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Non-linearity, multiple points of view and intercultural understanding. Interactive documentaries as sets of possibilities to tackle the complexities of 21st century's socio-cultural reality

2016

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3644>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Wiehl, Anna; Aston, Judith: Non-linearity, multiple points of view and intercultural understanding. Interactive documentaries as sets of possibilities to tackle the complexities of 21st century's socio-cultural reality. In: *AugenBlick. Konstanzer Hefte zur Medienwissenschaft*. Heft 65/66: Die Herstellung von Evidenz (2016), S. 113–118. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3644>.

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Non-linearity, multiple points of view and intercultural understanding

Interactive documentaries as sets of possibilities to tackle the complexities of 21st century's socio-cultural reality

Kurzbiografie

Dr. Judith Aston is a co-director of i-Docs – an international web-hub community of researchers and practitioners for discussion and debate on the rapidly evolving genre of interactive documentary. As an artist and creative producer with an academic background in visual anthropology and interaction design, she first began working in this field with the BBC Interactive Television and Apple Computing over twenty years ago, and ever since, she has retained her involvement in this area. Holding a PhD in computer-related design from the Royal College of Art and a Masters degree in the social sciences from the University of Cambridge, she takes an interdisciplinary approach to her practical as well as her academic work.

One of her research interests lies in exploring the potential of the interactive documentary as a means through which to represent multiple points of view and to encourage intercultural dialogue. Approaching the concept of interactivity beyond its mere representational functions, information retrieval and the ‹point and click world› of information design, she aims at enabling meaningful experiences that are fluid and tactile and at bridging the gap between ‹digital› and physical, social, cultural ‹reality›. Thus, she tries to encourage exchange and to create stimuli to bring people and communities together.

Although the essays in this special issue cover the wide and still diversifying spectrum of emerging new documentary practices, the title of the volume explicitly names web docs as a kind of umbrella term for contemporary non-fiction media phenomena.

For a long time, especially in the 2000s, scholars were concerned with developing a taxonomy in the field. Is this still one of the prime concerns in the academic and creative field in the international scientific community, or do such discussions rather miss the decisive aspects of interactive documentaries? How do you see this – given your academic training and your background as being a creative as well?

Well, it's interesting you should raise the topic of taxonomies and of genre, because that's not where I naturally find myself gravitating: I have a background in explicitly interdisciplinary practice. My first degree is in the social sciences, then I went on to focus more specifically on anthropology, and later I did a PhD in interaction design and anthropology.

My main interest in interactive documentary has been in i-docs as an emergent form, almost as a form of avant-garde practice, exploring new possibilities, throughout my career. I started off working with videodisc, and then CD ROM, then broadband, and now I find myself working more and more with live performance, and theatre in the mix.

Whenever people try to box me in and say, «Oh right, you do multimedia, multimedia is CD-ROMs, or you do this...», whenever they try to package and label me, I immediately start to feel uncomfortable. So I have never been one of those people who have been trying to pin down and define and create taxonomies. That's just not me and what I have to contribute to the field.

For me the interesting stuff is what's the in-between and moving between and across genres. And apart from that, with my cross-cultural perspective, I'm interested in dialogue between technologies, between communities, between disciplines rather than being boxed in by genre.

How do you conceive of these dynamics and creative ruptures – these in-betweens, as you call them? Is this one of the specific potentials of interactive documentaries that sets them apart from other media practices?

For me, that special potential you mention is part of a cultural shift around authorship and spectatorship and the relationship of producer to consumer, the democratisation of media.

As for example Ken Robinson¹ suggests, we need to move beyond maths and literacy as the key intellectual skills through which we create our approaches to solving 21st century problems. We have to bring in the arts as well. Music, visual literacy, design literacy, tactile making skills.

Ironically, as I am a digital media person, I'm in fact very suspicious of digital media taking over the world. And actually, I'm very interested in where digital media sits alongside the analogue, the creative and the world of crafting and making.

So if we're looking at the special potential and fascination of interactive documentary media, I think its appeal is part of a wider cultural shift, in response to the digital world. It can be seen as an indication that people want to be involved in

1 Sir Kenneth Robinson is an English author, speaker and international advisor on education in the arts to government and non-profit organization. He was Director of the Arts in Schools Project (1985–89) and Professor of Arts Education at the University of Warwick (1989–2001). Robinson was principal author of *The Arts in Schools: Principles, Practice, and Provision* (1982) which became a key text on arts and education.

making. They want to feel part of creative processes rather than having this «You're the maker. I'm the consumer». It's a bit like what Joseph Beuys meant when he said: «We're all artists of our own lives, we're all creative people».

And to me, it is exactly this, the interesting shift.

For a long time, documentary has been linked to «representing reality», as Bill Nichols already states in the title of his seminal book on documentary filmmaking. One of the main concerns of documentary is the creation of (audio-)visual evidence. How do you conceive of the concept of evidence with regard to the paradigm shift you suggested – the idea of in-betweenness, the idea of artistic avant-garde practices as well as i-docs' socio-political potential?

Having said all that about democratisation of media, I still think there's a place for artists, or for people who dedicate their lives more to commenting on and interpreting the world. And that becomes evidence.

Do you thus regard interactive practices – their performative, procedural, relational character – as having an evidentiary dimension of their own? Are these more important, the real «avant-garde»-momentum rather than interactive documentary «works»?

Yes, exactly. One paradigm here are people like the Griots in traditional Malian society for example – people who are continuing traditions of history and memory and culture. This is where evidence is procedurally brought forward – in this looking at the world around and commenting on it. It works at various levels – especially at community level, where people are creating their own creative response to the world as they see it and finding solutions to everyday problems at the local community level.

But then there's also a place for the Tolstoys of this world, who might dedicate 30 years of their life to writing their one great novel, who are totally dedicated to their craft.

So I think there's a sliding scale [in the concept of authorship, AW] with regard to the process of bringing forward what one might call «evidence», and that interactive documentary, respectively documentary *making* and rendering visible this «evidence», plays an essential role at various levels. It's important – for different people with different purposes.

Would you call interactive documentary a meta-practice then?

A meta-practice? I mean again, if you try to make «interactive documentary» into a *genre*, it becomes part of the whole thing that I'm trying to resist. However, interactive documentary is a useful term to create a community that is looking at these cultural shifts and looking at that relationship between spectator and performer, producer and consumer.

And in a way, for me, it was a useful term around which to convene our first i-Docs symposium in 2011 and ask the question, «What are computers bringing to the possibilities for interpreting and telling stories and interpreting the world around us?» So in a way, I suppose yes. I suppose it is a meta-practice, in that it's a reflection of a shift, and it's a space in which that shift can be discussed.

What do you think interactive documentary will become in the next five years?

In a way, the question is, what will computers bring in the next five years? And again, interestingly, as a digital media person, I'm very suspicious of the «Big-Brother-Worlds» and I really question how far computers can lead us into a utopian world. I mean, they were supposed to free us all from manual labour.

Yet, it's down to our intelligent use of technologies, and I am quite concerned that we're not that intelligent really, that we don't really learn, and that we allow technologies to take us over, that we allow technologies to be used for systems of control. Actually, I'm quite worried about that – big data, abuse of social networks, surveillance.

I think we need to be very mindful as these technologies can be used as instruments of power and oppression. So that's not very positive, but at the same time, as I said, you've got interactive documentary practices at a community level, you've got artists, you've got people creating amazingly interesting things with it. So I just think that the technology has all sorts of potential for all sorts of things. But it's about how individuals and communities use those technologies, more than what the technologies themselves are.

As to i-Docs and their utopian potential at the community level, what are in your eyes good practice examples? What are the most exciting cases you have experienced in the last few years?

Katerina Cizek is just amazing. Of course, it's partly due to the fact that she is part of the Canadian film board (CFB) that has enabled her to be amazing, but I think it's brilliant that the CFB agreed to spend that money [for her experimental interactive work, AW].

Especially *High Rise*² is a really interesting visionary project as it explores key themes of our time. As an anthropologist, I am familiar with the statistics – the percentage of people who will be living in slums and in very small living accommodation, as the world's population continues to grow.

2 *High Rise* (2009 –) is one of Katerina Cizek's most renowned and award winning projects, so far consisting of five sub-projects – *The One Thousandth Tower*, *Out My Window*, *The One Millionth Tower*, *The History of Highrise* and *Universe Within*. *Highrise* is a multi-year, many-media, collaborative documentary experiment at the National Film Board of Canada that explores vertical living around the world. (<http://highrise.nfb.ca/about/> (30.07.2016))

Then, there's the field of investigative journalism. Here, I am thinking for example of [David, AW] Dufresne's³ work. Again, it's big budget, big work. But actually, it's exploring big themes like the oil sands.⁴ In Dufresne's work, it is through game play that you as a user are enabled to get really immersed in a world and to explore multiple points of view.

Moreover, there are great projects coming out of places like Russia. I worked for example with George Soros for a while, and I did training in Eastern Europe with all sorts of people who had access to amazing cultural archives and objects – who were working, curating things on no money at all, but who had an incredible richness of ideas and creativity.

I've also participated in a workshop with a Ukrainian filmmaker living in Poland who's on the frontline in Ukraine, making an interactive documentary about life there. It's not only amazing story telling; it's also [such an important project] as it allows to see the conflict from a perspective that we wouldn't normally get access to through the mainstream media.

And in India – just to mention one last example – it's a similar situation: I am thinking for example of pad.ma,⁵ an open source project. In fact, the potential of this collaborative project as a gathering of non-Western materials is hugely powerful.

I think the really important thing is that interactive documentary can be used as a new set of possibilities enabling people to work creatively. And this goes for people from all round the world – it doesn't have to be this very Western-centric, very hierarchical thing. So whilst there are really exciting highly funded projects from the Western hemisphere, there's also smaller projects popping up, from amazing people, all over the globe.

One concept to conceive of interactive documentaries is to see them as 'tools for thought', another for example is to think of them as 'engines for empathy'. Having

3 David Dufresne is a French documentary maker and – apart from having produced *Fort McMurray* (2013), author of *Prison Valley* (2010), of one of the first transmedia (co)production for arte(vgl. hierzu das Interview mit Alexander Knetig in diesem Band), <http://prisonvalley.arte.tv/?lang=de> (30.07.2016)

4 *Fort McMurray* (2013) is a hybrid between web documentary and strategy video game. It deals with the socio-economic, political and cultural issues that the exploitation of oil sands brings with it, at the paradigm of Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada and Athabasca. Fusing traditional, linear documentary modes of representation, interactive game mechanisms and the logic of interactive factual storytelling, it allows the user to decide about the city's future and to responsibly develop the world's largest oil sands reserves. <http://fortmcmurray.com/#/fortmcmurray> (30.07.2016).

5 Pad.ma – the Public Access Digital Media Archive – is an online archive of densely text-annotated documentary video footage. Being free for download for non-commercial use, the project is set up as an open space for exchange, research, archiving, documentation and discussion of audio-visual documentary recourses. It allows access to materials that challenge the conventions of video-making, editing and spectatorship and thus are often suppressed or left behind. Thus, this collaborative open-source database expands notions of documentary audio-visual practices beyond the finite documentary film or the online video clip. <https://pad.ma/news> (30.07.2016).

explored all these inspiring projects, what do you think of interactive documentary in this regard?

Interactive documentary making is brilliant for getting people out of their bedrooms, off their computers and actually talking to people. It incites people to explore worlds that they wouldn't normally go into, and in doing so, learning about other points of view, and learning how to respect other people's positions and being able to negotiate difference. So I think it offers hugely powerful possibilities as an educational process.

Additionally, there is of course the potential that arises from non-linearity: With interactive work, you can create multiple pathways, which immediately invites exploration of similarities and differences, and multiple perspectives. It helps us to understand the complexities of the world that we're in now. Just think of the clashes of cultures that we're running up against and the fear of extremism! Learning to negotiate, learning to be able to put yourself outside of your own perspective, and try and understand somebody else's perspective is perhaps more essential than it has ever been before. One of my interests hereby lies in heteroglossia and the ideas of Bakhtin to bring in multiple voices whilst you might still have a key narrator.

All in all, I think interactive media has got a huge potential for exploring, taking things a bit further. That's really why I believe in it as a medium – as a set of possibilities.