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Database aesthetics, modular storytelling, and the intimate small worlds of Korsakow documentaries

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Small – the alternative big?

Within the context of digitalisation and networked media, the immediate spread of information, and the automatised gathering and structuring of vast amounts of data of our daily lives, new audiovisual documentary genres and formats keep emerging. Many of them are large-scale, global collaborations based on the world-wide participation of numerous professional practitioners as well as prosumers working together on massive audiovisual databases such as open-end projects like *Filming Revolution* (2015)[1] or *HighRise* (2009).[2] Another trend in the nexus of new media documentary practices responding to 'the call of Big Data' aims at mediating information that is collected by 'smart' environments, wearables, and devices for 'live logging'; also, a further path to 'expand' documentary experience is the use of VR.[3]

All these tendencies – their potential, but also their challenges – are one of the prime topics in discourse around the future of the documentary. How does this trend towards the integration of plenitude, of 'big data',[4] affect notions and practices of 'interactive documentary', which is, significantly, also referred to as 'database documentary' or (what a telling term!) '*expanded* documentary'? Do these kinds of expansion necessarily point toward a *qualitative* intensification in experience or are they only a quantitative accretion in material – in data in terms of 'data-storytelling', in

multi-medial footage, in being networked, in second- and even third-screen-usage? Do digital plenitude, interactivity, and what one might call 'an immersive spectacle' not rather paralyze, bind and blind, both documentary authors and audiences? What about the core of the story, the documentary voice, the documentary argument, let alone epistemological and ontological depth?

Minimalism, miniaturization, and epistemo-ontological expansion

> I think people have begun to forget how powerful human stories are – exchanging their sense of empathy for a fetishistic fascination with data, networks, patterns, and total information. Really, the data is just part of the story. The human stuff is the main stuff, and the data should enrich it.[5] – Jonathan Harris

Without wanting to set up a dichotomy between big-scale projects as less valuable on the one hand and works based on formal or narrative minimalism as the new aesthetic or narrative precious form of (data) storytelling on the other,[6] it is important not to lose those latter. Starting from the premises that documentary practices based on miniaturisation and minimalism, drawing attention to the idea of smallness, details, and slowness, I suggest thinking of them as complementary alternatives to large-scale projects. This permits mutual insight into the concepts, as well as their complexity *and* reduction, and their interconnection. Referring to smallness in a rather metaphorical way with regard to emerging documentary, I am thus aiming to fathom the specific *qualitative* differences to large-scale projects and how they might allow users to dive into epistemological depths in unconventional ways.

Many of those formally and narratively *minimalist* documentaries are based on *Korsakow* – a *complex* dispositive enabling the creation and experience of documentary miniatures. Such *Korsakow* documentaries[7] are a specific form of database documentaries: non-linear, algorithm-based, interactive audio-visual factual configurations. In contrast to intricate interfaces that are proliferating in many other interactive documentaries, they rely on a minimalistic visual design; unlike the preset plenitude of dramatic or argumentative narrative arches, Korsakow documentaries are based on evolving modular storytelling and intimate, personal narratives; instead of featuring the big issues of our world such as climate change or the exploita-

tion of natural resources (e.g. *Fort McMoney* [2013]) or the refugee crisis (tackled by the immersive VR-exploration *Clouds over Sidra* [2015]),[8] they are interested in small worlds in the sense of micro-cosmoses. Korsakow documentaries can be considered as affective tools for thought, as poetic miniatures zooming into the very small details of everyday life in a contemplative way. Due to the formal and narrative minimalism they invite authors and users to rethink structures and practices of perception, memory, cognition, and emotional engagement of representation, as well as the essence of concepts such as connectivity and relatedness, also the nuance and complexity of our (not only) digitally-networked world; they can inspire a self-reflexive questioning of media practices, the nature of storytelling, the processual character of making meaning in times of data paralysis, and a possible return to smallness and interconnectedness. As such they can stimulate pondering on ontological and epistemological issues of a most intimate and global nature.

From this axiom a few questions arise: how can opaquely-linked SNUs (smallest narrative units) contribute to a qualitative extension?; how far can miniaturisations in Korsakow documentaries promote a widening of cognitive and emotional horizons due to affective assemblage – in both temporal and spatial montage?; how far does structural, thematic, and aesthetic restriction affect concepts and functions of authorship and audience/user?; and, do Korsakow projects still qualify as documentary database narratives, as documentary database narratives, and, most critically, as documentary database narratives?

Think and link: Slow-storytelling, the interval of perception and action, and affective assemblage

> Becoming, [while happening in a gap], is nonetheless an extreme contiguity within [the] coupling of two sensations without resemblance…. It is a zone of indetermination. […] This is what is called an affect. – Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

One method to explore interactive audiovisual media that so far has only seldom been used is to adopt Bergson's thoughts on perception, interval, and the living image, and Deleuze's specifications of movement-images. This approach to digital documentary, which is closely connected to new media scholar Adrian Miles' notion of affective assemblage and soft videography,[9]provides an approach to a branch of emerging documentary prac-

tices from a fresh perspective. According to Deleuze's ecological reading of Bergson's concept of the universe and the world of images, everything reacts to everything else, and everything is interconnected. Thus, this networked world[10] is in a constant flow, a movement of interdependent action and reaction. These flows are not predetermined, and they are not absolutely random either – or as Bergson puts it: '[a]ll division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division'.[11]

For Bergson 'movement is reality itself'.[12] Deleuze bases his notion of a 'world-in-a-flux' on this Bergsonian notion in combination with his concept of the multifaceted 'living image' and his understanding of perception, affect, and reaction and the interval between those, known as the 'sensory motor schema':[13] although the movement between 'actants' is virtually open and undetermined, the perception of a living image in a *particular* situation always invites *particular* action. While all facets of the living image are still co-present only some are consciously perceived, filtered, and only those which seem to be relevant guide our reaction – in the case of (linear) film interpretation, and in the case of interactive media physical action, e.g. a click. In linear film this interval is bridged by temporal montage – the flow of images in time. Although one of the main attractions of film as an art form is montage, and although the audience in those cases probably pays heightened attention to this interval, the viewer can more or less passively drift in a flux of images, as at least no (physical) decision is required from her/him. All gaps are overcome by the film itself. From this follows that indeterminacy – and consequently complexity – are at least partly reduced (yet still subliminally present, if one considers alternative interpretations or subversive readings of a film).

In interactive audio-visual media, in contrast, the viewer must assume the role of an active user, which makes her/him much more engaged in the process of making meaning – the 'ongoing site of indetermination' is now mainly located in the user who becomes 'an affective relay between perception and action, watching and clicking'.[14] If s/he does not do anything, nothing will happen – at least the flow of images will come to a standstill. So it is up to the user to become a kind of co-author or co-editor navigating a database of (not only) audio-visual material. In such surroundings the Bergsonian interval becomes much more decisive for making meaning. This is especially the case if gaps become highlighted and expanded; moments of indeterminacy are elongated, complexity is rather enlarged than reduced,

and the situation opens for an affective relation to the perceived and experienced, which led Miles to coin the term affective assemblage.[15] These experiences are often intimate, as they oscillate between personal decisions as well as in-decision. The latter are most prominent in the case of Korsakow, as they enlarge the moment of associatively connecting issues and they allow the user to appreciate both the intimacy and the slowness of the small worlds of these documentaries.

Small stories and the logics of the Korsakow system

> [Korsakow] proposes a reading and making of the world that is not predetermined nor fully controllable, for maker, reader, narrator, or the work. – Adrian Miles

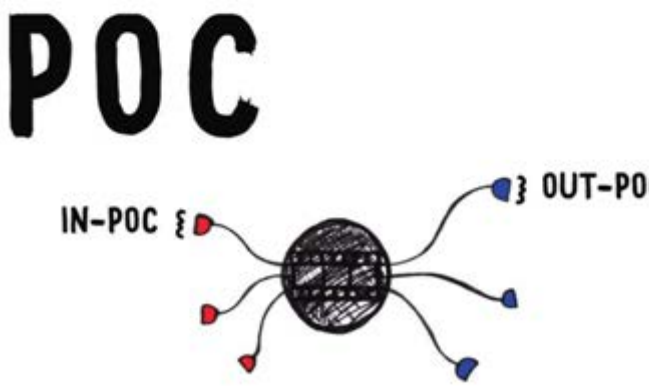
Paradoxically, the most outstanding feature to its visual properties is grounded in the unspectacular – the minimalism of interface design in Korsakow. It consists of nothing but one large video frame (displaying the active clip) and a limited set of smaller unanimated frames – thumbnail representations of potential following frames. These are all set before a monochrome black background. Navigation options are also reduced to one very basic operation: a click on one of the small video-frames, either at the end of the main video or during its display. After a click on one thumbnail this clip replaces the former active main video in the bigger frame, and during its runtime new thumbnail representations of further possible clips appear around it.

Fig. 1: The minimalism of interface design in Korsakow. The most outstanding feature is grounded in the unspectacular.

This minimalism in interface design, a graphic navigation surface that is reduced to the most basic features, and the fact that it is self-sufficient – i.e. does not rely on (big) data-feed from the Internet – sets apart Korsakow films from other emerging interactive documentary practices, such as sophisticated navigable web-documentaries which provide links to many other sites or are often driven by the velocity of real-time data-gathering (e.g. footage by web-cams), variety in the form of a digital plenitude of audio/visual/textual and even sensual material, and the sheer volume of those (to mention the key 'Vs' of Laney's characteristics of big-data). Another fact that contributes to stressing the affective interval between the clips is the way in which the mechanisms of modular storytelling and database logics are employed against the grain – at least if one refers to Manovich's widely-applied interpretation delineating database as a 'structured collection of items […] organised for fast search'.[16] Links in Korsakow do not so much link the audiovisual material in the sense that they glue together sequences, contributing to a smooth editing of clips to guarantee the fluent transition within the process of perception and reaction; rather, the transition from SNU to SNU – from one smallest narrative unit to the next – provokes breaks within the flow of images. This is due to the fact that links in Korsakow are pluri-directional; each SNU which builds a stock of clips in the database has two sets of keywords that enable points of contact (POCs) – a set of IN-keywords and a set of OUT-POCs that, on the graphic interface, generate a selection of potential following clips represented through thumbnails.


What is Korsakow? – This is a SNU
von Korsakow
01:18
vimeo


SNU
SMALLEST
NARRATIVE
UNIT


POC
IN-POC
OUT-POC

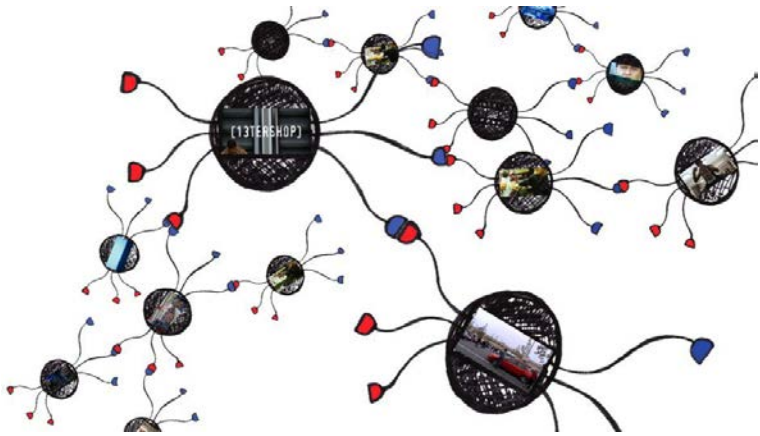


Fig. 2: SNUs and POCs in Korsakow.

In contrast to orderly and deterministic databases relying on an IN-keyword-OUT-keyword symmetry, keywords in Korsakow are fuzzy; any keyword, set of keywords, or parts of a set can be shared by more than one clip. Consequently, there exist many possible connections between the OUT-keywords of one SNU and the matching IN-keywords from another SNU. Clips in Korsakow simultaneously have multiple destinations. Thus, documentary arguments do not develop in a pluri-linear way. They form associational networks, 'potentially enormous sets which in turn express a milieu, mood, or even constellation of views upon an idea, topic, or event'.[17] By introducing this manipulation into the clear logic of databases the otherwise miniaturised aesthetics, the rudimentary navigation, and the most often seemingly banal stories evolved in the clips expand into thought-inspiring aesthetic, narrative, and epistemological depth.

A second reason for the expansion of affective intervals lies in the fact that linking on the interface-surface of Korsakow documentaries is opaque. Even if each clip-thumbnail is labeled with a sort of keyword resembling the inscription of functional links in classic hypertext-environments, these keywords hardly provide any information as to where or what they link to – i.e. what the content of the clip assigned to the thumbnail might be. Navigating the material becomes an experimental, tentative exploration of the universe of the Korsakow database. Intentionally following narrative or argumentative lines as in ordinary interactive documentaries becomes impossible. This, however, can be seen as a surplus rather than a shortcoming; this unfamiliar navigation mode provokes uncertainty as to which of the

clips to choose next; it requires extended moments of thought and associative work to select the next thumbnail and to consciously develop expectations of what might lie behind the enigmatic vignettes on the minimalist interface. The affective interval is expanded – in times of rapid data-processing required to cope with huge amounts of information storytelling slows down. It allows the user to become aware of tiny aspects that in their personal interpretation might become extremely meaningful.

The intimacy and the individuality as well as the surprising unpredictability do not only affect the user of the database. In some aspects it also goes for the author of the database, which leads to the last characteristic of linking in Korsakow configurations: its autopoietic dimension. Although the author of the database creates sets of IN- and OUT-keywords as well as the algorithms that rule it, s/he is not able to control all of the resulting multiple, unique tracks through the database that might result from the setting due to the complexity that evolves out of the multiple possibilities of SNUs, keywords, and different runtimes. Though this sets Korsakow apart from didactic, dramaturgical, well-built, and multi-linear documentaries, it does not make them *absolutely* random, and instead of dethroning the author Korsakow rather frees her/him from the obligation to control and pre-think all possible narrative branches. Or, as Florian Thalhofer, inventor and designer of the Korsakow system, puts it:

> [t]he problem consists in the fact that authors keep thinking linearly although they try to design multi-causal stories, which – with the augmenting complexity of the story – is impossible – the trick to solve this problem is radically simple: the author just has to stop thinking.[18]

Then s/he can give way to a flux of networked and self-generative narrations, and s/he is relieved from the ethical problems which arise when documentary film-makers start 'making films *about* people' (or even 'making people *into* film', in the sense that they become mono-dimensional characters in a documentary argument). The networked and active network*ing* processes enable an intimate making of story together *with* people – either protagonists, users, or authors.

Exploring the many small worlds of *Planet Galata* – a network of micro-cosmoses with virtually inconceivably cosmic possibilities of expansions

> Open documentary is the kind of film that can re-shuffle your mind. – Florian Thalhofer

Although one cursory exploration can only permit a glimpse into the complexity of a Korsakow configuration it might serve as an illustration of how these theoretical, partly (media-) philosophical considerations are realized. *Planet Galata* (2010) by Florian Thalhofer[19] invites the user of the database and the filmmaker himself to explore Galata Bridge and the neighbouring quarters of Istanbul, Turkey. The first SNU of the film conjures this idea and describes the bridge as 'a micro-cosmos of its own'. The bridge is one of the main traffic axes of Istanbul, with commuters passing it and tourists visiting it. In the belly of the bridge there are all kinds of shops, boutiques, hair dressers, souvenir kiosks, restaurants, and cafés. Apart from this cultural and social complexity as a 'transitory transitional place'[20] for people from various backgrounds, the bridge also metaphorically spans from the present to Turkey's past; since the 19thcentury the bridge has featured in Turkish literature, theatre, poetry, and novels, which gives this micro-cosmos a historic dimension. Galata Bridge is a symbolic link between the historic city of Istanbul proper, with its imperial palaces and principal religious sites, and modern, secular Istanbul with its large proportion of non-Muslim citizens, foreign merchants, and diplomats living and working there. Thus the small world portrayed in *Planet Galata* paradigmatically reflects a kaleidoscopic 'universe in a nutshell' in both a synchronic and diachronic way.

All these aspects are revealed gradually and in a fragmented way by the modular, associative, non-linear, and non-causal storytelling within the Korsakow configuration. The introductory SNU starts as a first-person-perspective-shot; the camera is set on a boat passing under the bridge. At the beginning this opening scene is the only video on the screen, but the sequence ends in a split screen displaying the lower side of the bridge as seen from the boat (on the left, in colour) and a view on the bridge from above (right). This aerial shot, at that moment a frozen image in black and white, links to the next SNU available – the only one available at this moment.

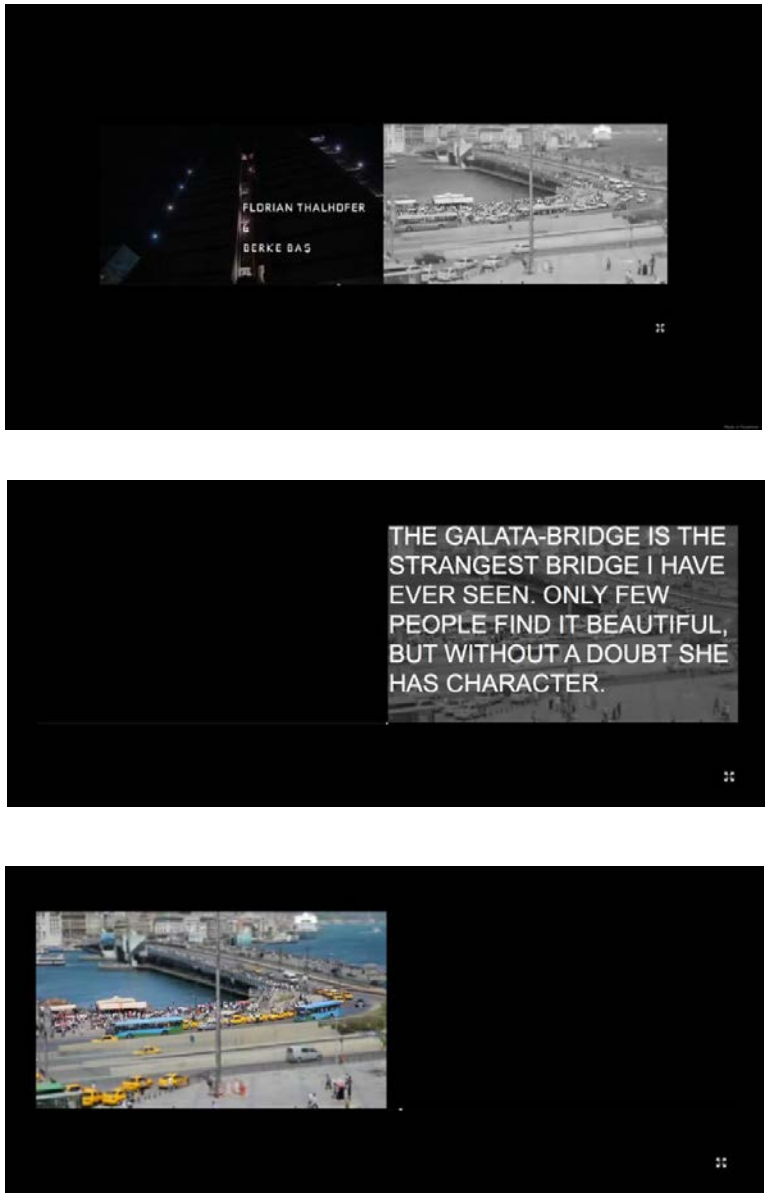


Fig. 3: The opening sequence of Planet Galata. After a first affective interval the viewer becomes an actant in the Korsakow configuration.

Here the user experiences a first instant of delay; s/he faces a rupture of the flow of images, an affective interval, and a short moment of indecision and

slight astonishment that affords some time to reflect on the expectations of the following. The so-far passive viewer now has to become an active participant in the experience, contributing to overcoming the break. Indeed, when s/he moves the cursor of the mouse onto the inactive right frame it comes alive; a sentence in white font appears, and as soon as it is clicked the image (now in colour) can be seen on the left side of the split screen, displaying a clip about Galata Bridge as a symbolic and metaphorically-loaded site of Istanbul. This SNU does not introduce the bridge as an element of the urban infrastructure; rather, it sets the idea of the 'Planet Galata' as a micro-cosmos, as a small world condensing universal experiences in the fragmentary micro-narratives of passengers and Galata-residents, their glimpses at life and anecdotes of daily experiences. This is even more so due to the minimalist split-screen design, as the user perceives that s/he will be able to dive even deeper into the Galata cosmos. While the clip on Galata 'Planet' is still displayed (active frame, right) the next SNUs simultaneously keep appearing as thumbnails, suggesting potential protagonists to follow: a young cook working in one of the restaurants of the bridge (whom we will get to know better later in our exploration); a workhand in a fish factory in the dark belly of the steel construction; the manager of the bridge and a

Fig. 4: Thumbnail representations of suggested potential clips. Which protagonists do you want to get to know?

commuter who passes the bridge every day (from left, upper row above).
Again, the user experiences a short moment of disruption in the flow of material and has to decide which of the potential protagonists to follow next – bearing in mind that the other possibilities are still co-present (at least beneath the surface of the interface) and that they might return later in the course of the experience. Thus, the ontological depth of co-presence and potential co-relationality subtly resonates throughout the processual, tenta-

tive itinerary, even despite or rather due to the minimalism of the interface design; the austerity of options allows a sense of multi-vocality and various simultaneously-existing paths, yet it does not distract any attention from the essential issue of the Korsakow experience – i.e. the unfolding, intimate stories. For example, by clicking on the thumbnail featuring the young cook the user is able to listen to the very personal story of Gaffur and his colleague Erkan. Although the incidents they depict seem to be rather banal (e.g. sharing one cooking zone) it becomes fathomable that there is much more behind their small stories of daily life if one listens attentively (this kind of focalisation is crucial in Korsakow experiences). They come from different ethnic and religious backgrounds: Gaffur is Greek-born, Erkan a native Istanbul citizen. Having in mind that those two cultures may have many shared historical roots and still originate from different continents (Europe and Asia), and considering that the (political) relationship between Greece and Turkey has been rather strained, the men's friendship appears in a different light. If one follows them (i.e. clicks on one of the SNUs featuring Gaffur and Erkan) one gets to know that they also share an apartment (with only one bed), and in the subtle gestures and glances between them one might notice that there might be more to their friendship than male bonding. Although it is never explicitly mentioned one gets the feeling of their closeness, once again due to the slowness of the narration which is reinforced by the intervals at each end of an SNU, which allows an affective response to that small excerpt of life, as the user is never urged to immediately proceed to the next click.

Although the story of Gaffur and Erkan may only be a slice of life and far away from being representative, this vignette nonetheless points beyond itself. Bearing in mind what has possibly been learned before (the centuries-old cultural and political tensions between Turkey and Greece, also the excoriation of homosexual relations in both the Orthodox Christian and Muslim faith), the episode gains a much larger dimension; it suggests that in spite of the statistically-negligible official number of non-heterosexual or mixed-religious relationships in Turkey, their invisibility in mainstream media, and their stigmatisation in society, such bonding does exist. In a merely statistical evaluation of corpuses of big data and the necessary rounding of figures the existence of lived counterculture might get lost; in linear documentary argument based on chains of cause and effect it might easily take on a moralising undertone. However, in the procedural revealing

of information and exploration of small stories as in Korsakow it is sensed, though never explicitly pronounced.

Another protagonist one might decide to follow is a young Muslim woman, Sadiye, whom one might already have noticed in a different context of SNU-thumbnails while the introductory SNU was running. If one listens to Sadiye's recollections of the last few days on Galata Bridge one gets to know her better; a further layer of meaning is added to the experience, as the user once again can zoom into the kaleidoscopic microcosmoses. Sadiye, who works in the kitchen in the same restaurant as Gaffur and Erkan, recounts that she has been looking for a second job this week – once again in vain, and this regardless of her MA degree, which she secretly obtained at Istanbul Open University. Since she recently divorced from her husband who abused her, and since she has been banned by her family which is deeply rooted in Muslim faith and local traditions, and since she still feels responsible for her younger sister who is living with her, Sadiye gives the viewer a critical view of modern Turkish society. These two stories – the example of Erkan and Gaffur giving reason for optimism as to the existence of niches of private cultural insurrection, and Sadiye's case – unfold contrapuntally, and they are experienced as being two co-existing layers of reality.

Such experiential depth is due to the always subliminally resonating copresence of all SNUs and the subtly rising awareness of the universal kaleidoscopic nature of this micro-universe – whether it is the visual simultaneous presence of selected SNUs on the surface of the graphic interface; whether it is the knowledge about the set of further micro-narratives hidden in the database but potentially available; or whether it is the knowledge of the unassessable expansion of combinations of SNUs generated by the underlying algorithms which resemble the uncertainties of existence itself. All these different dimensions of expansion do not only stretch out horizontally while the narrative is unfolding in time, they also expand vertically as the user is trying to fathom the epistemological depth of the micro-narratives, their individual message that their intimacy provides for her/him *personally*, and their far wider-reaching universal aspects.

However, *Galata Planet* does not only capture – or better still, bring to life – the cultural diversity of the city, the Bosporus nations, Europe, and perhaps human civilisation as a whole, inspired by essayistic-orchestrated, intimate micro-narratives. Many SNUs also trigger self-reflection on how we make sense of our experiences, of our perceptions, associations, and

thoughts. *Galata Planet* prompts the user to ponder on how we approach audiovisual texts, particularly digital documentary; it raises the issue of how one makes these experiences meaningful, and what 'meaningful' means in this context. The first-person micro-reflections of filmmaker Florian Thalhofer are woven into the story of Galata Bridge; they are significant in this context when he is sitting in a hotel in Istanbul after a day of shooting for this project and starts pondering about the processes of filmmaking, of our management of data, of global media networks, and of the life that data might get on its own:

> I'm on the phone to Strasbourg. I'm on the phone to Berlin. On the phone with Caracas, on the phone with New York. I answer emails from Sydney, Montreal, Lisbon. I'm typing sentences into my computer. I'm jotting down sentences into my diary. I copy data from the camera onto the computer. I re-organise data and connect it with other data from sound recording devices, camera. I ask questions, I receive answers. I organise information.
>
> I haven't had enough sleep. I am lying on my bed in my hotel room and I am typing sentences into my computer. The words are being saved onto the hard drive, and are safe online seconds later. On a hard drive somewhere, on some server farm, somewhere in the world. My computer in Berlin logs in each night to get new data from the Internet and copies them […] My sentences live a safe life. No fire, no earthquake can destroy them. Maybe they will never be read. Then they are sure to be forgotten.

These sentences, however, will probably not be forgotten too soon. Since we have run through at least parts of the Thalhofer material from his shooting, it will certainly not only be stored 'on a hard drive somewhere, on some server farm, somewhere in the world'; it will not merely join the stream of other big data and just flow away; rather, it will get attention and unfold meaning and individual significance for each participant. This is partly due to such self-reflexive insertions by Thalhofer on how we deal with digital material which prompts the user to self-reflexively question his everyday media practices; still, these reflections alone would only unfold significance for the participant at a superficial level, and if arranged in a linear documentary film they might even produce a feeling of unease with the audience who might read them as embarrassingly introspective and deliberate didactics. If they are individually, processually experienced, neither these trains of thought nor the material will simply end up stored someplace. Rather, they can generate further existential questioning which requires slow thinking and deeper thought and which also evades rigorous mono-

causal analytic examination yet calls for more complex, non-linear, associative, affective considerations.

Korsakow – documentary database narratives, documentary database narratives, documentary database narratives?

> Korsakow's technological and aesthetic footprint is an alternative site for interactive documentary practice […] more or less directed improvisations which have the tenor of 'what if?', or 'what happens when?' and 'I think I'll try this instead'. – Adrian Miles

This raises three crucial questions as to the nature of Korsakow – and all these questions refer back to the initial axiom of this article: the potential for epistemo-ontological expansion in Korsakow due to the various aspects of minimalism and miniaturisation. In view of the very specific procedural and autopoietic nature of Korsakow, can we still speak representations of reality, documentary database narratives? Do these often opaque configurations still qualify as documentary database narratives? And does non-linear, a-teleological Korsakow thinking bring forward documentary database narratives?

One of the major reasons to question the database-nature of projects based on the logics of Korsakow is the opaque linking which impedes target-orientated navigation and prevents the dataset of SNUs from being searchable in the sense that clips can be directly retrieved, which, however, is by definition one of the core qualities of databases. One response to this point could be to follow new media scholar Adrian Miles who underlines that 'calling interactive documentaries "database narratives" is a naïve technological determinism' which would be 'misjudging the container for the thing'.[21] Still, I would like to reformulate this statement slightly but decisively: *reducing* interactive documentary configurations such as Korsakow to being *functional* databases would be a misinterpretation. Where in orderly databases navigation aims at functional usability, where the relation of the user's actions and their result is obvious and direct, emotional relatedness and affect are correspondingly decreased. Still, it is exactly in the affective interval between perception, action, and reaction – the experiencing of one SNU of a Korsakow documentary and, after a moment of indeterminacy, choosing or rather tentatively exploring what might follow – that an infinitesimal moment of astonishment can happen. The user can open himself to

an inner negotiation of the experiences and can thus achieve a form of making meaning and mindful self-examination in addition to the factual content he has just been presented.

The second question that arises is whether Korsakow documentaries can be really called documentary database narratives, as they are certainly not representations of reality proper – at least not if one (erroneously) interprets this generic formula in the sense of documentary being a more or less direct mediatisation of 'real world phenomena',[22] i.e. if one approaches documentary from an essentialist starting point, trying to pin it down to criteria such as indexicality and certain formal structures or style; or if one bases the definition on the existence of a (clear) documentary argument and an authorial documentary voice suggesting one point of view. Considering that we are witnessing processes of hybridisations of all genres and formats, of narrative modes and techniques of storytelling, such an approach would be rather blinkered with regard to so-called new or digital media, various processes of convergence (not only technological) and digital plenitude.[23] Still, asking the question if Koraskow documentaries are really a case of factual digital storytelling, this question closely relates to a third question one has to consider: are we in the context of Korsakow configurations still dealing with documentary database narratives? How can the Korsakow principle of the autopoietic be reconciled with basic narratological concepts, particularly if one thinks of the dramaturgic evolvement of a story from a starting point to an end, a plot that is based on comprehensible chains of cause and effect?

Even without deeply entering into philosophical terrain one can certainly state that reality in the sense of the world we live in and we experience ourselves is not based on such simple linear chains of cause and effect. It is much more intricate; it paradoxically oscillates between fragmentation and granularity, also between dense connectivities and fluid, ephemeral correlations. Thus any straightforward approach to give evidence of this world, to represent reality in dramaturgically well-constructed stories which are based on linear logical thinking, can certainly grasp only a very limited part of the nuances of existence. The clearness and austerity of the interface and interaction design combined with the autopoietic unfathomability of the database can be regarded as a reductionism for expansion. This is particularly crucial when it comes to telling stories like those which Korsakow seems to be most adequate for – what we called small stories, and what we experienced in the case of *Planet Galata*. Despite the seeming banality of the

stories told in the vignettes all issues which were raised within the context of this mirco-cosmos turn out to be densely interconnected, and due to their delivery with the user as part of a complex configuration they point far beyond what is said and shown. They may not put forward a clear documentary argument but they have the potential to enable the participants to better comprehend the correlated nature of our being at a cognitive level and to procedurally, affectively experience and personally relate to what the world is like.

As to the three-fold discussion of Korsakow documentaries being documentary database narratives, one might question nuances of the notion of documentary, database, and narrative. But if it comes to the core of the issue in a synergetic relation between the underlying concepts one might even dare say that Korsakow configurations might be one of the most adequate ways to do meaningful documentary work with regard to certain spheres of life.

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Notes

[1] Filming Revolution (2015-ongoing) is set up as a large-scale, open-end participatory meta-documentary launched by Alisa Lebow, gathering, archiving, and contextualising audiovisual footage of the uprisings in Egypt since 2011, framing these primary sources with interviews with activists, filmmakers, witnesses, and creatives. http://filmingrevolution.org/

[2] High Rise (2009-ongoing) by Katerina Cizek is a big-budget interactive documentary ensemble financed by the National Film Board of Canada. So far the multi-year, multi-media collaborative documentary experiment consists of five sub-projects including mixed-media, interactive documentaries, installations, and films. The various sub-projects explore what it means to live in 'vertical suburbs' – i.e. multi-story buildings all over the world. http://highrise.nfb.ca/

[3] Since 2015 VR documentaries have gained attention from the creative industry as well as from various academic fields. IDFA 2015, Sheffield Documentary Festival 2015, the Montreal International Documentary Festival, as well as i-docs 2016 dedicated extra panels and sections to VR-based documentary pieces. Recently awarded projects are Witness 360° (2015) by Darren Emmerson and Assent (2015) by Oscar Raby, an autobiographical first-person documentary piece based on Oculus Rift technology.

[4] Although I base a notion of big data on Gartner Group's three dimensions of big data (volume, velocity, variety; Laney 2001) other definitions by Kitchin 2014, Boyd & Crawford 2012, Marz & Warren 2014, and Zikopoulos et al. 2012 adopt and extend these characteristics in the context of computational social sciences as big data sets (fine-grained in scope, exhaustive in scope, able to capture whole systems and to detect patterns). These approaches should always be seen within the special context of their usage. Hence this article will set the focus on specific characteristics by adopting them in its main research questions. The focus will lie on the organisation of multi-medial material (cf. the characteristic variety), of narrative patterns, respectively or their absence in aleatory interactive formats, and formal aspects of their accessibility and representation in database documentary. This allows us to develop a line of argument that explores the potential of small data (as defined in the following) as to the epistemological insights into the variety and complexity of relations and its implications in a way different from the usual representation or visualisation of relational (big) sets of data (in the form of graph database, for example).

[5] Segel & Heer 2010.

[6] Cf. Kitchin's differentiated and critical approach to the challenges and potential of Big Data analysis for the humanities and possible paradigm shifts (Kitchin 2014; cf. Boyd & Crawford 2012).

[7] Paradigmatic projects are the early Korsakow documentary with the telling title Kleine Welt (1997), Forgotten Flags (2007), Archiving R69 (2011), Ceci N'est Pas Embres (2011), and Racing Home (2015).

[8] Fort McMoney (2013), directed by David Dufresne, is an interactive documentary project at the intersection of multi-linear factual storytelling and strategic video game; cf. Clouds over Sidra (2015), by VRSE, an immersive interactive VR-exploration of a Syrian refugee camp; http://vrse.works/826/clouds-over-sidra-wins-sheffield-docfest-award/.

[9] Miles expands this train of thought in his v-log manifesto vogma as well as in several lectures and publications. Cf. also his thought on a 'poetics for cinematographic database narratives via the cinematic interval' (Miles 2012).

[10] Hereby I refer to a broad notion of Latour's Acteur-Réseau, such as redefined by the French scholar himself in On Recalling ANT or as the concept developed by Krieger & Belliger. Cf. Latour 1999; Krieger & Belliger 2014.

[11] Bergson 1991, p. 259.

[12] Bergson 1946, p. 169.

[13] Deleuze 1986.

[14] Miles 2014a.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Manovich 1999, p. 81.

[17] Miles 2014b, p. 19.

[18] 'Das Problem ist, dass linearkausal denken wollende Autoren auch multikausale Storys durchdenken wollen, […] und das ist – mit zunehmender Komplexität der Geschichte – unmöglich. Der Trick, um dieses Problem zu lösen, ist radikal einfach: Der Autor muss das Durchdenken aufgeben.' (Thalhofer 2014, p. 63, translation A.W.)

[19] http://planetgalata.com/korsakow/en/. Thalhofer also edited a linear film using parts of the footage of the interactive experience.

[20] Cf. Bakhtin's concept of chrono-topos in literary theory as the merging of the dimensions of time and space; cf. also the various relational topological dimensions of 'transitory transitional places', e.g. Günzel 2007, pp. 14-29.

[21] Miles 2015, p. 4.

[22] Cf. the notion of direct cinema, the 'desire for a new cinematic realism' (Monaco 2003) or Nichols' observatory mode (Nichols 1991).

[23] In this context one has to remember that the nature of documentary film has been the subject of discourse in theory ever since its beginnings. If one thinks of the first definition by John Grierson, who described documentary as 'the creative treatment of actuality', or if one takes Nichols' long-established model of different 'modes of representations' (particularly the concepts of the poetic, self-reflexive, and participatory mode), several discourses on documentary film point towards an opening of essentialist approaches.