

The Living Documentary: from representing reality to co-creating reality in digital interactive documentary

Introduction

This research germinated in my mind fifteen years ago when, working as a television producer, I began to question how the digitalisation of the whole production process (from filming to editing) and of content distribution (first via digital cable and satellite, and later via the Internet) would affect the form, and the effect of documentary making. What will the documentary of the future be like? How will digital interactive and networked media enforce new logics of representation of reality? These questions have evolved since formally starting this research at Goldsmiths, but my fundamental interest in the documentary form as a way of relating to reality and of creating models of subjectivity¹ has not changed.

What is interesting about the documentary form is not so much its attempt to portray a reality of interest to the filmmaker, but that the way the filmmaker chooses to interact with reality, to mediate it through shooting, editing and showing it, is indicative of new ways of thinking about reality, and therefore of forging it. In other words documentary doesn't say much about what reality *is* but it says a lot about *how we do relate to* reality and how we construct our knowledge, and our beliefs, around it. If we accept the hypothesis that media is not neutral, as it affords² a certain type of informational organisation that shapes the final artefact and places its users in specific roles, then entering into a digital networked society must be seen as having cultural, political and aesthetic consequences. This research focuses on the

¹ I refer here to models of "subjective consciousness" in Chalmers terms (1996) as ways to create a consciousness of the self: how are 'qualia, subjective experiences, first-person phenomena' (Searle 1997:99) experienced and created through the relation human-interactive documentary? In chapter three this concept will be expanded to Guattari's 'complexes of subjectivation' (1995:7).

² The word "affordance" was originally invented by psychologist J. J. Gibson (1977, 1979) to refer to the actionable properties between the world and an actor (a person or animal). 'A path *affords* pedestrian locomotion' (Gibson, 1979:36), 'a fire affords warmth' (ibidem). To Gibson, affordances are relationships, some of which are perceivable while some others are not - or we just do not know about them. When I say that a media affords certain types of relationship I mean that each media permits, allows and accommodates different information structures: a video tape affords sequential shots while a DVD can afford non sequential random viewing.

changes that can be observed in a specific type of digital artefact: the interactive documentary.

With the availability of high speed broadband in private households, collaborative Web 2.0 and the high penetration of mobile digital devices over the last ten years, the Internet has shifted from being a secondary delivery platform for video producers to being a fundamental production platform for any documentary maker. Smart phones allow us to access content on the move but also to send photos, videos and texts from wherever we are. The Web is no longer populated by static pages designed by specialists: it hosts highly networked and dynamic content that can be produced from everywhere by not particularly digitally skilled individuals. In such networked cultural and technological context people interested in factual narrative are rightly considering digital media as an alternative medium to video and film – which have been the traditional media of documentary makers so far. But a platform that affords interactivity pushes authors to experiment with interaction, changing the form of the documentary from linear to non-linear, from authored to collaborative and from video-based to multi-media based. The result of those experiments is what, in this research, will be referred to as interactive documentaries³.

If interactive documentaries can be traced back to the early 1980s it is only in the last ten years, since non-professional content has started populating Web 2.0 blogs and dynamic websites, that they have been asserting themselves as a radical new form. Recent projects such as *Gaza Sderot: Life in Spite of Everything* (2008), *Journey to the End of Coal* (2009), *The Virtual Revolution* (2009), *Prison Valley* (2010), *Life in a Day* (2010) and *Beyond 9/11* (2011), indicate that large communication corporations such as the BBC, Arte TV, Le Monde and Time Magazine, are moving into the field, investing into interactive platforms and moving the genre to another economic scale.

As in any emerging field there is a lack of definitions and taxonomies that confuses our understanding of the genre which makes the mapping of the field particularly difficult. Terminologies such as new media documentaries, web-docs, docu-games, cross-platform docs, trans-media docs, alternate realities docs, web-native docs and interactive documentaries are all used without clear understanding of their differences. But a closer look at the form shows that all these types of interactive documentaries are substantially different

³ A digital interactive documentary not only uses a digital support (that could be anything from digital video to mobile phones or the Web...) but it also demands some embodied interactivity from the user-participant (in other words a participation that is more than the mental act of interpretation).

because they all vary in degrees of interactions, in levels of participation, in logics of interaction and in degrees of narrative control by the author.

It is in this fuzzy and constantly evolving context that this research seeks to map the forms of emerging interactive documentaries, so as to propose a definition and a taxonomy of the genre. It aims to analyse the specificities of each type of interactive documentary and, finally, to investigate the influences that interactive documentaries might have in forging our understanding of our world, and our role within it.

This research argues that interactive documentaries should be looked at as *relational* entities, rather than static ones. The term “relational” implies that these are dynamic systems formed by heterogeneous entities (humans, machines, protocols, technology, society, culture) where all the components are interdependent. For example, their interactive nature demands an active participation of the user who, de facto, becomes a *doer*, rather than a *viewer*. The user needs to act on, interact with, the interactive documentary for it to materialize itself into a new screen. The user is therefore not *external* but rather *internal*, “part of” the system. The user and the interactive documentary are linked and interdependent: a string of feed-back loops (action/reaction) ties them together and transforms them both. It is not one object that needs to be studied, but a cloud of possibilities that depends on the possible relations between several dynamic systems.

This view of relationality inscribes itself in the current debates around body and affect that have emerged in cultural and social studies in the last ten years (Blackman, 2008; Brennan, 2004; Clough, 2008; DeLanda, 1992; Massumi, 2002; Lash, 2006; Latour, 2002, 2004; Parisi, 2004). The importance of *affect* - understood as ‘pre-individual bodily forces augmenting or diminishing a body’s capacity to act’ (Clough, 2008:1) – is that it puts the emphasis on the concept of *becoming*, rather than *being*, and on *process*, rather than *structure*. Individuals, in such paradigm, are not separate from their environment, not in control of it either, but constantly affected by it and ‘put into motion by other entities, human or non-humans’ (Latour, 2004:205). It is in this context that this research concentrates on a particular encounter between entities: the user and the interactive documentary. The aim is not to focus on the effect on the user but if anything to diminish the importance of the user when studying interactive documentaries.

It is argued that a relational approach allows us to concentrate on the temporary links created between a user and a digital artefact. This approach puts the emphasis on their *becoming one*, and on the *process* that makes such encounter possible. By doing so, we can discover the complexity, the transformational power and the political impact of interactive documentaries.

This would not be possible using more traditional methodologies of analysis, such as film studies⁴ or Human Computer Interaction⁵, as they tend to have a dualistic approach film-audience, and digital artefact-user. It also needs to be noted that film studies tend to focus on image composition and temporal montage, none of which are representative of the non-linear, multi-window nature of interactive artefacts (as argued by Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media*, 2001⁶). Furthermore, as we will see in chapter five, certain types of interactive documentaries use little, sometimes no, moving image at all. Human Computer Interaction, on the other hand, has a rather user-centric⁷ approach to interactive artefacts; it focuses on the action/reaction dynamics between the user and the computer, and tends to disregard the potential effects of such exchange onto a larger system. In this research the interactive documentary will not be seen as a static finite product, but rather as an *eco-system*⁸ (Fuller, 2005; Guattari, 2000; Hayles, 1999; Gibson, 1979; McLuhan, 1968) where one change in the system has repercussions on all its components.

By looking at interactivity⁹ as transformative, responsive and adaptive the interactive documentary will be re-defined as a *Living Documentary*. This is a living entity - living as conceived by Maturana and Varela in Second Order Cybernetics where a living *autopoietic*¹⁰

⁴ I refer here to the traditional ways of analysing film language as expressed, among others, by Bordwell and Thompson (2004), Grant and Wharton (2005), Nelmes (2003) and Arijon (1976); where the means by which film meaning is created include 'dialogue and voiceover, but really focuses on cinematic aspects such as cinematography, *mise en scène*, editing, sound and special effects, as well as genre, narrative, representation and the star system' (italics in original, Grant and Wharton 2005:8).

⁵ Human Computer Interaction (HCI) is 'a field which studies and attempts to improve the interface between computers and users' (Lister et al. 2003:41). A historic of different HCI approaches will be given in chapter one.

⁶ In *The Language of New Media*, Manovich foresees the re-emergence of 'spatial montage' (where different images, of different sizes, appear at the same time on the screen) through the passage from linear film to interactive media. Spatial montage, he says, 'represents an alternative to traditional cinematic temporal montage, replacing traditional sequential mode with a spatial one' (2001:322).

⁷ See *The Three Paradigms of HCI* (2007), by Harrison, Tatar and Sengers.

⁸ In *Media Ecologies*, Fuller reminds us that ecologists focus on 'dynamic systems in which any one part is always multiply connected, acting by virtue of those connections, and always variable, such that it can be regarded as a pattern rather than simply as an object' (2005:4). Although several understandings of the word "ecology" are possible, and Fuller provides an exhaustive summary in his book, it is to this idea of 'massive and dynamic interrelation of processes and objects, beings and things, patterns and matter' (2005:2) that we will refer in this thesis.

⁹ As we will see in chapter two, the traditional Human Computer Interaction understanding of "interactivity" is of series of on/off loops between the human and the machine. This two-way approach will be argued against in this research.

¹⁰ First formulated by biologists Maturana and Varela in 1980 autopoiesis has become a key concept of Second Order Cybernetics by defining the living organism as self-organized, autonomous and in constant relation (structural coupling) with its environment. Abstracting "life" from the usual characteristics of "birth", "death" and "mode of reproduction" was perceived as liberating and revolutionary in the cultural context of the early 1980's. This maybe explains why autopoiesis was rapidly extrapolated from the biological context and used in philosophy (Deleuze, Guattari), social sciences (Luhmann), psychology (Bruner) and cognitive science (Thompson, Rosch, Clark and Noe). It is argued, in this research, that autopoiesis is particularly useful for the analysis of digital interactive documentaries because it defines interaction as a set of relationships between the organism and its environment that defines, and shapes, both of them.

organism is self-organized, autonomous and in constant relation (structural coupling) with its environment (Maturana and Varela, 1980). Through this new approach it will be possible to question the levels of *liveness* of Living Documentaries (their aptitude to self-organize, to adapt to their environment¹¹ and to change it). It will be argued that Living Documentaries are not the simple evolution of linear documentaries through digital technology¹². Digitality is fundamental, but not enough. Their liveness and adaptivity is what permits them to change; it gives them a transformational power, which will be the focus of the second part of this thesis.

Transformation will be understood as the power of the interactive documentary to change itself, but also to change what is part of its ecosystem: the user, the author and the interface being just some of the components of such system. If one accepts the constructivist idea that we constantly re-adjust our understanding of the world through our actions in it, then the interactive documentary becomes a mediated world where we constantly test options, experiment and reposition ourselves. This could be true of our relation to any digital interactive artefact, whether a 3D game or an interactive art project, but the particularity of the interactive documentary is that it relates to reality. While the users are selecting options, sending videos or navigating in a virtual world, they are conscious that this is not a fictional space: they are exploring, changing, participating in a particular vision of reality. If in the last century, as we will see in chapter one, documentary's purpose has shifted from representing to negotiating reality (Bruzzi, 2000; Nichols, 2001; Winston, 1995), interactive documentary is going one step further: the act of negotiation now implies direct participation by the user to the construction of the world that is portrayed. Reality can now be co-created, but who are the participators? What power do they have? And which visions of the world are emerging from such co-creation?

In order to answer those questions this thesis will proceed through a series of steps.

¹¹ Where "environment" is not understood in a dualist way, as what surrounds us, but rather in a systemic way, as what shapes us, and is shaped by us. This vision is in line with psychologist Gibson view of the human as in a relation of interdependence with his environment (1979). Following a similar approach, biologists Maturana and Varela, referred to the example of the foot and the shoe: those two entities are not to be seen as separated, since the 'recurrent interactions' (1987:75) between the two bond them in a structural coupling where they are both shapers and shaped.

¹² Critiques done to the digital as a political system (Deleuze, 1995; Galloway, 2004; Massumi, 2007b) will not be taken into consideration in this research as it goes beyond its scope. This thesis wants to limit itself to the creation of conceptual tools to understand new media forms such as the interactive documentaries.

Chapter one will propose a definition of the word “interactive documentary” and attempt a taxonomy of the genre. For this we will need to question if current definitions of linear documentaries are applicable to digital interactive documentaries. Differences and similarities between linear and interactive documentaries will be highlighted. *Modes of interaction*, will be proposed as a way to distinguish between interactive documentaries. Modes of interaction are ways of conceiving the relation between users and digital content; they give different levels of agency¹³ to the user and they set the parameters of the interaction between the users and the interactive artefact. Four types of interactive documentary modes will be proposed: *hypertext*, *conversational*, *experiential* and *participatory*. Examples of each of those modes will be discussed specifically in the thesis.

Chapter two will use Cybernetic concepts of feed-back loops, autopoiesis, embodied action and structural coupling to visualize interactive documentaries as systems that are in constant relationships with other systems, and that are formed by/through those relationships. Deleuze, Guattari and DeLanda’s use of autopoiesis and assemblages¹⁴ will be essential to look at interactive documentaries as *Living Documentaries*, living forms with levels of interactivity and levels of autopoiesis.

In chapter three, four and five case studies of each interactive mode described in chapter one will be examined. Assemblage theory will be used to highlight the domains that form them and to question what stabilises and destabilises them. Then, through the lenses of autopoiesis and structural coupling, the levels of autopoietic behaviour of each case study will be analysed. From this standpoint it will be questioned how open such systems/artefacts are to organizational change, how their identity might change through interaction with their environment and, finally, how such systems might stop functioning/existing – in other words how they might die. The selected case studies will be: the *[LoveStoryProject]*, by Florian Thalhofer (2002-2007) for the hypertext mode, *Rider Spoke*, by Blast Theory (2007) for the

¹³ Agency is a philosophical concept that describes the capacity of an agent to act in a world. The term is used here in its interactive design sense, as a description of what a user can do when interacting with a specific digital artifact.

¹⁴ The different definitions of the term assemblage, by philosophers Deleuze and DeLanda will be seen in chapter two. The theory of assemblages considers that entities on all scales (from sub-individual to transnational) are best analyzed through their components (themselves assemblages). The relationship between an assemblage and its components is complex and non-linear: assemblages are formed and affected by heterogeneous populations of lower-level assemblages, but may also act back upon these components, imposing restraints or adaptations in them.

experiential mode and *Global Lives*, by David Harris (2009-ongoing), for the participatory mode. The only mode that will not be analysed through a case study is the conversational one. Although this research wants to propose a new methodology for analysing interactive documentaries, it does not try to be exhaustive - the task would simply be too vast. I have therefore decided to leave out the conversational mode in the hope of continuing such research as a post-doc.

The conclusion of this research will seek to illustrate how each interactive mode carries with it an inherent vision of the world, and our role within it. It is hoped that this contribution will not only be relevant to the academic understanding of interactive documentaries but that it will also help future creators when conceiving their digital products. The message, and the effect, of their work will depend on the topic they portray, the media they use and the look and feel of their interactive artefact, as well as the interactive modes that they decide to use. As with any relational object, the interactive documentary has a political power that should not be underestimated by its creators, interactors and participants. This thesis proposes new lenses to see the transformative power of interactive documentaries. They will be useful to those for whom documenting reality is a dynamic process, not a straight line. This is only a starting point: in a fluid environment, lenses will have to be constantly re-adjusted to keep some focus on the ever-changing shape of what we perceive as our standing ground.

The difficulty in exploring a field in constant evolution is in resisting the temptation to simplify it too much and propose a methodology that is coherent, yet flexible enough to be case specific. My personal solution has been to propose a general methodology, a way of looking at interactive documentaries, that only acquires density and depth once applied to specific cases studies. In order to choose the most significant examples, and to test my own ideas while they were developing, I created my own website in March 2009. In www.interactivedocumentary.net I have created an archive of existing interactive documentary examples, I have documented my own process of going through a PhD and, most importantly, I have invited others to participate – and therefore to change/push my own thinking. In a certain way my website has been my own interactive documentary, a place where my voice has reached others, but also where unforeseeable relations, technical constraints and people's suggestions have transformed my own thinking, my language and my beliefs. The professional credibility acquired through my website has also allowed me to

co-convene i-Docs 2011¹⁵, the first European symposium totally dedicated to the field of interactive documentary, and its subsequent i-Docs 2012. I see in my website the demonstration that an interactive documentary is not just a virtual space - a new living species confined to the cyber world - but rather a relational object that keeps changing and that affects its digital, and non-digital, components in very tangible ways.

by Sandra Gaudenzi, London, 20.07.2012

¹⁵ i-Docs 2011 was convened by myself and Judith Aston on behalf of the Digital Cultures Research Centre, University of the West of England, Bristol. All the abstracts of the conference can be found at www.i-docs.org.