropriated by local groups to affirm their dignity and challenge colonial and post-colonial domination (ibid.); on the "process towards fostering a wider Ewe identity", see, e.g., Yayoh (2015, 129–145).

9 This has been further developed as "multiple viewpoint" by Nicholas Mirzoeff (2000, 1–18).

10 In the same vein, Stoler and Cooper speak of "Manichaean dichotomies" in questionable forms of colonial history that obscure "hybridity and variation" (Stoler & Cooper 1997, 9). For an elaboration of the concept of polycentrization based on Nicholas Mirzoeff, Ella Shohat, and Robert Stam, see Alkın (2019, 109, 182–183).

11 On the "multiplicity of viewpoints" in history films, see Rosenstone (1996, 206).

> History cannot be "taken up" by consciousness, but, rather, must be subjectively "made out." This is not to deny the world its spatial solidity nor the temporal event its reality – that is, its material causes and consequences. (There is a difference between "making something up" and "making it out.") It is, rather, to recognize – as I think most people do today – that we are subjectively implicated in and responsible for the histories we tell ourselves or others tell us and that, while these are just representations, their significance has both value and consequence to our lives. (Sobchack 1996, 6)

Fig. 1: Screen layout of the interactive documentary "Epistemologies of Restitution"

Source: Screenshot *Epistemologies of Restitution* (Martin Doll, 2022)

Deferring Synthesis While Producing Meaningful Connections

Ultimately, the aim is not just to introduce new statements into the "colonial library" but to found a "newly expanded library" (Mudimbe 1994b, 194). This new foundation also entails placing well-known historical facts in a new context, particularly that of oral history. Following Sobchack, who in turn draws on Hayden White, the objective is to present a "collage of multiple versions" (Sobchack 1996, 9).[12] But my approach radically differs from White's concept of "emplotment", which involves creating a linear narrative, "making a story out of mere chronicles" (White 1987, 83). In doing this, one would make sense of history by shaping historical data into a familiar story

12 On the relevance of the fragment, see White (1996, 25).

format, "by endowing what originally appears to be problematical [...] with the aspect of a recognizable, because it is a familiar, form" (ibid.). Instead, my interactive documentary seeks to maintain the problematic status of the different positions and keep them somewhat unfamiliar. In contrast to traditional historiography, which Paul Ricœur described as "a synthesis of the heterogeneous" (Ricœur 1990, 66), my project deliberately suspends synthesis as much as possible. The interactive interface serves to present fragmentary yet historically significant speaking positions without overly smoothing or ordering their diversity. For example, due to keyword-tagging, which is sometimes connected to specific timestamps in certain statements, viewers may come across juxtapositions of inconsistent audiovisual materials. This means that when they select an alternative clip by clicking on a preview offered through the interface, they might be presented with conflicting points of view on the same matter of concern. However, no definitive or conclusive answer is ultimately provided.

As an illustration, German newspaper reports often oversimplify the situation of restitution, portraying it as a straightforward matter of museums retaining looted cultural materials for too long and emphasizing the urgent need for an immediate return to the states of origin. While this framing is not entirely false, our fieldwork uncovered a significantly more complex reality. Various stakeholders, including local communities, government bodies, and international scholars, each brought forth distinct perspectives and demands that resist easy amalgamation into a single story about restitution. Instead, this diverse range of voices contributes to a multifaceted and intricate landscape of restitution dynamics:

Fig. 2: Togbui Dake IV, Akpini Palace, Kpando (Ghana)

Source: Screenshot *Epistemologies of Restitution* (Martin Doll, 2022)

Fig. 3: H.E. Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, President of the Republic of Ghana (2017–2025)

Source: Screenshot *Epistemologies of Restitution* (Martin Doll, 2022)

Fig. 4: African Science Center, The University of Yaoundé I

Source: Martin Doll, 2021

Fig. 5: Malik Saako, Principal Curator of the National Museum of Ghana, Accra

Source: Martin Doll, 2021

The representatives of the "Akpini Traditional Area" express a desire to return their cultural heritage to their *own* chiefdom. Togbui Dake IV made this clear during our meeting: "We wouldn't like anything being returned to us being diverted to a national place!"[13] On the national level, President Akufo-Addo of Ghana promoted a Pan-African Heritage Museum, stating: "The museum will provide a natural residence and resting place for all the looted cultural artifacts of our continent which are housed in foreign museums and which will be returned to us, come what may!"[14] By contrast, David Simo, a professor of German studies from Cameroon, echoes the arguments of Achille Mbembe (2019), suggesting that the memory of violence, etc. associated with looted cultural heritage should be preserved by not restituting it too quickly. Simo advocates for a trusteeship by UNESCO, asserting, "by taking all these African objects from Europe you erase the memory of the fact that the objects have been stolen from Africa". Malik Saako, chief curator of the National Museum of Accra, emphasizes the importance of not forgetting the African diaspora. He raises questions about repatriation, asking: "If we repatriate all these objects to the various African countries, what are we telling our colleagues who are in the diaspora? … Are they part of the history of Africa or are they part of the history of Europe"?[15] These are just a few of the many conflicting positions encountered – perspectives at risk

13 You can jump to the specific clip via this link: *Epistemologies of Restitution*, https://thinking-about-restitution.info/film#?snu=8491.

14 *Epistemologies of Restitution*, https://thinking-about-restitution.info/film#?snu=8534.

15 At the time of writing this paper, these interviews were not yet included in the interactive documentary.

of being lost in the "tsunami" (Abungu 2021) of the current "restitution Olympics", amidst the "scramble for decolonization" (Hicks 2022) – important critical objections concerning the dynamics of current restitution processes raised by the Cambridge-trained archaeologist and former director-general of the National Museums of Kenya, George Abungu, and Dan Hicks, Professor of Contemporary Archaeology at Oxford University.

Nevertheless, the project does not merely amass a haphazard collection of entirely incoherent and, therefore, potentially insignificant material. Even though the interface of the interactive documentary constantly produces juxtapositions of highly heterogeneous speaking positions, it also establishes meaningful links between the specific audiovisual materials. This dynamic contextualization enhances the audience's engagement with the different perspectives. In contrast to a linear "realist historical narrative" the endless network of relations that emerges during the viewing of the interactive film – connecting *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), desktop documentary clips and interviews – allow users to experience the "polycentric vision" individually. Depending on the route each viewer chooses to take through the material, a different combination of the heterogeneous occurs, resulting in different meanings of the clips and their ensemble.

Bringing Perspectives and Their Relatedness to Light

Within this multiplicity of perspectives and positions, it was crucial for me not only to capture the diversity of viewpoints but also to illuminate the intricate relationships that existed already during shooting. This included highlighting the connections of the speakers to our international research team and, simultaneously, revealing the relationships between the interviewees and me, in my dual role as scholarly filmmaker and one-man film team. It's important to note that the specific conversations or meetings were anything but immediate. Drawing inspiration from Rey Chow's approach to "cultural translation", I aimed at questioning traditional subject-object relations where one subject looks at another as an object. Instead, as Chow underlines: "'Us' and 'them' are no longer safely distinguishable; 'viewed object' is now looking at 'viewing subject' looking" (Chow 2010, 153). Thus, the film is in this sense as well not about predefined positions but about relations, and the evolving nature of these relations. In other words, the narrated memories, the political positions, and restitution demands were always clearly addressed to us or me, acquiring their own quality because of these relations.

Fig 6: Filming and being filmed during the meeting with the chiefs and elders of the Akpini Traditional Council (September 2021)

Source: Stefanie Michels, 2021

Fig 7: Filming and being filmed during the meeting with the chiefs and elders of the Akpini Traditional Council (September 2021)

Source: Screenshot *Epistemologies of Restitution* (Martin Doll, 2022)

Fig. 8: Approval of interview clips used by the chiefs and elders of the Akpini Traditional Council

Source: Gertrude Aba Mansah Eyifa-Dzidzienyo, 2021

On numerous occasions, my interviewees, who were familiar with the project's goals, expressed a clear desire to have their voices and positions heard. For instance, after the documented meeting with the Akpini Traditional Council, the clips used in the documentary received approval from the chiefs and elders, ensuring that the representation accurately reflected their perspectives and positions. However, it's essential to note that the concept of this interactive documentary project fundamentally differs from collaborative or participatory projects that focus more radically on the co-creation of content, as in many community projects.[16] So, I, as a scholar and filmmaker, was less a "context-provider" in the thoroughgoing sense of Sharon Daniel, who aims at providing the "tools that will induce others to speak for themselves, and the context in which they may be heard" (Daniel 2012). Instead, the people involved in my project played more of a content-provider role, with *some* control over the outcome. Rather than handing over the camera for the interest groups to decide what to film, I retained sole responsibility for the filming, though there was

16 In this context, I recommend Marta Fiolić's excellent participatory "artivist" project with and about women's homelessness (see Fiolić's article in this volume).

an approval process in which the elders of the Akpini Traditional Council were consulted. Thus, although I employed an interactive mode of documentary filmmaking, the majority of decisions within the project were made by me, both during the editing process and the tagging of the clips with keywords.[17] This approach inevitably yields an outcome profoundly characterized by my perspective on the topic.

Taking this insight seriously from the outset, I adopted the strategy of making this perspectivity as transparent as possible through specific aesthetic decisions in the recording and publishing process. This included the consistent use of a monopod during the interviews, resulting in a sort of hand-held camera movement that clearly emphasized the activity of filming, along with the establishment of a visually clear axis between me and the interviewees. In place of a Lavalier microphone placed close to the speaker, I opted for a directional microphone, which not only records the speaker's voice but also captures some ambient sound and at times my own voice. Additionally, all my texts and inserts in the film were written from a first-person point of view. Furthermore, I disclosed the keywords I used to structure the material on the project's website. Although I have not yet found a solution to make the selectivity behind the material shown (or not shown) visible, I have incorporated a "landing page" after the end credits. On this page, viewers can see which clips they did not encounter during the viewing experience, without the opportunity to view those they missed. This highlights that as a viewer, one has, firstly, actively omitted certain (possibly important) voices, and secondly, can never truly grasp the full picture of the restitution process.[18]

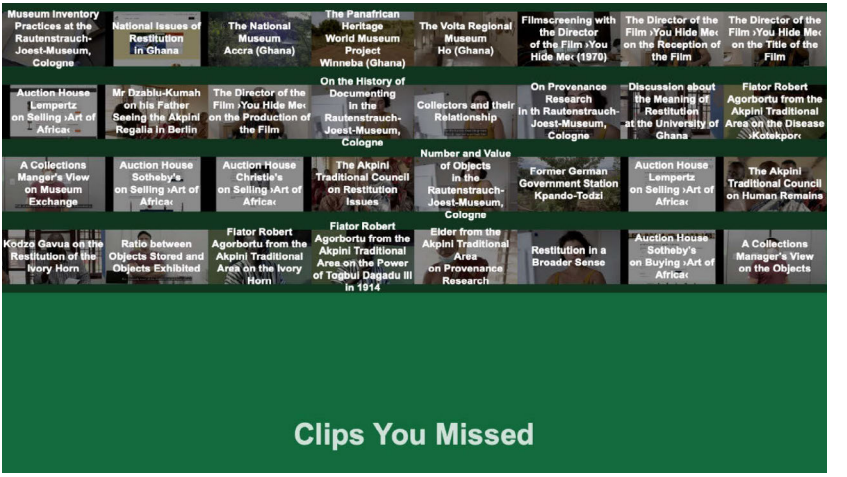
Fig. 9: Keywords as listed on the project website

Source : Screenshot www.thinking-about-restitution.info (Martin Doll, 2022)

17 I initially planned to collaborate with the chiefs and elders in tagging their statements. However, a second field trip to Kpando was halted due to chieftancy issues.

18 *Epistemologies of Restitution*, https://thinking-about-restitution.info/film/#?snu=6782.

Fig. 10: Landing page after the end credits



Source: Screenshot *Epistemologies of Restitution* (Martin Doll, 2022)

Freedoms in Interactivity: Presenting and Restricting Opportunities

The characterization of the interactive film and its interface in negative terms – as something that moves away from specific aspects, does not provide certain opportunities, and defers synthesis – clearly indicates that the project is positioned beyond the euphoria of interactivity[19] that was prominent in the 1990s. The excitement of this era emphasized user-controlled synthesis, attributing, for example, to hyperfiction the potential to grant users unlimited freedom over the text – an ideal of user freedom that sometimes stemmed from literally (mis)understood metaphors such as Roland Barthes' "death of the author" (cf. Wirth 1997, 320–321).[20] By contrast, my project aims to clearly highlight my authorial position, going as far as to explicitly define certain restrictions for the user within the interface and emphasizing them distinctly. Thus, the freedom lies more with the interest groups, whose recorded statements or interview answers – sometimes presented completely unabridged –

19 I thank two of the editors, Vanessa Zallot and Tobias Conradi, for bringing up this point about the user perspective.

20 The true progenitor of this idea is Marshall McLuhan. He sees in the electronic age of interdependence the possibility of emancipating oneself from the constraints of linear, sequential writing, which he inextricably links to a certain conceptual tradition of thought and centralized power and thus to a fundamental lack of freedom. See McLuhan 1962; McLuhan 1969, 244; McLuhan 1994, esp. 81–88. On hyperfiction, see also Doll 2018.

can occupy more space in their multiplicity than in the traditional dramaturgy of a linear documentary format. In the end, the interactive nature of the project also affords me, as the author, greater freedom. I can include longer interview sequences, since users have the option to stop playback if they find the pace too slow according to their expectations of rhythm and structure. Most importantly, it enables me to integrate more diverse and incompatible material and to avoid rigid editing decisions and their associated interpretations, as users compose the sequences through their mouse clicks. Thus, they are somewhat compelled to engage in creating meaningful relationships. However, this does not free me from certain responsibilities in sense production, as this co-constitution of meaning occurs within the framework of my selection of video clips and the links provided by my keyword tagging within the Korsakow software.

Conclusion

Multiplying the voices and perspectives, as outlined in the IFG proposal, may not only lead to the presentation of "incompatible stories from incompatible speaking positions" but also emphasize the diverse frames of reference inherent in these speaking positions and their role in contextualizing restitution. With this project, my explicit goal is to make these different frames of reference visible and audible, highlighting their intricacy and ambiguity. The ultimate aim is to underscore the necessity of continued contemplation of how they interrelate. In the end, this might encourage the interactive users to put *their own* only seemingly self-evident frames of reference into perspective: Through the diverse viewpoints of actors and interest groups in Ghana and Germany, the viewers can experience how the four Rs – restitution, return, repatriation, and reparation – are seen and conceptualized from different, sometimes discordant, and constantly evolving standpoints, along with their associated concerns. However, it's important to note that I view my interactive film *Epistemologies of Restitution* not as a panacea against the postcolonial challenges but as one – modest – means to engage with them.

It is modest because advocating for audiovisual historiography is not at all intended to replace academic historiography in its current state. Instead, it aims to add supplementary resources to it by contributing to its complexity. As already indicated, moving images, photographs, and sound recordings should not be seen as providing more direct or immediate access to reality and the past; rather they need to be complemented. To apply Sobchack's view of popular historical cinema to interactive audiovisual historiography: "the multiplication and visibility of particular and concrete things […] seek any further expression in the conceptual rather than the concrete, in historiographic saying and writing" (Sobchack 1997, 19). Within the context of historiography, a further relationality has to be acknowledged: the mu-

tual relationship between audiovisual historiography and written history. They need each other. They also interact. And thus they can mutually enrich each other.

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Authors

Tobias Conradi is a postdoctoral researcher at the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media. He leads the project "Played Problems – 'Decisions' as a Category of Knowledge", which investigates the use of serious games as educational media, especially in the context of promoting awareness and mindfulness regarding "fake news" and climate change. As a senior research associate, he worked in the SNSF-funded research project *Interactive Documentary* in the Design, Film, and Art department of Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. He has also been Max Kade Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of Cincinnati. After completing his doctorate on the representation of crisis and disaster events, he worked as a research assistant at the University of Vienna, Braunschweig University of Art (HBK), and the University of Paderborn, and as a postdoctoral researcher at the Brandenburg Center for Media Studies in Potsdam. His research focuses on discourse theory and analysis, narratives of reality, politics of representation, and the relationship between crisis, critique, and decision.

Selected Works:

- "Heterogene Formationen medialer Entscheidungsfindung. Content-Moderation und Content-Incident-Protokolle", in Ralf Adelmann & Tobias Matzner (eds.), Filter, Paderborn: Universität Paderborn 2024, pp. 1–12. http://dx.doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/22940 (open access)
- "Pure, Clinical, Shiny Surfaces. Recreational Drones and Images of Construction and Destruction", in Winfried Gerling & Florian Krautkrämer (eds.), Versatile Camcorders. Looking at the GoPro-Movement, Berlin: Kadmos 2021, pp. 105–120.
- Breaking News. Automatismen in der Repräsentation von Krisen- und Katastrophenereignissen, München/Paderborn: Fink 2015. https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3866 (open access)

Jan Distelmeyer is Professor of History and Theory of Technical Media in the European Media Studies program of the Potsdam University of Applied Sciences and the University of Potsdam and a founding member of the Brandenburg Center for Media Studies – ZeM. His current research focuses on the interrelation between mediality and digitality, with a particular emphasis on interface processes (for, with, and within networks and platforms).
For more details: www.distelmeyer.emw-potsdam.de.

Selected Works:

- Critique of Digitality, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2022.
- Video Conferencing: Infrastructures, Practices, Aesthetics, Bielefeld: transcript 2023 (Ed. with Axel Volmar and Olga Moskatova).
- "Which Operativity? On Political Aspects of Operational Images and Sounds", Interface Critique, Vol. 4, 2023, pp. 23–33.

Martin Doll is Professor for Societal, Ethical, and Social Aspects of Digitality at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Cultural Studies at the University of Applied Sciences Düsseldorf and a researcher at the Centre for Digitalisation and Digitality Düsseldorf. His primary research interests include the intersections of politics and (digital) media, particularly the technicization of politics/politicization of technology since the 19th century; digital ethics; media theories (of the digital); philosophy and media; audiovisual historiography; global media studies; and forgeries and hoaxes. In 2021, he was a senior fellow in the International Fellow Group 5 on *The 4Rs in Africa: Reality or Transcultural Aphasia?* at the Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA), University of Ghana. During his fellowship, he worked on an interactive film project examining the *Epistemologies of Restitution* in Ghana: https://thinking-about-restitution.info/. For more information: www.mdoll.eu.

Selected Works:

- Mediale Gegenwelten. Technologien der Emanzipation im 19. Jahrhundert, Bielefeld: transcript 2024.https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839468630 (open access)
- "Pour une historiographie audiovisuelle. La situation coloniale entre le Cameroun et l'Allemagne," in Albert Gouaffo, Colbert Akieudji, & Diderot Djiala Mellie (eds.), Mémoire, paix et développement en Afrique. Réflexions autour d'une éthique de la souvenance en contexte post-colonial, *Yaoundé: Éditions CLÉ 2022, pp. 167–183*.
- "'Fünf Minuten für Zintgraff, fünf Minuten für die chiefs?' – Visuelle Historiografie im Spannungsfeld der kolonialen Verbindungen Deutschland–Kamerun,"

in Albert Gouaffo & Stefanie Michels (eds.), Koloniale Verbindungen – transkulturelle Erinnerungstopografien: Das Rheinland in Deutschland und das Grasland Kameruns, Bielefeld: transcript 2019, pp. 173–190. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839445297-010
- Cutting Edge! Aktuelle Positionen der Filmmontage, Berlin: Bertz + Fischer 2019.

Frédéric Dubois is Professor of Digital Narratives at ifs Internationale Filmschule Köln, where he teaches media and communications theory and production studies. His research and practice go hand in hand. The result is research-creation projects that generate knowledge both by creating interactive digital narratives (IDNs) and by performing research in the humanities. He has co-authored and produced award-winning interactive storytelling features such as *Atterwasch* (2014) and *Field Trip* (2019) and co-edited two books: the collection of essays *Autonomous Media* (2005) and the graphic novel *Extraction! Comix Reportage* (2007). He has also worked with the National Film Board of Canada and Arte on digital projects such as *Fort McMoney* (2013), *The Hole Story Interactive* (2011) and *GDP* (2009). Since 2012, he has been the co-founder and managing editor of *Internet Policy Review* – an open access journal on internet regulation – published by the Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society (HIIG).

Selected Works:

- "Notes on impact", in Michael Brendan Baker & Jessica Mulvogue (eds.), The Interactive Documentary in Canada, Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2024, pp. 50–69.
- "Iterative Loops: Approaching Digital Media with a Research-Creation Mindset", Interactive Film & Media Journal, 2(4), 2022, pp. 76–85 (with Lena Thiele).
- "Interactivity as a key feature redefining documentary reality", Images. The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication, 21(30), 2018.
- Autonomous media: Activating resistance & dissent, Montréal: Cumulus Press 2005 (as editor, with Andrea Langlois)

David Dufresne is a writer, director, punk rocker, *sousveilleur*, and counter-filmmaker. He directed *Un pays qui se tient sage* (*The Monopoly of Violence*), his first feature film, which received support from the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes 2020, won the Lumières prize for Best Documentary in 2021, and was nominated in the Best Documentary category at the 2021 César Awards. In 2021, he founded the online

counter-media Au Poste. He has published two novels, *Dernière sommation*' (Grasset, 2019), and *19h59* (Grasset, 2022), after having written a dozen investigative works, including *On ne vit qu'une heure, une virée avec Jacques Brel* (Le Seuil, 2018) and *Tarnac, magasin général* (Calmann Lévy, Prix des Assises du Journalisme 2012), which was hailed as "a little masterpiece" by *Le Monde*. In 2019, he was awarded the Grand Prix du Journalisme 2019 at the Assises internationales du Journalisme for his *Allo Place Beauvau* project on police violence, a work recognized by the UN, the Council of Europe, and the European Parliament. He won the 2011 World Press Photo prize in the "best interactive non-linear work" category for his web documentary *Prison Valley*, which opened the doors to the MIT Open Documentary lab, where he was artist-in-residence for two years.

Daniel Fetzner is Professor at the media faculty at Offenburg University with a focus on artistic research. He has been invited twice to the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe as a guest artist (2007 and 2021) and to the Indian Institute of Science (2014 and 2018). Fetzner has teaching experience in Egypt, India, and the United States. He is head of the Media Ecology Lab at Offenburg University and founding member of the group *mbody* for artistic research in media, somatics, dance and philosophy. In his ongoing research cycle DE\GLOBALIZE he uses situationist interventions as both a method and a tool for thought. His artistic explorations are conceived as speculative movements in search of the terrestrial in the sense of the French philosopher Bruno Latour, with whom he collaborated on the exhibition *Critical Zones* at ZKM Karlsruhe.
http://mediaecology.de, http://deglobalize.com, http://metaspace.de

Selected Works (all are open access):

- "Inner Congo: Unveiling Matters of Violence through Art and Interactive Documentary", *Interactive Film & Media Journal*, 3(1), 2023, pp. 132–134. https://doi.org/10.32920/ifmj.v3i1.1853
- "DE\GLOBALIZE", in Bruno Latour & Peter Weibel (eds.), *Critical Zones*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2020, pp. 412ff. (with Martin Dornberg).
- "Experimental Polyphony: On the Media Ecological Research of Intermediate Bodies", *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, 15, 2018, pp. 124–146 (with Martin Dornberg). http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue15/ArticleFetznerDornberg.pdf
- "wild topologies in 360°: a fly on the inside of a sphere", in *The Material Turn and Interactive Documentary: A Panel*, Melbourne: RMIT, 2017, pp. 37–49. https://zenodo.org/record/1120448#.Wj010lSFiRvora

Marta Fiolić is a researcher and artist from Zagreb with a PhD in communication sciences (specializing in cinema), from NOVA University Lisbon. She is actively involved in CineLab, a research initiative at the university, and co-organizes programs such as Cinema & Politics and CineMagia, which engage audiences in discussions about film and philosophy. From 2021 to 2024, she was a Fellow of the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, developing her thesis on activist practices in online documentaries, culminating in the interactive documentary *SOMOS MULHERES*. Marta holds degrees in history, ethnology, and cultural anthropology from the University of Zagreb. In 2022, she co-founded the *ɛntropiɑ* collective, which focuses on the intersection of sound, music, and visual art, with a strong commitment to community engagement. The collective has produced various projects, including soundwalks and audiovisual installations that address social issues. Her work reflects a dedication to blending research and artistic practice with social activism. For more information: www.martafiolic.com

Jimmy Fournier became the NFB's Director General, Technologies, and CTO in 2022 and has been the R&D, Engineering, and Digital Platforms Manager for eight years. He joined the NFB more than 20 years ago as an engineer. He has a bachelor's degree in computer engineering and is a member of the OIQ (*Ordre des Ingénieurs du Québec*), as well as the ad hoc director of the SMPTE's Montreal chapter. Jimmy has extensive experience in the audiovisual field and played a leading role in conceptualizing and operationalizing the digitization, restoration, accessibility, and preservation processes for the NFB's works. More recently, Jimmy was a key player in choosing and implementing the technology for the NFB's new headquarters in downtown Montreal and for its conservation and digitization room in Ville St-Laurent.

Anita Hugi is a filmmaker, producer and festival director based in Zurich, Geneva, and Paris. Since 2023, she has been Dean of the Film Department at the University of Art and Design in Geneva (*HEAD – Haute Ecole d'Art et du Design*). She was general and artistic director of the Solothurn Film Festival between 2019 and 2021, programming director of the International Festival of Films on Art in Montreal from 2016 to 2018, and consultant to the *Festival du Nouveau Cinéma* (FNC) in Montreal, co-creating the new immersive section *FNC eXPlore* in 2016. From 2005 to 2016, Anita Hugi headed programming and production of art and culture documentaries (*Sternstunde Kunst*) at the Zurich-based Swiss public broadcast network SRF. In 2016, Anita directed the documentary essay *Undine*, which was awarded Munich's "LiteraVision" prize, and the interactive documentary *Dada-Data*, which she co-directed with David Dufresne and Aufen. It won the Grimme Online Award (Germany), Numix and Boomerang awards (Canada), a Lovie Award (GB), and was a finalist in the Prix Europa and Prix Italia.

Filmography (as director):

- Heidis Alptraum – the story behind a Swiss icon, 2022. Written and directed by Anita Hugi, produced by Narrative Boutique, Arte, SRF, SSR SRG. Duration: 52 minutes. CH, FR, ALL.
- Hanna la Rouge (Hanna the Red), 2018. Directed by Anita Hugi, animation by Anja Kofmel, co-written with David Dufresne; produced by Narrative Boutique, co-produced by Akufen, Grand Garage, with the support of the Federal Office of Culture (Switzerland) and the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Premiered at the Geneva International Film Festival 2018, international premiere at Fipadoc 2019. Interactive documentary, distributed on AppStore, GooglePlay. Production: CH, CAN, FR.
- Dada-Data, 2016. Written and directed by Anita Hugi and David Dufresne, in collaboration with Akufen, produced by SRG SSR, Arte, DocMine. Interactive documentary. Production: CH, FR, GER.

Jasmin Kermanchi is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Media and Communication at the University of Hamburg, where she completed her dissertation on the political potential of participation in interactive documentaries in 2024. In 2020, she also worked as a research associate in the teaching lab project *Online Course Documentary Film in Digital Transfer* (*Onlinekurs dokumentarischer Film im digitalen Transfer*), with support from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. From 2019 to 2023, she participated in the research project *The Documentary and the Digital*, led by Anna Wiehl, contributing academic and editorial work. Her research interests include new documentary forms, especially in digital media cultures; theories of documentary film; praxeology, media ecology, and media ethnography; digital media technologies and questions of democratization and participation; and artificial intelligence in documentary. For more information, see: https://www.slm.uni-hamburg.de/imk/personen/kermanchi.html.

Selected publications:

- *Dokumentieren – Partizipieren – Intervenieren. Teilnahme und Teilhabe in Interactive Documentaries*, Hamburg: AVINUS 2025.
- "Praxeologie und Materialanalysen digitaler Formate am Beispiel interaktiv-partizipativer Dokumentarprojekte im Web (i-docs)", in Sven Stollfuß, Laura Niebling and Felix Raczkowski (eds.), *Handbuch Digitale Medien und Methoden*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS 2023. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-36629-2_36-1
- "Open Documentary Platforms Enabling Forms of Democratization and Community Experience: A Plea for More Nuanced Differentiations Between Forms

of Participation", *Interactive Film & Media Journal*, 2(4), 2022, pp. 86–94. https://doi.org/10.32920/ifmj.v2i4.1666
- "Co-creation as im/mediate/d caring and sharing in times of crises: Reflections on collaborative interactive documentary as an agile response to community needs", *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, 1, 2021, pp. 195–217 (with Sandra Gaudenzi and Anna Wiehl). http://dx.doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16274

Florian Krautkrämer is a Professor in the Department of Design, Film, and Art at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. He was head of the SNSF-funded research project on interactive documentary (2021–2025) and has been head of the SNSF-project on historical analogue film apparatus since 2025. His research and teaching activities concentrate on film and media studies and documentary studies, and focus on the transformation of amateur media and cameras in the context of digitalization. In 2018, he held the Chair of Film Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz for two semesters (ad interim). Prior to that he worked as a research assistant at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Braunschweig, where he received his PhD with a dissertation on writing in film. Other research interests include experimental film, production and industry studies, film funding, sustainability and film, and zombie studies. Since 2024, he and Prof. Winfried Gerling (Potsdam) have been joint heads of the DFG-research network on "camera studies".

Selected Works (all open access):

- "Mobilizing the Undead: Zombie Films and the Discourse of Otherness from the 1930s to Post-Millennial Cinema", *Atlantic Studies*, 20(1), 2023. https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2022.2125248
- "Die übergebene Kamera: Partizipative Filmarbeit als Produktionsdispositiv", in Elisa Linseisen & Alena Strohmeier (eds.), *Deine Kamera ist eine App. Über Medienverflechtungen des Applizierens und Appropriierens*, Lüneburg: Meson Press 2023, pp. 71–98. DOI: 10.14619/2140
- *Versatile Camcorders. Looking at the GoPro-Movement*, Berlin: Kadmos 2021 (ed. with Winfried Gerling).

Cornelia Lund is an art, film, and media scholar and curator living in Berlin. She has worked for years in research and teaching, mainly on audiovisual artistic creation, documentary film and practices, design theory, and de- and postcolonial theories. Since 2004, she has been co-director of *fluctuating images*, an independent platform for media art, design, and music (www.fluctuating-images.de). From 2012 to 2018,

she was senior researcher on the DFG project "History of the Documentary Film in Germany 1945–2005" at the University of Hamburg. She is currently a research fellow at the University of the Arts, Bremen. She has curated and collaborated on numerous screenings and exhibitions, most recently: *Connecting Afro Futures. Fashion x Hair x Design* (2019), *Laboratoire Kontempo Kinshasa–Berlin* (2021/2022), *Under Construction: Films + DJ Sets* (2023–).

Selected Works:

- "Jazz as film: Roger Tilton's documentary Jazz Dance (1954)", Jazz Research Journal, 16(1), 2023, pp. 38–56 (with Holger Lund). https://doi.org/10.1558/jazz.20128
- "Performing the Real. Audiovisual Documentary Performances and the Senses", in Andrew Knight-Hill (ed.), Sound & Image. Audiovisual Aesthetics and Practices, New York/London: Routledge 2020, pp. 161–176.
- "Elastic realities – documentary practices between cinema and art", Membranas, Dossiê: intersecções entre arte, ciência e tecnologia, Ars, 17/35, 2019, pp. 167–182. DOI: 10.11606/issn.2178- 0447.ars.2019.152831
- "They'll take whatever you feed them—Reflections on projection in live audiovisual performance," in Gabriel Menotti & Virginia Crisp (eds.), Practices of Projection: Histories and Technologies, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press 2020, pp. 173–188.

Mike Robbins is the co-founder of *High Road Stories*, a Berlin-based creative studio for immersive experiences, which was established in 2018. A multidisciplinary team, High Road Stories creates innovative digital projects and manages productions, such as the VR experiences *The Infinite Library*, *Place*, and *Fantaventura* (with German rap legends *Die Fantastischen Vier*). Recently, High Road Stories has been working with artist Yael Bartana, culminating in a full-dome project installation as part of the German pavilion at the 2024 *Venice Biennale*. Other Exhibition venues worldwide include the *Alte Nationalgalerie* in Berlin, the *National Palace Museum* in Taiwan, the *Israel Museum* in Jerusalem, the *Stadtpalais* in Stuttgart, and the *Munch Centre* in Norway, as well as international film festivals such as CPH:DOX, IDFA, and the BFI London Film Festival. In previous lives, Mike studied visual arts in Toronto and was a rock musician. As creative technologist and partner at his company *Helios Design Labs* in Toronto, he led pioneering interactive documentary projects such as *Highrise* (2012, with director Kat Cizek), winning Emmy, Peabody, World Press Photo, and Canada Screen awards. Other projects include the *Quipu Project*, *Digital Me*, *After The Storm*, and *Offshore*.

Francesco Spöring has a background in history and philosophy of knowledge. He used to conduct research on the history of alcohol and drugs and the history of psychopharmacology at ETH Zurich, TU Munich, and the University of Zurich. In addition to his current work as an advisor for research grants, he now enjoys broadening his focus of research towards audiovisual media.

Florian Thalhofer is a media artist, researcher, and co-founder of the *Korsakow Institut*. He is the inventor of the *Korsakow System* and the chief-architect of the *Korsakow* software. Thalhofer started to make use of computers for sense-making through storytelling in 1997. That led him to develop the Korsakow-System, a software and a principle for a new way of weaving narrations. These narrations are rule-based, non-linear, and (usually) interactive. Thalhofer made numerous Korsakow films and one linear film that was broadcasted on TV and then soon forgotten. He taught at the University of the Arts, Berlin, the DFFB, and the Deutsches Literatur Institut, Leipzig, and has given talks and lectures on every continent except Australia. He worked in the newsroom of DW, an international news broadcaster, for more than 20 years. From 2021 to 2024 he was research associate at HSLU within a project that researches interactive documentary. He is currently doing a practice-based PhD at UWE (University of the West of England, UK).

Louis-Richard Tremblay was Executive Producer of the NFB's Interactive Studio in Montreal, a position he took on in 2019 after six years as a producer. In April 2024 he left for the NFB's new Innovation Lab. Fascinated with the transformative power of media, he has guided many international co-productions and helped produce more than 100 award-winning works in Canada and abroad. He also regularly shares his expertise through talks, panels, and masterclasses. As a leader who brings people together, Louis-Richard inspires those he works with to pool their ideas and push the boundaries of storytelling. He remains committed to championing creative visions that bring about a better understanding of our complex world.

William Uricchio is Professor Emeritus of Comparative Media Studies at MIT, where he founded the Open Documentary Lab, and Professor Emeritus of Comparative Media History at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. His research considers the interplay of media technologies and cultural practices in relation to representation, knowledge, and publics. His work links past and future, seeking developmental patterns and points of distinction. The recipient of Guggenheim, Humboldt, and Fulbright awards, and the Berlin and Mercator Prizes, he has also held professorial appointments in Stockholm, Marburg, the FU Berlin, China University of Science & Technology, Siena, and was Denmark's national DREAM professor. William has published extensively on topics ranging from high culture in

the "low medium" of early cinema, to the dynamics of popular culture, to pre-1945 German television, to media and the cultural contours of Europe.

Selected Works:

- Collective Wisdom: Co-creating Media for Equity and Justice, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2022 (ed. with Katerina Cizek).
- "Médias récursifs", Questions de communication, 2022, No. 1, pp. 301–314.

Vanessa Zallot is a doctoral student at the Department of Media Studies at the University of Basel and is currently working on her dissertation on knowledge-making and documentary strategies in interactive documentaries. From 2021 to 2025, she was a research associate in the SNSF-funded research project on interactive documentaries at the Department of Design, Film, and Art at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Her research merges interests from media studies and European ethnology. It encompasses documentary theory, digital platforms, and production practices as well as ethnographic methodologies, media and digital anthropology, visual ethnography, and queer methodologies. She has been a member of the Digital Anthropology Lab (University of Tübingen) since 2018 and of the DFG research network "Camera Studies" since 2024. She is a programmer for the Pink Apple queer film festival in Zurich.

Selected Works:

- "Messy Knowledge-Making with Korsakow: Representing Open and Complex Research Findings in Interactive Documentary", Interactive Film & Media Journal, 3(1), 2023, pp. 67–75. https://doi.org/10.32920/ifmj.v3i1.1674 (open access)