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Commentary

The Readerly and the Cinematic: Hybrid Reconfigurations through Digital Media Practice

Judith Aston

I write my response to the interviews with David Clark and Sharon Daniel as a Founding Director of i-Docs, the research group based in Bristol, which explores through praxis how evolving technologies are impacting on the documentary form. Working at the intersection between interactive film, electronic literature, and at times immersive theatre, I am interested in the hybrid forms that emerge when documentary practices engage with evolving technologies that incorporate the digital imaginary. My response here is framed within this context and on the understanding that documentary too is a constantly evolving set of practices. Historically, I have used the term “interactive documentary” to describe this field of inquiry and, for the sake of consistency, will continue to do so here. However, “open documentary” and “docmedia” are other equally valid terms, which are emerging as an alternative way to describe and engage with many of the same issues as set forth in this response.

David’s and Sharon’s approaches are of strong relevance to this field of inquiry, for their distinct but related approaches to interactive and non-linear narrative. In reading their two interviews, it strikes me that there are two key aspects, which connect them both to each other’s work and to my own specialism. The first of these is that although they both position themselves as Media Arts practitioners, they have both found crossovers between their work and that of documentary practice. Sharon has explicitly engaged with the interactive documentary community since the first i-Docs symposium in 2011, and David (though having stronger connections with the electronic literature movement) has presented

his work in various forums and events on evolving documentary practices. The second connection is through their combined interest in cinematic narrative as a “site” or “territory” to be explored, as opposed to being experienced through linearly organized forms of delivery. This gives audiences agency, in relation to how they navigate their way through the work, and creates a hybrid reconfiguring of the relationship between the readerly and the cinematic, which is of particular interest to my work with interactive documentary (e.g., Aston 2017, 224) and to this volume as a whole.

Thinking about how the digital imaginary restructures form and content, Alexandre Brachet (a leading producer of interactive documentary work) argued vociferously for how the two are inextricably linked at our first i-Docs symposium in 2011. In talking about his seminal interactive documentary production, *Gaza/Sderot*, he described how “good interaction is integral to the successful delivery of content and to the creation of meaning” (Aston and Gaudenzi 2012, 130). He went on to say that “if design is part of the content, then the authorship of an i-doc does need to include the designers as part of the editorial process” (ibid: 130). Both Sharon and David understand this implicitly in their work, as the interviews reveal.

When talking about her project, *Inside the Distance*, Sharon describes how the interface design helps to communicate the concept of fluidity of subject position by enabling the viewer to switch positions between that of a mediator, a victim, and an offender. This fluidity at the level of interface design is integral to the content that is being conveyed. When talking about his work, David explains that it takes him a long time to figure out the feel of the piece and its aesthetics. He often starts with an arbitrary structure, such as the periodic table, and this directs him to cut things in a certain way. Over time this translates into the interface design, which inevitably feeds into how the content is received and interpreted.

In talking about the transformative nature of immersive, narrative, and database technologies, Janet Murray’s four affordances for digital media design offer a good point of reference (Murray 2011). For her, everything made up of electronic bits is potentially procedural (composed of executable rules), participatory (inviting human action and manipulation of the represented world), encyclopedic (containing very high capacity of information in multiple media formats), and spatial (navigable as an information repository and/or a virtual space). I have written about these affordances in relation to interactive documentary (Aston 2016), where I stress that once we start to drill into these

affordances, it immediately becomes clear that there is a whole host of different ways in which they can be applied and that different projects use some or all of them to a greater or lesser extent.

Both Sharon's and David's work fits with all four of these affordances in clear and interesting ways. Both work with authoring tools and programming software that creates executable rules, both invite participation to some extent—even if just offering the freedom to choose navigational direction—both work with encyclopedic database forms, and both prioritize spatially navigable environments over linearly organized forms of delivery. The one that is the most striking for me, however, is the spatial and navigable aspect to their work as an approach to narrative. Sharon describes how her methodology is to think of a set of issues or social problems as being like a “site” or “territory” rather than a story. She will map that territory by populating it with the testimony of those most impacted by the issue or problem and then drop viewers into that territory, such that they can find their own way through it. David explains how he has often been drawn to diagrams and the idea of a schematic, as these give a certain amount of freedom to populate their forms with ideas as opposed to specific stories. He talks about how what he really likes doing is to form a piece, in which you wander around making new connections and seeing things from different perspectives.

This involves a different form of engagement from which we associate with more established approaches to the cinematic and is, I think, the key to understanding the transformative potential of both Sharon's and David's work. It brings us back to the hybrid practices that sit at the intersection of the “readerly” and the “cinematic” and links to debates around “multimodal literacy” (Kress and Jewitt 2003), which views a “text” as having the potential to be made up of a whole variety of semiotic resources. These contain their own affordances and constraints, both individually and in combination, with “multimodal literacy” requiring an enhanced ability to make deliberate and effective choices in the construction and presentation of knowledge. Both Sharon's and David's work fits with this approach, as each of their projects combines different forms of media and requires those who are engaging with them to take an exploratory approach, in which they become implicated in the process of constructing knowledge as they go along. In this sense, their projects are to be *explored* and *discovered*, and the meaning that can be derived from them is relatively open ended.

That is not to say that these are not authored pieces, they very much are, but that the rules of engagement are very different from sitting down to read a book

or to watch a film. They involve hypertext logic as “a new medium for thought and expression” (Bolter 2001, 44), which is procedural and often antithetical to linear logical thought processes. When it comes to narrative, we are more used to texts, which have one beginning, one middle, and one end, and can become uncomfortable when hypertext narratives don’t conform to this principle. I would argue that is the wrong way to read hypertext projects, such as those of David and Sharon, and that it is our expectations of the work, as opposed to the work itself, that create the stumbling blocks. This is because hypertext involves the presentation of information through a linked network of nodes with which readers/viewers/interactors are free to navigate in a non-linear fashion. If we don’t approach it in this way by thinking about the aesthetics of simultaneity and the multiple and are instead looking for closure, we will be disappointed. That’s not to say that pattern, form, and shape aren’t there, just that the aesthetic of form and content has its own distinct pleasures that need to be understood for what they are.

Having been around these debates since they first came out (see, for example, Landow 1992), I would be the first to admit that whether or not hypertext will evolve into a widely accepted and sophisticated new discourse for the construction and representation of knowledge is still an open-ended question. This is because engaging with hypertext requires effort and the reward isn’t always immediate. It requires audiences to be open minded, to be willing to explore and discover, and to accept not having things laid out on a plate for them. Hypertext engages the analytical as well as emotional mind, and takes time and commitment to become entangled in the ideas and arguments that it presents through the design and selection of materials and navigational pathways offered to the reader. Often the pleasure lies in engaging with work through repeat visits, with each sitting revealing new connections and insights.

Also, hypertext often reveals itself through what Manovich refers to as “cultural interfaces” (2001), which are constantly evolving according to the choice of navigational design aesthetic and the medium of delivery. With David’s and Sharon’s work, this is definitely the case, as each iteration of their work is different, to reflect the shifting landscapes within which ideas such as theirs are being communicated. In this sense, audiences need to learn the rules of engagement with each new project, as well as to learn about the content. This makes it quite challenging and creates affinities with experimental novels, such as those of Paul Auster (e.g., 1987), whose experiments with form are inextricably linked to the content. This means that crossover with experimental literature, as

opposed to more formalist experimentation with visual art, is the most relevant to their endeavors. Often the more you engage, the more rewarding it becomes, but the initial will to put the time in has to be there, as the project themselves don't necessarily entice you in. This is why Sharon likens her work to hybrid forms, which reveal her multiple worlds as a researcher, artist, and human, and which create parallel but also unique encounters for her viewers.

There is no doubt that hypertext is a powerful research tool involving a collaborative effort in terms of the construction of knowledge. This relates to i-docs scholar Anna Wiehl's comment that it is about *doing* a subject, documentary in her case, as opposed to experiencing it (Wiehl 2019). The same can be said for hypertext projects across other contexts and disciplines, with the reader/viewer/interactant needing to approach them with an open mind and a willingness to make their own connections. In this sense, looking for narrative closure in David's and Sharon's work is not the point. Instead their texts are more like sites for research, which conform to Howard Rheingold's concept of the computer as being a "tool for thought" (2000). David and Sharon both offer a landscape, which can be explored with a view to learning something new and making previously unconsidered connections. This has much potential as a means through which to think through complexity, as it enables us to explore a topic from a multiplicity of angles.

As Sharon has said, she wants people interacting with her work to experience something of the intensity that she experienced in making the work and to connect things up in new ways. In her case, a key theme is to help American citizens to think through the retributive justice system and to begin to ask if there might be a better alternative, by presenting the case for restorative justice. Rather than laboring the point, she prefers her audience to explore this point for themselves, while often providing some directorial guidance through her introductory narration and editorial choices. David's work is more whimsical, as it invites people to come down rabbit holes with him, to explore the worlds and connections that he has made. He is keen to point out that he is often an unreliable narrator and that the process involves a discovery of meaning in response to the links and connections that he has already made.

Florian Thalhofer, as a key proponent of non-linear narrative, made a provocation to these debates at the fourth i-Docs symposium (Thalhofer 2016). He proposed that expanding one's literacies to encompass non-linear interconnected thinking is essential for humanity's survival in a complex world. For him, linear storytelling often places too much emphasis on causality and

tends to reinforce binary thinking. This is dangerous in a world where we have the power to destroy each other on an unprecedented scale. His point is that we need to move beyond this dependence on linear causality, as our future survival literally depends on it. As Einstein said: the definition of genius is taking something complex and making it simple. The proposition here is that this should be achieved not by retreating into binaries but by embracing complexity and appreciating the simplicity that lies on the other side of it.

For the time being, both David's and Sharon's projects can be articulated as avant-garde forms of experimental practice, as unique projects, which are appreciated by those who are willing to put the time in to be rewarded through deep engagement. Where this will settle, as computer literacies evolve and procedural knowledge becomes a more commonplace part of everyday life, is at this point uncertain. Only time will tell, but David's and Sharon's respective work is most definitely an important and leading contribution to a rapidly evolving field of discourse. It is, therefore, absolutely worth spending some time with their well-designed, impeccably executed and highly informative projects.

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