The interactive multimedia documentary as a discourse on interactive non-fiction: for a proposal of the definition and categorisation of the emerging genre

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Abstract: this article intends to present the state of affairs on the converging lines between the audiovisual documentary and the online interactive multimedia documentary. We propose the definition of a new, emerging genre, which here is called "interactive multimedia documentary," counter to the creation and production logic of linear documentaries. Finally, we propose some considerations on the new genre's prospective evolution.

Keywords: documentary, digital media, interactive digital communication, interactive multimedia documentary, Internet, 2.0, browsing methods, interaction methods, representation methods

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1. Introduction

This article focuses on the study of the convergence process between two fields of communication: the documentary and digital media. These are two fields that have experienced complex processes to have now arrived at a very interesting point of convergence. Towards the end of the 20th century, and the beginning of the 21st, these two histories have travelled separate paths, having passed their challenges, survived a changing environment and reached a noticeable level of maturity. As a result of this initial contact, each genre has adopted their own unique set of properties and characteristics. In a sense, the initial fusion is produced from their mutual attraction: the documentary genre provides a variety of modalities in representing reality, and digital media provided the new mode of browsing and interaction. These modes found each other within the interactive applications, which use different presentation and browsing mediums. on the one hand, off-line mediums, and on the other, the online medium par excellence, the Internet[1]. This scenario has brought the emergence of different formats and the constitution of new genres, as is the case of the interactive multimedia documentary. It involves a nuanced genre resulting from a double hybridization: between the audiovisual-documentary genre-and interaction-interactive digital media, and between information-contents-and entertainment-browseable interface.

2. The documentary experience

This documentary genre is one of the most powerful and efficient tools that exists to explain non-fictional stories of reality. Its multiple applications have helped it become a fundamental element in the film industry since the first documentary film, *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty 1922), which showed the medium's powerful ability to bring the audience into the other people lives and places. Currently the documentary genre continues to provide audiences with unique experiences, representing life and providing in-depth observations and reflections on culture, politics, ideologies and people.

While the representation of reality can be considered its most common element, especially in the first documentaries, with time, filmmakers have gotten to understand the documentary as Stella Bruzzi describes in her book *New documentary* (2000)*: a critical introduction,* a negotiation with reality, mixing the reality of the filmmaker's experience with his/her attempts to understand it. Bruzzi places special emphasis on the role of documentary filmmakers and indicates that documentaries are "performative acts whose truth comes into being only at the moment of filming" (2000:4). For this, the documentary is "a negotiation between reality on one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other' (2000:4)". The documentary's evolution has gone from representing reality to organising it, and finally, to become a negotiation of reality. This evolution shouldn't be considered as a something strictly chronological, but as movements and trends that may co-inhabit the same documentary. But, what does negotiation really mean? Bruzzi sees the filmmaker as somebody who invades a space and marks it, leaving behind the illusion of "objective film" that inspired the Direct Cinema of the sixties. For Bruzzi (2000), the interruption of reality with the film director's actions is what gives meaning and value to the documentary. She sees the documentary as 'a dialectical conjunction of a real space and the filmmakers that invade it' (2000:125).

On the other hand, the interactive media have started to redefine the documentary experiences outside of traditional film. We can confirm that these experiences are documentaries in the sense that they provide information and knowledge on the

topics and subjects in real life, but unlike traditional documentaries, these new documentaries allow the users a unique experience, offering options and control over it (Britain, 2009:2).

The concepts of choice and control were considered the rights of the documentary filmmaker. When this power is given to the user, as in the case of interactive mediums, the author's role as narrator (and thus the story's point of view) is put in question or eliminated. In traditional documentaries, the author's capacity to influence the viewer is granted, and is done through filmmaking and the structured discourse that is articulated via editing and montage. But, what happens when this capacity is granted, at least partly, to the documentary viewer? What happens when the viewer is no longer a mere viewer, but becomes a creator of his/her documentary experience?

If the story (and thus, reality itself) is really negotiable, there are multiple "realities" that may be extracted from a single event or situation, depending on who is telling the story. In her work, Sandra Gaudenzi (2009) defends the idea that by taking advantage of interactive media, documentary experiences can be created that capture the multiple visions of reality that make up our world, giving everybody the power to document themselves. This idea of an "open code" documentary is in the middle ground on the concept of an interactive documentary.

The aims of the interactive documentary may be very similar to those of the traditional documentary, but the former requires your physical contribution (Gaudenzi, 2009:8). By allowing a physical interaction, the interactive documentary provides its users a layout open to browse through the content (Choi, 2009: 45). Mark Stephen *Meadows, in his book Pause and Effect. The art of interactive narrative (2003)proposesfour basic characteristics of interaction with the documentary :* the capacity for observation, exploration, modification and reciprocity.

According to Nichols, the strategy is to define the concept of the documentary from three different points of view, aware that "each starting point leads to a different yet not contradictory definition" (1991:12). The three points of view proposed are the director's, the text's and viewer's. With regards to the importance of the user's expectations and the key role of technology in creating a film, Gaudenzi (2009:2) claims that "the user's expectations are as important as the filmmaker's agenda in defining documentary, and that technology has an active role in shaping a film, are for me the strengths of Bill Nichols' contribution to the subject matter."

Starting from the film director, the definition focuses on the position and power of the director. Even though this definition has the advantage of uncovering the filmmaker's influence in creating his/her artefact, it has the inconvenience of not being concise in terms of the "control" (Controlling the actors? The events? The framing? Of what could happen? The distribution? The sponsorships?, et.) Another possibility consists in defining a documentary as a film genre as many more, that is, like a type of text, a type of audiovisual "text." (Nichols, 1991:18). But the problem consists in determining which are the characteristic films that would have to form part of this genre. This definition is based on a structuralist paradigm, and according to Gaudenzi (2009:3), it is not very useful in the search for defining interactive digital documentaries. Finally, another option is defining the documentary from a user's point of view.

The idea is to include the viewer and/or user in defining a discursive artefact like the documentary is especially relevant for Gaudenzi, since it emphasis the artefact as a

relational object, and not the control of the artefact. Nichols also offers another possible focus to delimit what could be a documentary. As we have repeated, instead of concentrating on the participants, we concentrate on the "modes" of representation. Modes of representation are "basic ways of organizing texts in relation to certain recurrent features or conventions" (1991:32). One mode transmits one perspective of reality, because the logic a documentary adopts says a lot about the filmmaker's and audience's position in trying to intervene in reality. Here the emphasis is in how the documentary is made, which is made manifest in the structure and how it positions the different implicated agents.

Nichols´ vision works around the belief that "documentary film practice is the site of contestation and change" (1991:12), which is an especially relevant focus for this study. But as we have seen, Nichols does not adopt a single definition, instead chooses three points of view (the film director, the text and the viewer) to argue how the three constitute the general logic that creates the document that represents reality. In this point, we no longer are asking the way in which reality is represented, but the interaction with it. That is why Gaudenzi (2009) calls them modes of interaction with non-linearity, instead of modes of representing reality:

"because I want to enforce a view of the documentary as praxis of doing, rather than praxis of communication or representation. In Chapter 1 (the literature review) I argue that the famous *modes of representation* presented by documentary theorist Bill Nichols were relevant for linear documentaries but that it is *modes of interaction* that become key in interactive documentaries." (Gaudenzi, 2009:2)

3. The interactive multimedia documentary: definition proposal

If the definition of documentary is complex and currently under construction, the definition of a multimedia documentary is in the previous stage. Here we propose an approach to the concept and a possible definition for interactive documentaries from the proposals of Sandra Gaudenzi´s aforementioned study, which states:

"If documentary is a fuzzy concept, digital interactive documentary is a concept yet to be defined. This comes with no surprise, since it is an emergent field, but the lack of writing on digital interactive documentary has also to do with the fact that new media artists do not consider themselves documentary makers, and therefore they call their work anything but interactive documentaries. In 2002 artist and academic Mitchell Whitelaw was noticing the rise of the terminology 'interactive documentary' (Gaudenzi, 2009:6)".

The problem when defining what an interactive multimedia documentary is does not only arise from the lack of acceptance or from not delimiting a main current. According to Gaudenzi, this is clearly shown in the fact that there are many film and documentary critics that doubt if an interactive documentary can be considered as such because of the lack of a strong narrative voice. Those who have tried to define the term have treated interactive digital documentaries as the evolution of the linear documentary, framed within the predominance of the digital convergence. They have assumed that the interactive documentary is basically a video, and that its associated interactivity is no more than a way of browsing through its visual content. Some of

those who have tried to describe the genre are Xavier Berenger, Carolyn Handler Miller and Katherine Goodnow.

Xavier Berenguer (2004) considers the interactive documentary as a type of narrative that emerged from hypertexts and games of the eighties. According to Berenguer, when a narrative becomes interactive through the use of digital media, it can spread into three main directions: interactive narrative, interactive documentary and games. Carolyn Handler Miller, author of the book *Digital Storytelling* (2004), also considers the interactive documentary as a type of interactive non-fictional film. The author says that the viewers "can be given the opportunity of choosing what material to see and in what order. They might also get to choose among several audio tracks' (Handler Miller, 2004:345). From Katherine Goodnow´s perspective, interactive documentaries come from the initial experiments of interactive films, where physical activity, while not cognitive, is used to browse through or across the existing material (video or film). Gaudenzi values the basic distinction between physical and cognitive functions that Goodnow uses: "Goodnow makes a distinction between cognitive function (the act of understanding and interpreting) and physical activity (where the 'audience must do something in order to fulfil the desire to know how the story will end, or to explore alternative storylines')" (Goodnow, 2004:2). But he differs from her when trying to position the interactive phenomenon from the perspective of the evolution of different genres or trends and, on the other hand, approaches Mitchell Whitelaw´s position (2002:3):

"By tying linear and interactive documentaries together the tendency would be to expect them to be somehow similar, or at least in a clear evolutive relation. I personally disagree with this vision and join artist and new media theorist Mitchell Whitelaw when he says that 'new media doco [documentaries] need not to replay the conventions of traditional, linear documentary storytelling; it offers its own ways of playing with reality' (Gaudenzi, 2009:7)

Whitelaw finishes by giving us a clue of what will be crucial in our approach, which is also adopted by Gaudenzi: the interactive documentary offers its own forms or resources to play with reality, and by extension, represent it. According to this author, we think a useful approach would start by assuming that both the linear and interactive forms intend to document reality, but the type of material associated to the mediums and the authors´ and participants´ preferences concludes by creating a very different final product. Gaudenzi continues the approach by making a basic premise in his work and analysis to distinguish the lineal from the interactive documentary:

"If linear documentary demands a cognitive participation from its viewers (often seen as interpretation) the interactive documentary adds the demand of some physical participation (decisions that translate in a physical act such as clicking, moving, speaking, tapping etc...). If linear documentary is video, of film, based, interactive documentary can use any existing media. And if linear documentary depends of the decisions of its filmmaker (both while filming and editing), interactive documentary does not necessarily have a clear demarcation between those two roles [...]" (Gaudenzi, 2009:8).

It seems obvious that a possible definition of an interactive multimedia documentary must assume the open and complex character of this specific genre (always subject to changes and variations), the ambivalence between the cinematographic and

interactive, and finally, identifying it as a discourse that attempts to transmit a specific type of knowledge linked to a reality.

Recapitulating some of the ideas presented and bring in this approach, we can provisionally define interactive multimedia documentaries as interactive applications, on or off-line, made with the intention of representing reality with its own mechanisms that we can call modes of browsing or interaction, relative to the level of participation allowed.

Interactive multimedia documentaries try to represent and interact with reality, a fact that implies the consideration and use of a set of techniques or modes to do so (browsing and interaction modes), which make it, in this new form of communication, the key element in reaching the documentary's objectives. The interactive structure may come from one or several different perspectives, and may finish in a specific point for the author, but also admit a structure with several developments that contemplate different paths and outcomes.

4. Distinction between linear and interactive multimedia documentaries

The proposals for this genre do not usually distinguish between traditional audiovisual documentary and the interactive one, since the latter is usually considered the natural evolution of the former, just like the Web 1.0 naturally became the Web 2.0. This criterion seems insufficient to frame and define such a complex and varied genre.

The first characteristic that delimits both fields is evident: First, the traditional documentary is linear, that is, it takes you from a starting point to an ending point (from A to B) and follows a route pre-established by the author. The limits of authorship and control over the discourse is perfectly limited. In the second case, we start at a point proposed by the author (or optional) and we encounter bifurcations and alternative paths depending on the route we follow. The final decision is not left to the director, as in the first case, but to the interactive user. Therefore, we are not talking just about discourse, but different developments and thus, different possible stories. All in all, the key element that distinguishes the interactive audiovisual field is evident: traditional narratives follow a linearity whose discourse may not be altered, while in interactive territory, this order may be affected and modified.

Linking the previous point with Gaudenzi´s idea of physical participation in the interactive documentary, and as a second key distinguishing idea from a mental and physical perspective, we can affirm that both the linear and interactive documentary attempt to document reality, but the subject matter associated to the mediums and preferences of its authors and participants end up creating a very different final product. The linear documentary requires a cognitive (mental) participation of its audience, which becomes an interpretation and mental reflection of that viewed, in the second case, the interactive documentary demands, besides a cognitive interpretation, some types of physical participation with regards to decision making, such as the use of the mouse, movement through the virtual setting, use of the keyboard and writing, speaking, etc.

Finally, and associated with the previously presented concepts, this physical response required of the interactive user is made via the elements that the interactive

documentary offers: the modes of browsing and interaction. Bill Nichols´ modes of representation are pertinent for linear documentaries, but for our case (the analysis of interactive documentaries), the key elements are the modes of browsing and interaction. This perspective shifts the attention on the study of a documentary as a finished product, which can be analysed through styles and conventions (the camera's position, the use of off-screen narration, editing styles, its politics, etc.), towards the study of a documentary as a dynamic form, with a system composed of its relations to different realities (the people that have been interviewed, the camera as mediator, the author's intimate thoughts, the user's participation, the cultural and economic context, etc.).

Finally, the act of analysing interactive multimedia documentaries from its modes of browsing and interaction mark the fourth big difference between the two types of documentaries: during the complete production process, a linear documentary may constantly change, but once edited, this process stops. In analogical mediums, the production and viewing process are kept separate. This isn't the case for interactive digital mediums. In interactive documentaries, the process doesn't stop and may be considered as "live systems" that continue to change until the collaboration and participation are sustainable or desired by the users or systems that compose it.

5. Perspectives and conclusions

The production and dissemination of interactive documentaries seems to be at a standstill. Filmmakers have few incentives to convert their film into an interactive project, since doing so would limit their distribution to the Internet, renouncing their control over it and authorship, while decreasing the film's impact at the expense of the small screen.

Non-linear narration (for the author, equivalent to the loss of control over the discourse), is seen as a problem in the world of traditional documentaries, but in this new genre is considered a great opportunity. This type of narration allows us to provide audiovisual projects with elements that complement and enrich it, providing many added values to the overall viewer experience, so that it is more varied, complete and immersed. The director's role in documentary films consists in finding the middle ground where the meaning can be maximised and the audience is most committed; a middle ground where the documentary film can coexist with the interactive media. Through the combination of the force behind the cinematographic medium to provide perspective and the interactive capacity to improve user's participation with the material, interactive documentary film may offer more meaningful documentaries.

One of the essential premises of the traditional documentary is the will to organise a story in such a way that it is both informative and entertaining. And the interactive format, in this sense, must continue the tradition and try to offer similar experiences that in the most efficient, original and attractive way possible, combines a playful (entertainment) yet educational (knowledge) proposal. This is possible through the combination of the different modes of browsing and interaction in a single application, enabling multiple exchanges between the work and the interactive user.

First of all, the act of browsing and visiting different content presentations and structural proposals (the information and knowledge), implies the use of games´ strategies and resources. So from the interactive structure and through the modes of

browsing, the user, in a sense, "plays" with options offered by the work and may satisfy their initial need: that of leisure and entertainment. Secondly, this strategy, originating from experience with games, implies the visitor's immersion, avoiding a boring learning experience, and not erasing the need to be informed or to learn.

Therefore, the educational proposal offered becomes attractive and dynamic, beyond that of most classic hypertexts. In this stage the interactive user "learns playing" and once having "learned the lesson" in an entertaining, original and casual manner, may share with other interactive users, in real time or when considered appropriate. Therefore, we see how an interactive documentary may satisfy three needs and/or desires: That of a gamer (playful), that of a student or person with cultural interests (educational) and social (through the participant's communication). We believe that through the proper combination of these three aspects, non-fiction multimedia applications can be in par with other fictional proposals.

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[1] By the end of the last century, the off-line mediums, like the CD-ROM or DVD-ROM, were almost completely abandoned, since the Internet provided some key factors that allowed for a progressive abandonment of off-line mediums and a massive migration towards a single online support. The most important factors were: infrastructures and technologies that allow a never before seen accessibility in terms of information and contents, fast browsing, high technical features and interaction between users.