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Shifts of focus. A revised perspective on evidence in interactive documentary as living documentary. A conversation with Sandra Gaudenzi on autopoiesis, VR, data-mining and personalization

2016

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3642>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Wiehl, Anna; Gaudenzi, Sandra: Shifts of focus. A revised perspective on evidence in interactive documentary as living documentary. A conversation with Sandra Gaudenzi on autopoiesis, VR, data-mining and personalization. In: *AugenBlick. Konstanzer Hefte zur Medienwissenschaft*. Heft 65/66: Die Herstellung von Evidenz (2016), S. 96–104. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3642>.

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Shifts of focus

A revised perspective on evidence in interactive documentary as *living documentary*

A conversation with Sandra Gaudenzi on autopoiesis, VR, data-mining and personalization

Kurzbiografie

Sandra Gaudenzi started her career as a television producer, she then moved into interactive television and taught interactive media theory at the London College of Communication (University of the Arts London) from 1999 to 2013. Since January 2015 Sandra Gaudenzi has been holding the post of Head of Studies of *!F Lab* (<http://www.iflab.net/>), a cooperation with *iDrops*, a company driving forward social innovation and digital training. Being a mentor and advisor for new interactive factual projects, she curates a monthly meetup for i-docs makers based in London.¹ She also co-convenes i-docs, a conference dedicated to interactive documentaries. Currently, Sandra Gaudenzi is designing the first UK MA in «Interactive Factual Narrative» for Westminster University (commencing September 2016).

She is a creative director of the website, <http://i-docs.org/>, blogs at www.interactivefactual.net, and created www.interactivedocumentary.net during her PhD, a platform that can be regarded as the expansion of the academic blog she started in 2009 in order to document her own experience of doing a PhD at Goldsmiths, University of London.

In her Ph.D. thesis, Sandra Gaudenzi approaches interactive documentaries starting from the axiom that they can be best conceived of as living ecological entities. She fathoms modes of participation and interaction, as well as how engaging in documentary configurations affects our view of how we construct and experience «reality».

1 London's Interactive Factual Narrative meetup: <http://www.meetup.com/de-DE/Londons-Interactive-Factual-Narrative-meetup/members/> (15.5.2016).

Her current research interests include interactive documentary, participatory practices, UX in i-docs, transmedia storytelling, locative experiences and games for change.

With regard to your twice two-folded-background being both a practitioner and a media scholar, and as being experienced in the production of linear film as well as in the design of interactive formats – how do you mediate between these different perspectives?

I would agree with you that I sit in between a lot of different fields, which seems to be a bit of a recurrent theme in my life.

Practitioners usually want to do things and find methodologies to make things better. This is part of my work with *!F Lab*. Scholars, in contrast, want to define areas and create taxonomies – but unfortunately, in doing so many of them approach issues mainly from only one disciplinary perspective – their own discipline.

Of course, creating taxonomies and setting the field is important, as I tried to show in my PhD, and in fact, three years ago it was important to put clarity and map the territory. However, I do not want to specialize and only see things through the eyes and the glands of merely one discipline. I am interested in the overview. How we can actually cross-fertilize disciplines? How can we look at something from a systemic point of view?

Positioning myself in between the two [academia and production], I try to <zoom out> to see the big picture and to <zoom in> to see the details.

Having <zoomed out of> as well as <zoomed into> various, certainly highly different forms and practices of what is usually covered by the umbrella-term <interactive documentary>, what would you say: In how far can emerging practices be seen as a kind of evolution, a variation of the linear documentary tradition in new different – new? – media, or do you conceive of them as a cultural form of their own?

It depends where we take this from. If we take it from a definition of documentary that would be in general the idea of having a <creative> treatment of <actuality>, the intention of an interactive documentary is the same as the intention of a linear documentary. It is about creating a reality-true medium and accepting that there is a form of change of that reality through the fact that it is an author who rearranges this reality. So, as to the intention of documenting the real – this issue is the same in both.

However, as the medium is different, not only the result becomes very different, but at the same time, the moment we start using a different medium, we change our own perspective. The medium changes us. If we're trying to express ourselves in a non-linear way, our point of view then, in a systemic way, starts to look at the world in a systemic way. And so, although the intention at the beginning is the same, I think the result is sufficiently different in interactive documentary. Hence,

effectively I think it is a form that allows us to do things that we couldn't do before. And therefore, it's now becoming a breed on its own.

*One breed on its own with many variations or various breeds? In the title of your thesis, for example, *The Living Documentary: From representing reality to co-creating reality in digital interactive documentary*, you already used two different terms to describe your research issue. We've got <the living documentary> and <the digital interactive>. And on one of the two internet platforms that you are currently running, the *Interactive Factual net*, you even widen the terminology once again.*

In how far do you distinguish between different variations of emerging documentary practices? Are there also different drives behind specific forms?

Let's stick to the title of the PhD to start with where we have two different terminologies: we have <the living documentary> on one side and then I used <digital interactive documentary> [short: i-docs].

In the PhD, I am arguing that those two are the same: any interactive documentary is a living form. Of course, it is a bit of a provocation to call it <living documentary>. I would never use this in a colloquial conversation, because if I said, «I specialize in living documentaries», no one really knows what I'm talking about.

But the provocation and the argument behind the PhD was that in an interactive documentary, the user becomes an active part of the documentary itself, through the act of interacting. Consequently, we're not speaking about <user> but <interactant>. This form changes according to this dynamic of interactivity. There are several levels of interactivity, so the changes can be minimal, if it's only a question of clicking and going to another screen. However, they can also be much bigger, if we're thinking about user-generated content. But nevertheless, whichever is the range of change, there is always a change. And therefore, interactive documentaries are a form of life.

<Life> [in this context], is connected to another term that I use in my PhD: the concept of autopoiesis as defined by Maturana and Varela). Autopoiesis describes life as effectively interaction with the world, it conceives of interactivity as a way of being, of relational exchange. If being alive depends on our levels of interaction with our environment then <reality> only exists as a result of such exchange, it is never an entity that can be separated from such dual construction. Reality becomes the evidence that we construct to make sense of our repeated interactions with our environment.

Thus, those two terms [interactive and living] say more or less the same thing. Interactive documentary is alive and relational.

Now, why did I more recently use the term <interactive factual>, which sometimes now I call <interfactuals>?

Five years ago, when we started I-docs, the conference and flaking research project, with the *Digital Cultures Research Centre at Bristol*, we referred to this genre that we wanted to explore as <i-docs>, standing for interactive documentaries. At

that time, no one really knew what we were talking about. So, calling it <interactive documentary> made it simpler in a way: people understand <interactivity> – [in our time most often] in terms of <digital interactivity>, and they understand <documentary> in the sense of <documenting the world>. Put these two together, we thought to express what our research is about and to then fathom what one can when documenting reality with interactive media.

At that time, it seemed to be a terminology that fitted.

But, what we realised through running i-Docs as a conference, and then as a blog, etc., is that there is a limit in using a terminology that people are acquainted with. The fact that we were using [the term] <documentary> meant that a lot of immersive journalists or people who were doing <online stuff>, or who were in the field of serious games, did not feel addressed.

So again, people would then compartmentalize their knowledge in referring to what they have studied, which would create a problem with i-docs which we always as a team considered as a very vast field. We are speaking about all sorts of forms. It could be games, it could be mobile phones, it could be... The common denominator is that it is about documenting <reality> through interactive media.

This is why five years later, I have decided to take up a terminology that is a bit more neutral and went for the terminology <interactive factual>.

That's the story between all those terminologies.

You mentioned the importance of relational exchange in interactive documentary formats, of liveness and the concept of autopoiesis. In how far does this perspective on documentary practices affect the notion of <evidence> in documentary?

Autopoiesis, aliveness and relationality in this context are based on theories developed by the biologist Francisco Varela [1987].² He conceives of life as effectively interaction with the world and argues that interactivity is an essential way of being. A cell, for example, is not alive by itself, as an independent unity; it is alive because of and through its mechanism to relate to its outside world. Thus, it only exists through constant adjustments to its environment via its own internal organization. It is this idea – this idea of life as interaction is what interested me.

Documentary, and especially interactive forms of documentary, are alive in so much they change and relate to the world through its interaction with the user. Thus, in my opinion, there is no evidence <as such> anymore. Rather, it is creation and sense-making through relationality.

From the moment we are not just observing a linear documentary but are becoming part of an interactive documentary as <actants>, we give life to this thing that

2 Francisco Javier Varela García, a Chilean biologist and philosopher, developed together with his teacher Humberto Maturana the concept of autopoiesis. Cf. Humberto Maturana; Francisco Varela: *The Tree of Knowledge*. Boston 1987.

is not only connected to us: it is also connected to its technology, the web, the web protocols, all sorts of non-human levels as well. This is why I also refer to i-docs as relational objects.

One of the upcoming technologies in the field of interactive documentary is certainly VR. Its usage in documentary production it is often called a machine for empathy, enabling an even closer relation to now bodily experience representations of reality and adding layers of awareness or deepening immersion. What do you think of VR in this regard? Hype, exaggerated hopes or «the future of documentary», as it is sometime hailed?

I get annoyed with the hype that there is at the moment about virtual reality, especially when it is sold as the ultimate immersion machine or a machine for empathy. That annoys me for two reasons.

The first one is I think we have been witnessing in the history of media this constant quest for immersion. The more we would feel immersed, the more we will believe in it, the more it will be nearly real, the more we have been successful as documentary makers. We went from photography to video, and now, it is VR. But this quest to be always more representational or creating evidence of «reality» is definitely not the core of what documentary is about in my eyes.

Our job is not to recreate reality [in virtual worlds]; it is to create a space for reflection and discussion. And so, by definition, we have to mediate perspectives on «reality» it and by definition we need to have an authorial point of view on it. So, what is interesting for me is not how we can best be immersed in it, but more how we can best use a medium to create conditions that make us think, make us change, make us have an impact on «reality»? Thus, I'm not interested in VR-immersion *per se*.

The second reason is this claim that VR is the ultimate machine for empathy because at the moment, it doesn't fulfill this promise, these «fantastic things» that it's talking about. If you look at things as they are done right now, there is very little interactivity in VR. Most of the work that employs VR with factual stories is 360° video, where effectively you land in a situation with your kit and all you can do is you turn around and you look at what is represented there. So, you land in a place where there is an Ebola crisis,³ you land in a Syrian refugee camp,⁴ but you are back into the situation of being «the observer».

However, you cannot *do* anything, and for me, that is extremely frustrating. I'm thinking, «Why am I catapulted here to look at the misery of other people? What is

3 Here, Gaudenzi is referring to VRse and Vice's VR project *Waves of Grace* (2015), directed by Gabo Arora and Chris Milk. <https://vrse.com/watch/id/121/> (27/2/2016).

4 *Clouds over Sidra* (2015), directed by Gabo Arora and Chris Milk. <http://cloudsdocumentary.com/> (27/2/2016).

this adding? Am I supposed to be empathetic to that? What is this medium trying to do, what is it used for, and what can I do?»

For me, empathy is not just feeling for someone, it is having the agency to decide if my feeling for this someone can be used. It is about having a feedback. If I cannot do anything, my empathy is just affect. To get into empathy, we need to get to a level of agency that at the moment VR is not catering for.

All this doesn't mean, though, that VR will never get there. So, I am still excited about VR, because I recognize that this is a form that is just starting, that it has a lot of potential.

One project we haven't talked about is Digital Me, the project you are currently working on, which is heavily based on the concept of personalization: At the core of this documentary experience stands a «conversation» with one's digital alter ego, based on the traces one has left in Internet.

Can you tell us a bit more about the background of the project and your motivation to tackle this topic?

The story behind *Digital Me* is very much linked to the things I referred to before. On the one side, it started with the fact that there were very first experiments with some form of personalization around 2010. I don't know if you remember *The Wilderness Downtown*, a music video by Chris Milk and Aaron Koblin. At the beginning you have to say where you were born, and it would use that information to take some images from Google Earth and include those images in the video itself. I thought that was very intriguing to make a music clip more personal

Only one year after that, Jason Zada developed a Facebook app which was called *Take This Lollipop*, which went very viral within a couple of days. It was a short experience using your Facebook data and your photo to include you in a very short story which would scare you. In that case, you would see someone who was probably ready to kill you, and because in the video you could see your own image and also a geo-location of where you are based, it has the potential to create a very strong anxiety in you.

As to this novel use of technology, I thought these projects were very interesting, because for the first time the narrative was not a general narrative. It was a narrative that includes parts of your life, of your privacy, to show you how relevant that narrative might be to you. But, as I am not interested in scaring people nor just surprise them, I started thinking of ways in which personal data could be used in a more meaningful way.

I have always been interested in issues of identity, connection between the selves and the world, in the topic of self-awareness and self-development and themes about perception of the world and how we *create* the perception. So I started questioning how one could use personalization within a story context to speak about the

self, and more precisely about the digital-physical hybridization of our selves. That's how *Digital Me* was born.

How do you actually achieve personalization in this documentary project?

I thought that it would be thrilling to test a concept based on data mining. How can we use your social media content for your own self-growth, rather than selling it to corporates to help them sell you stuff you do not really need. How can we empower you to re-appropriate your own data to create an intriguing narrative that effectively leads to an increased self-awareness?

So, if we put together those three elements – re-appropriation of data, factual narrative embedding and meaningful personalization – data-mining is used (for a good cause): it makes you reflect on who you are, who you think you are and how much you are becoming a hybrid person when you start having a digital personality. If you ignore your digital persona, you are actually starting to ignore part of who you are in the world that we live in now, which is a hybrid world, digital and non-digital. At the same time, *Digital Me* is a way to go politically against unfair use of data for things that escape us. In this regard, *Digital Me* can act as a mirror: your data is coming back to you, and it is up to you to do what you want with it.

If we think of «i-docs' short history but long future», as Jon Dovey has recently put it – where do you personally see interactive documentary respectively interactive factual narrative in five years?

I really think we need to look at documenting as a big sphere, where there is space for everybody. Linear documentary is still and will always be a fantastic way to document the world. With the dominance though on, I would say, narrative – having a narrative voice and having a narrative point of view. There is space for that and we need that.

This compliments itself very well with what the Internet and other networked media allow us to do, which is to document the world in a more collaborative way, a networked way.

Obviously, by doing this, we maybe lose a lot the voice of the author, but we gain other things: we gain a perception of agency in the world itself, because we as interactants can say something about this world. And I think both are needed.

Within interactive documentary, I think each platform has its own focus and its own strength. So, I'm sure that VR will actually find its *raison d'être*. It is a challenge at the moment, but I definitely think this is going to be one of the big expansion fields for interactive documentary. I also think that of another space that has not been really explored to its full, e.g. mobile technologies.

All in all, the more we go for mobile technologies and collaboration, the more we express a world that is connected, that is interactive, that is complex, that maybe

fits with the paradigm shift of our society, going towards a culture of sharing and collaboration.

So, for me, the evolution of interactive documentary and «documentary as such» is about using each medium for what it is best at, remembering that none of these media is a religion – none of those is *the* best. Each of those serves a purpose and adds a layer to that complex sphere that «our reality» is. After all, are we not constantly constructing it through our efforts to relate to it with whichever medium we can afford to use – our body to start with, and then photography, film, video, the web... and now VR.