

2. Interactive Documentary: Its History and Future as a Polyphonic Form

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Abstract

This chapter looks at the decolonization of interactive documentary practices (i-docs) through the lens of polyphony. Writing as practice-based researchers from a position of privilege, the authors argue that self-reflexivity is a key requirement for “decolonizing the mind” and that i-docs can facilitate this process. They place polyphony at the heart of this, as an approach which encourages us to embrace complexity and plurality, and to respect different perspectives and points of view. Building in particular on Bakhtin’s work on polyphony, they argue that the interactive, multimodal and nonlinear properties of i-docs methods and tools can help us to reframe our perspectives on self and other, in ways that can be both challenging and transformative. Outlining the thinking behind their *Polyphonic Documentary* project, they look at what two specific software tools bring to the table. They also argue that approaching i-docs from the perspective of polyphony and decolonization can help with addressing two major and interconnected issues of our times: climate emergency and ideological polarization.

Introduction

This chapter picks up on the editors of this volume’s assertion that interactive documentary is in a constant process of becoming, that it is not so much a genre as a set of possibilities and practices which are constantly evolving in response not just to technological developments but also to the cultural specificities within which these technologies unfold. This refusal to allow the term to be pinned down to precise definitions or boundaries is in the spirit of what Paolo Favero has aptly described as “interactive documentary practices”¹, abbreviated here to i-docs. At the heart of this is the intention “to generate interdisciplinary exchange across academia and industry, platforms and genres.”² As Favero has stated, “the transcultural space of creative practices is perhaps the one we need to monitor in the future, in order to discover the leading trends in the field.”³ In so doing, we are able to approach i-docs as “a direction, an inspiration for creating more inclusive participatory and multi-modal experiences capable of responding to the changing world that surrounds us”.⁴ This book, with its focus on decolonizing practices, builds

¹ Favero, “The Travelling i-Docs”, 237.

² Aston, “Interactive Documentary: What Does It Mean and Why Does It Matter?”, online.

³ Favero, “The Travelling i-Doc”, 250.

⁴ Favero “The Travelling i-Doc”, 251.

on this transcultural spirit, with this chapter looking more specifically at the decolonization of i-docs through the lens of polyphony.

We see polyphony as being an important component of what i-doc practices have to offer in a way that is not dependent upon, but certainly aligns well with, concepts of co-creation, participation, and collaboration. As a key part of this, we propose that polyphonic approaches offer a way of thinking about narrative which can help to decolonize our understanding of “story” by questioning our received ontological assumptions and opening up perspectives which challenge essentialist ideas. We also see polyphonic approaches to i-docs as being helpful with combating fear of the “other”, offering us tools and perspectives which can help to embrace diversity and move away from the tendency towards ideological polarization. As part of this, we argue for the relevance of polyphony within i-docs to eco-narratives which give agency to the more-than-human,⁵ helping us to compose or co-create collective, non-anthropocentric and sustainable approaches to the future. In this sense, we see polyphony within i-docs as making a contribution towards the development of multimodal literacies which promote our ability to engage with complexity, navigate uncertainty and celebrate both within and across species, all key skills which we believe to be necessary for negotiating the challenges of the 21st century.

Building primarily on Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on polyphony, but also referring to Michel Foucault’s work on heterotopias, we argue that a dialogic approach is central to this, as a means of generating “new social relations and new forms of participation in the material, physical and social exigencies of everyday life”.⁶ This places i-docs as a tool for understanding “local contexts and the times in which we live”, in order to “better grasp (and possibly intervene in) the lived world that surrounds us”.⁷ With this in mind, we reference our current collaborative *Polyphonic Documentary* project,⁸ which has recently developed into a working group composed of over seventy people across several continents. We explain how this project is focusing on the potential of polyphony as an approach for multi-perspectival thinking within an i-docs context. While polyphony can be clearly found across a number of documentary forms, we explain that our main focus at this point is around reframing earlier debates within i-docs around narrative/non-narrative/anti-narrative and its relationship to storytelling and database aesthetics.

Key Terms, Definitions, and Research Questions

Patricia Zimmermann has noted that

polyphony emerges from music history and theory. It describes the layering of different melodies and voices to create new resonances, a combinatory art depending on both vertical and horizontal vocal movements . . . polyphony is a common organizing structure in Renaissance and Baroque music, as well as in

⁵ See: Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*; Lorimer, “Cultural Geography”.

⁶ Favero “The Travelling i-Doc”, 237.

⁷ Favero “The Travelling i-Doc”, 237.

⁸ See: <https://polyphonicdocumentary.com/>.

other types of music such as Indonesian gamelan, West African drumming, and Estonian and Ukrainian polychoral folk music.⁹

Moving away from a musical context, she also makes the point that historiographers have “criticized linear causal history as reductive of historical complexity, and have advocated for the explanatory power of polyvocal forms so that other voices and experiences can dislodge power relations”.¹⁰ Our work with polyphony builds on this approach to historiography and on the proposition that, when applied to the documentary form, “polyphonic structures can generate heterotopias through assemblages of difference, diversity, and interdisciplinarity”.¹¹

Heterotopia was first mentioned by Foucault in a limited way in 1966,¹² but our preference is to reference one of his more expansive talks from 1967.¹³ Unlike utopia, heterotopia describes a potentially real space (in time) in which we can see and hear what is going on around us from different perspectives. Heterotopias can function in different ways, and their use can change over time. They are, however, always spaces where incompatible or contradictory kinds of space converge, including cinemas, festivals, asylums, and prisons. They are dependent on the particularities of history, geography and society, offering spaces through which to talk and reflect on our contemporaneity and they are also connected to the whole world that surrounds them. We are exploring heterotopias and their relevance to polyphonic thinking through practice-led research. This enables us to use interactive documentary to get ‘our hands dirty again’¹⁴ and to learn through an interactive process of studying and making. While our focus to date has been primarily on Bakhtin’s work on the polyphonic novel, we will come back to Foucault’s work on heterotopias as our *Polyphonic Documentary* project progresses.

In relation to Bakhtin, we propose that there is value in interrogating his ideas about the polyphonic novel, to examine their relevance to decolonizing i-docs. Questions that relate to this within our research project include: What is the ongoing relevance of ideas about polyphony developed within the specificities of ideological frameworks from past times and cultures to a contemporary transcultural context? Can the approaches to polyphony which offer an alternative to the binary and overly empirical thinking of the Enlightenment still serve this purpose? How do Bakhtin’s ideas about polyphony as a single authored construct fit with current debates about co-creation which work in opposition to this construct? Can digital, non-linear interactive forms be developed as a place for using documentary to help work out new modes of inter-relationship which are fit for navigating the challenges of the 21st century? Where do the limits of an expanded and decolonized notion of “story” lie? As we write this chapter in 2021, the i-Docs research group (as originally convened by Aston, Jon Dovey and Sandra Gaudenzi through the

⁹ Zimmermann, “Polyphony and the Emerging Collaborative Ecologies”, 63.

¹⁰ Zimmerman, “Polyphony,” 63.

¹¹ Zimmerman, “Polyphony,” 63.

¹² See: Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

¹³ See: Foucault, “Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias”.

¹⁴ Favero, “The Travelling i-Doc”, 237.

first i-Docs symposium in 2011)¹⁵ from which this collaboration on polyphony has emerged, is ten years old. This offers an opportunity to look back in order to look forwards, to consider where the field has come from, where it is going, and how this is playing out within the context of decolonization and polyphony.

Looking back to look forwards

Though not explicitly articulated as such at the time, the principles of polyphony were very much what lay behind the motivation in co-convening the first i-Docs symposium in 2011 and have remained a central interest within the i-Docs research group ever since. Resonating with prior work on ethnographic archives and computer based spatial montage,¹⁶ the French collaboration between Arte and Upian for their 2008 i-doc project *Gaza/Sderot* was a key moment (see Figure 2.1). This now classic piece of professionally produced i-doc explores everyday life across two cities in Israel and Palestine. It was co-produced with six filmmaking teams in each country, who collected video material of everyday life across a forty-day period, and was designed as a split-screen i-doc to enable direct comparison of everyday life across the two cities.

<Figure 2.1 here>

Figure 2.1: *Gaza/Sderot: Life in Spite of Everything*. gaza-sderot.arte.tv

Viewers could explore the material by date, people, themes or specific locations on a map, to build up a picture of what could bring people together and not just divide them. The split screen approach showed two different versions of the subjects' everyday truth, their "realities" in two different countries which share the same, permanent war context. This multiplication of windows on screen points to a multiplication of points of view: "Although most people generally are aware of documentary as having an association with truth rather than truth itself, when you exhibit on more than one screen you make that association more transparent".¹⁷ The project's Executive Producer, Alexander Brachet, gave a keynote on *Gaza/Sderot* at the first i-Docs symposium in 2011¹⁸ and the project has been written up as a comprehensive case study by Ella Harris.¹⁹ It was an example of web-based i-doc work which lent itself to polyphony as a form of multiperspectivalism because it could be engaged with in several different ways. This soon became a well-established approach in the i-doc field, including through Canadian projects such

¹⁵ See i-docs.org for further details.

¹⁶ See Aston: "Spatial Montage and Multimedia Ethnography".

¹⁷ McLaughlin, "Freedoms and Accountabilities", 39.

¹⁸ See: Aston and Gaudenzi, "Interactive Documentary: Setting the Field".

¹⁹ See: Harris, "Introducing i-Docs to Geography".

as *Out My Window* (NFB 2009)²⁰, *A Journal of Insomnia* (NFB 2019)²¹ and *Sputnik Observatory* (Jonathan Harris 2009)²².

As technologies have continued to develop, the i-docs field has expanded to incorporate a wider range of approaches, which includes among others virtual and augmented reality. As part of this, the term “immersive” and issues relating to “presence” have become popular in many academic and industry circles, moving the focus away from the term “interactive” and its associated issues relating to “agency”. Rose writes that this offers some “welcome relief from the challenge of distraction inherent in browser-based work”²³ and the i-Docs research group has responded more generally by expanding the “i” in i-docs to incorporate both immersion and interactivity.²⁴ In addition to this, pioneering projects such as *Gaza/Sderot*²⁵ are no longer widely available because the Adobe Flash software that they were developed in is no longer being updated to accommodate the fast pace of change with computer operating systems and internet search engines.

Whilst the aggressive nature of “upgrade culture” is clearly an ongoing problem, there is also growing evidence to suggest that interest in the computer-based aesthetic of multiple windows and non-linear navigation is experiencing somewhat of a revival. Multi-window interfaces such as that of Zoom have become ubiquitous, high profile interactive narrative projects have started to emerge on channels such as Netflix (who have developed their own bespoke software tool for interactive narrative production), and many of us are engaged with using interactive tools for on-line learning. A major conference on interactive narrative in August 2021 was convened in response to this,²⁶ Kate Nash’s recent book on interactive documentary²⁷ reflects on this too, and interest in how this intersects with developments in artificial intelligence is building momentum.²⁸ We see this as evidencing the ongoing need to bring interactivity and immersion into dialogue with each other, and to not lose sight of the one in favor of the other, so as to avoid the pitfalls of technological determinacy.²⁹

This builds on Janet Murray’s point that interactivity and immersion should be seen as two mutually reinforcing concepts.³⁰ Furthermore, Murray brings attention to three aesthetic

²⁰ See: https://www.nfb.ca/interactive/highrise_out_my_window_en.

²¹ See: https://www.nfb.ca/interactive/a_journal_of_insomnia/.

²² See: <https://vimeo.com/sputnikobservatory>.

²³ Rose, “The Immersive Turn”, 147.

²⁴ See: i-docs.org.

²⁵ See: <http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/>.

²⁶ IFM: Interactive Film and Media Conference 2021: New Narratives, Racialization, Global Crises, and Social Engagement. <https://interactivefilm.blogspot.com/>.

²⁷ See: Nash, *Interactive Documentary: Theory and Debate*.

²⁸ See, for example: the workshop organized by The Space in 2019 on artificial intelligence and next generation storytelling: <https://www.thespace.org/resource/artificial-intelligence-and-next-generation-storytelling>.

²⁹ See: Aston, *Interactive Documentary*, on-line.

³⁰ See: Murray, *Inventing the Medium*.

principles, which combine in new ways through interactive narrative: immersion, agency, and transformation.³¹ She describes *Immersion* as being the feeling of being present in another place and engaged in the action therein, relating it to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief".³² With this in mind, Murray describes the computer as an "enchanted object", which creates "a public space that also feels very private and intimate".³³ *Agency* is described as being the feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions. This is more than interface activity, as the actions need to have an effect on the experience for there to be agency.³⁴ *Transformation* is then related to the shapeshifting that can be achieved by being able to switch perspectives or points of view within an interactive narrative.³⁵

Murray explains that by experiencing "interwoven stories as one unit, we can enhance the kaleidoscopic capacity of our minds, our capacity to imagine multiple points of view".³⁶ We see this as offering a transformative process which is key to the way in which we think about polyphony within an i-docs context. The spatial composition of multiple windows in the screen creates what Murray describes as a "virtual space" which can be navigated around.³⁷ In digital projects, this virtual space is negotiated through the human-computer interface, which gives participants, users or viewers some agency in deciding how to explore this space. This makes it very different from the split-screen aesthetic seen in more traditional documentary formats, which uses multiple windows in a more fixed way, as part of the documentary's sequential progression. As part of this, we are also interested in how this can play out in the hybrid space between the digital and non-digital, as i-docs practices can incorporate both.

Bakhtin, Dostoevsky, Polyphony and Decolonization

A key aim behind looking at the relevance of Bakhtin's work on polyphony to i-docs is our thinking around the need to decolonize storytelling and indeed, as a key part of this, to keep working on decolonizing our own minds. This links to Bakhtin's ideas about polyphony in the novel as being the consequence of a dialogic, as opposed to monologic, sense of truth. Using Dostoevsky's work as his example, Bakhtin argued that the polyphonic novel has the potential to unsettle absolute truths, drawing the authoritative into question and helping us to embrace multiple perspectives and points of view³⁸. In so doing, that which might otherwise have been considered to be certain becomes debated and open to interpretation. Bakhtin argued that this was achieved in Dostoevsky's novels by the way in which the author put himself into a dialogic relationship with his characters, giving them autonomy to speak with their own voice and point of view without any explicit judgement from the author. In so doing, Bakhtin showed how

³¹ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 181.

³² Murray, *Hamlet*, 110.

³³ Murray, *Hamlet*, 99.

³⁴ Murray, *Hamlet*, 128-9.

³⁵ Murray, *Hamlet*, 154.

³⁶ Murray, *Hamlet*, 160-1.

³⁷ Murray, *Hamlet*, 83.

³⁸ See: Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

Dostoevsky, as an explorer of ideas and systems of belief, was enabling his readers to explore important societal themes (such as suicide, poverty, human manipulation, and morality) from a variety of different perspectives.

This still plays out in Dostoevsky's novels as story, but in a way that is not based on the principles of drama³⁹ and which gives autonomy to the reader. Whilst the author maintains a privileged role in terms of structuring the overall narrative, there is no explicit attempt to make the characters subservient to an overarching authorial point of view. Instead, the author's role is to enter into dialogue with the characters, and, in a quite distinct way, to participate in that dialogue. In so doing, Bakhtin sees Dostoevsky as being "one of the interlocutors in the 'great dialogue that he himself has created'".⁴⁰ This enables the novel to use story as a site for debating ideas about how society should be constructed which are not fixed but which highlight the ongoing interaction of ideas, emphasizing fluidity and change rather than rigidity".⁴¹ For Bakhtin, the polyphonic novel could help to "renounce our monological habits so that we might come to feel at home in the new artistic sphere that Dostoevsky discovered ...in that incomparably more complex *artistic model of the world* which he created".⁴² Given that openness, fluidity, dialogue, and multiperspectivity are values that we consider to be core to i-docs, this is our motivation for taking the time to consider what Bakhtin's work can teach us about polyphony.

A clear difference behind Bakhtin's work with the novel and contemporary i-docs, however, is that Bakhtin was writing about single authored and generally fixed texts, whereas i-docs can be co-authored and more fluid in terms of their duration. This begs the question as to the ongoing relevance of his ideas to the contemporary landscape of computer-mediated communication, which many have argued looks more to oral traditions of storytelling than it does to the more fixed conventions of print culture. Amelia Winger-Bearskin, for example, draws on her own indigenous traditions to write about "decentralized storytelling",⁴³ and the Co-creation Studio at MIT's Open Documentary Lab⁴⁴ also doing wider work on indigenous storytelling traditions.

Our argument is that Bakhtin's critical thinking on polyphony brings additional insights and perspectives which are complementary to this work on indigenous storytelling traditions. Core to this is the way in which Bakhtin offers a framework through which different ideas, approaches, and cultural traditions can be discussed alongside each other. Although his focus was on the single authored, print-based novel, his thinking opens-up perspectives and approaches which can also be applied to more contemporary mediatized contexts. Key to this is his dialogic approach which facilitates multiperspectivity, as opposed to being focused on one particular way of

³⁹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 17, 34.

⁴⁰ Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, 239.

⁴¹ Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel," 39–40.

⁴² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 272.

⁴³ Winger-Bearskin, "What is Decentralised Storytelling?".

⁴⁴ <https://cocreationstudio.mit.edu/>.

thinking and acting. Through dialogue (which is participative and not unduly provocative) human beings are facilitated to understand themselves in relation to “others”, learning to negotiate the “I” with the “we”, discovering the differences that characterize all of us and learning to accept them. Embedding this dialogue, within our media production processes (as in co-creation) and/or within the media texts that we create (as in polyphony), is an approach which we see as being helpful on many levels, from the local through to the global. We have collective problems to address, such as climate emergency and ideological polarisation, which would benefit from multiperspectival understanding. This can draw on the range of tools and techniques that are available to us and, there is no reason why the principles of polyphony within i-docs cannot draw on oral storytelling, as much as on other forms such as the novel.

In this sense, there is a strong alignment between co-creation and polyphony⁴⁵, although it is important to also acknowledge that the one can still be enacted without the other. By this we mean that co-creative i-doc practices do not always need to lead to polyphonic outcomes and, likewise, polyphonic outcomes do not always need to be co-created. As with polyphony, co-creation strives towards greater inclusivity and awareness of methodological biases,⁴⁶ and it has been acknowledged that it is naive to suggest that power structures can be completely overcome⁴⁷. Bakhtin’s ethics acknowledges these points in relation to polyphony, with his interest in carnival being confined to certain spaces and structures that can be created to facilitate an atmosphere of openness through which different perspectives and opinions can potentially find common ground. Within the privileged space of the novel, Bakhtin also acknowledges the responsibility of the author or what we might call within a co-creation context the orchestrator/s of the dialogue. Though heavily influenced by Albert Einstein’s writing on relativity, particular in his later writing, it is also important to acknowledge that Bakhtin was not an advocate of relativism⁴⁸, in that he was rooted in Russian culture and was a clear advocate of the philosophy of pluralism within that culture. This is an essential point when looking at the relevance of his ideas to i-docs practices, it being important to acknowledge one’s own rootedness. In this instance, ours is within Western democratic culture, which is inevitably influencing our writing about polyphony, no matter how open we may be to other transcultural contexts.

Decolonizing Story and the Mind Through I-doc Practices

Roger Lundin shows how, when Bakhtin first published on Dostoevsky in 1929⁴⁹, Dostoevsky could see that Western thought had come through the Enlightenment to be dominated by monological thinking and the idea that truth could be contained within a single system (e.g. Newton, Hegel, Marx) or lodged securely within a single consciousness (ie. Descartes)⁵⁰. This

⁴⁵ As acknowledged by Zimmermann in “Polyphony and the Emerging Collaborative Ecologies”, online.

⁴⁶ See: Auguste, et al, “Fifty Speculations and Fifteen Unresolved Questions”.

⁴⁷ See for example: Namaan, “When is Co-Creation Possible”, 42; and Rose, “Not Media About but Media With”, 62-63.

⁴⁸ See: Emerson, “Isaiah Berlin and Michail Bakhtin.”

⁴⁹ See: Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Creation*.

⁵⁰ Lundin, *Believing Again*, 163.

led to the idea of dualism and binaries, and was the basis for the rationalism of science and European thought that has played out through colonialism and beyond. Dostoevsky could see how the monological thinker does not need to know other persons or points of view in order to complete their own understanding of the truth, and that a monological system requires neither correction or development, for it has already grasped the truth in its totality.⁵¹ Bakhtin has argued that Dostoevsky's novels used polyphony to create an alternative vision for society in which things are accepted as being more complex and far less certain. Although the binary thinking of the Enlightenment has been brought into question by many thinkers since,⁵² we argue here that it is still present in many of the systems and structures of contemporary Western society, including the dominant way in which we continue to tell and receive stories.

One might say, in fact, that debates about what constitutes democratic values – eg. multiculturalism versus monoculturalism – are at the heart of ideological polarization within our society today and are a key reason why democracy is said to be “in crisis”.⁵³ One can also say that the Enlightenment placed humans in a position of superiority over our environment, leading to a culture of extraction that is now manifesting as climate emergency. Whilst contemporary scientific thought does recognize the need to embrace complexity and to consider our place alongside the “more-than-human”,⁵⁴ we are still seeing these debates playing out in politics through tensions between democracy and authoritarianism, plurality and monoculture, sustainability and ongoing extraction. Our interest in the multiple relates to plurality and diversity, as opposed to a multitude of voices that coalesce around conformism, sameness or unity. That said, we would not wish this conception of the multiple to deny the power of collective action through which seemingly diverse groups and individuals can find commonality through a defined interest or goal, such as class struggle or identity politics.⁵⁵

Our provocation is that we need to understand and reflect on this, in order to think through the assumptions that we bring to the storytelling methods and tools that we use. Indeed, we would go as far as to suggest that many of the dominant tools for interactive storytelling work against this kind of reflection, in spite of their potential to do otherwise. This is partly because, although these tools promote non-linear and interactive mind-mapping as means of conceptualising story ideas, their workspace for putting content together is often organized around the principles of sequential editing, in a similar way to traditional film editing systems. Whilst this is helpful, in that it makes the software more accessible to non-coding filmmakers, it also has a tendency to push authors back towards preconceived ideas about how we construct narratives or tell stories. These preconceived ideas are often based on dramatic approaches centered around conflict, which are currently being pushed hard for in contemporary documentary commissioning circles.

⁵¹ Lundin, *Believing Again*, 163.

⁵² See: Alexander, *The Dark Side of Modernity*.

⁵³ The topic, for example, of the Visible Evidence XXVII conference:
<https://www.visibleevidence.org/conference/visible-evidence-xxvii/>.

⁵⁴ See for example: Lorimer, “Cultural Geography”; Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

⁵⁵ See: Negri and Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, 105-106.

This all too often leads authors back to binary tropes such as good/evil, heroes/villains, us/them to help drive the narrative forwards. Whilst the storyboarding and mind-mapping systems that accompany these software tools do allow for a broader range of approaches to narrative, it requires extra effort to do this because the actual editing workspace is not conducive to it. Indeed, Murray herself, speaks about “dramatic agency”⁵⁶ within interactive narrative, thus promoting the idea that narrative within interactive digital formats is still fundamentally about drama.

Our argument is that, building on the work of the Modernists and postmodern artistic movements, and on wider insights gained from folk and non-Western cultures, we need to take a more expansive understanding of narrative and story, in order to incorporate a wider range of approaches. In this sense, decolonizing our approach to storytelling, and hence our minds, is not just about bringing in a greater diversity of voices but is also about taking collective and personal responsibility for looking at the ways in which we construct and tell stories. This needs to include awareness raising and critique around the tendency to look for universal tropes across all cultures, both in narrative structure and in themes. Whilst we fully accept that dramatic narrative is not unique to western culture, being found for example in myths and legends across a whole host of cultural contexts, we are questioning the tendency towards monological thinking about story as drama within contemporary media culture. This can be seen as a form of neo-colonialism in its own right, dictated by the drive towards profit and satisfying the pre-conceptions of mainstream audiences. Whilst Bakhtin’s work on polyphony is our starting point for this, it is by no means our end point, as many of his ideas were indeed embraced by twentieth century movements such as the Modernists and postmodernism⁵⁷. It is by returning to his thinking in relation to these movements and to ongoing societal tensions, that we intend to explore what resonates with interactive documentary practices and how this can be put into dialogue with other thinkers such as Foucault and beyond.

Building on Bakhtin’s thinking, if we are genuinely going to embrace, and indeed learn from, what has more recently been called “the ontological turn”,⁵⁸ which tells us that there are different ways or modes of being, we need to continue to open-up (as opposed to close-down) what we mean by “story”. We see this as being particularly important to documentary-making in a context of ideological polarization and climate emergency, in which dramatic narrative, and its associated link to causality, may not always be the most productive way to help us to think through the problems that we are facing. At the i-Docs 2016 symposium, this issue of “story” was raised in the “tools for thought”⁵⁹ strand, through keynotes from Alisa Lebow and Florian Thalhofer. Lebow has subsequently gone on to collaborate with Alexander Juhasz and convene an important dialogue under the title of “Beyond Story”.⁶⁰ Whilst this dialogue doesn’t currently seek to expand our idea of “story” per se, it does directly critique the dominance of dramatic

⁵⁶ Murray, “Dramatic Agency”.

⁵⁷ See Burton: “Paradoxical relations: Bakhtin and Modernism”, for more on why Bakhtin himself did not explicitly engage with the Modernists.

⁵⁸ See: Holbraad and Pederson, *The Ontological Turn*.

⁵⁹ Building on Rheingold, *Tools for Thought*.

⁶⁰ Juhasz and Lebow, “Beyond Story”.

narrative within contemporary documentary commissioning circles. Thalhoffer, on the other hand, continues to seek to expand our understanding of “story” through his work and in collaboration with our *Polyphonic Documentary* research project.

In our context of polyphonic i-docs, authority does not reside in one single voice but it is often characterized by a polycentric and decentralized approach in which various narrative lines are available. Whilst we are not saying that this is the only approach worth taking, we are wishing to explore its potential within a wider landscape of possibilities. This is to build on Bakhtin’s point that “the development of the polyphonic novel is a huge step forward not only in the development of novelistic prose ...but also in the development of the *artistic thinking* of humankind”⁶¹. In making “new demands on aesthetic thought”, he also points out that when “raised on monologic forms of artistic visualization, thoroughly steeped in them, aesthetic thought tends to absolutize those forms and not see their boundaries”⁶². Going back to Murray’s concept of “virtual space”,⁶³ these boundaries can indeed be explored on a computer, where audiovisual material held in a directory or database can be called and edited into a number of windows within the screen using interactive authoring tools. The composition of multiple windows can also change based on the author’s decision or allocated randomly. In Korsakow, for example, each piece of audiovisual material can be assigned to a different interface and multiple window compositions developed.

This relates to the idea of “open” versus “closed”, as Korsakow puts all elements of the film into dialogue with each other, opening it up to a plethora of multiple perspectives. This has the potential to help the author to decolonize the way we talk (and think) about our lived experience, by focusing on footage, shots and sequences that might otherwise have been neglected. Engagement with a tool like Korsakow can, therefore, help to broaden our understanding of narrative and story in documentary. It can help with presenting lived experience in a different, alternative and hopefully more democratic way, moving away from the general obsession for dramatization and sensationalism that is all too prevalent in the documentary industry today. As the inventor of Korsakow, Thalhoffer, has called this type of sensationalism “extreme storytelling,”⁶⁴ adding:

I myself (and I think more and more people), don't think any more that the extremes are interesting. Why? Real life lives in the middle, not in the extremes. Extremes, at least in my life, are not very common. And, solutions for problems often exist in a middle ground. The problems of climate change will not be solved in the extremes...Extremes are usually irrelevant, totally boring.⁶⁵

Further reflection on tools

⁶¹ Bakhtin, *Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 270.

⁶² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 270.

⁶³ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 83.

⁶⁴ Thalhoffer, “The Way We Tell Stories,” online.

⁶⁵ Proctor and Maher, “Emotional Multiplicities”, online.

It is important to stress that, as a tool, Korsakow is likely to be useful in some contexts but not in others. By exploring its potential alongside that of other tools, we are aiming to discover where it can have most impact and where other tools are more useful. For example, Korsakow is not intuitive to many, as the author(s) need to reach a good level of understanding of the software and of its transformative potential, in order to use it effectively. Stornaway breaks from a film editing logic by logic enabling those working with it to organise and edit content through “story maps” and “story islands”. These can be predetermined and easily visualized to help authors to plan out pathways and patterns, as a way of organizing thoughts and presenting them to others (see Figure 2.2). Korsakow, on other hand, is based on the principle of SNUs (smallest narrative units) and POCs (points of contact) in which anything can be connected up to anything by allocating keywords (See Figure 3.3). Though less provisional and emergent than Korsakow, it does perhaps mean that Stornaway is a better tool for communicating the results of research, whereas Korsakow can help to find new patterns and connections as part of the research process itself. That said, within the field of eco-narratives, for example, it may be that Kosakow is an effective means through which to de-anthropomorphize the way in which we tell stories. This relates to its potential to move us away from a human-centered focus to a “storytelling framework flexible enough to co-create with nonhumanity, even during an environmental moment characterized by crisis”.⁶⁶

<Figure 2.2 here>

Figure 2.2. The organizing principle of Stornaway based on Story Maps and Story Islands.

<Figure 2.3 here>

Figure 2.3 -The organizing principle of Korskaow based on Smallest Narrative Units (SNU) and Points of Contact (POC).

This idea of co-creation relates to the fact that, as a research method, Korsakow has potential as a practice for analyzing our behavior in the way that we produce documentaries and in the way that we tell stories. This builds on insightful PhD research with Korsakow practitioners, from the anthropologist, Franziska Weidle⁶⁷, who is also part of our polyphonic documentary research group. Building on her work, we are proposing that Korsakow is a good research tool for decolonizing the mind and how we think about stories, because it enables us to find unexpected patterns and encourages us to be challenged by that. Korsakow could, indeed, be used as an auto-ethnographic or personal development tool for the subsequent creation of more uni- and multi-sequential structures⁶⁸, which are not necessarily dependent on Korsakow for their delivery. It may be that, in order for Korsakow to be accessible as a communication tool for documentary

⁶⁶ Donly, “Toward the Eco-Narrative”.

⁶⁷ See: Weidle, *Of Trees and Clouds* for a full analysis of this work.

⁶⁸ Murray, *Inventing the Medium*, 43.

makers, one first needs to understand how it works and what it is trying to do. Key to this is the fact that, as with Bakhtin's ideas about the polyphonic novel, Korsakow refuses to dramatize. It does not provide all the information of the story, but instead allows those who engage with it to fill in the gaps and create alternative stories. In this sense, if one brings preconceived expectations about what a story is, based on the dominant paradigm of dramatic narrative, to a Korsakow project, then one is likely to be disappointed and frustrated by the experience of using it.

Our intention with the *Polyphonic Documentary* project therefore is to build our collective literacy, initially with Korsakow and Stornaway, in order to better understand the potential of different tools based on the evolving preconceptions and understanding that we bring to them. What is very important in interactive documentaries is that the different paths, narratives or sub-stories that are not selected by the viewer are still there to be explored, used, remixed in future experiences, in another time, perhaps in another context. The viewer is aware of that, as a key component of the i-doc experience that makes it different from linearly presented documentaries with only one beginning, middle and end. It is there, at the back of our minds, that material is still always available even if we have not used yet: "The text appears to fragment, to atomize, into constituent elements (into lexias or blocks of text); and these reading units take on a life of their own as they become more self-contained, because they become less dependent on what comes before or after in a linear succession".⁶⁹ Stornaway, through its use of mindmaps, gives the author(s) the facility to decide how much to make this additional material explicitly evident to the reader and how much to make this something that has to be discovered through ongoing interaction with the material. Korsakow, on the other hand, does not have this option, as all the different connections are algorithmically generated, meaning that there will always be an element of serendipity and surprise.

This approach allows us to become actively aware of what is happening around us and in the story in a way, which is as much about interaction as it is about immersion. We believe that it creates a process of awareness or subjectification, whereby creating structures (through the use of Korsakow) can help us to decolonize the way we tell stories, offering a more democratic and "aware" process. For Wiehl, who also has a good understanding of Korsakow and is part of our research group, "the issue of (distributed) authorship in Korsakow and the issue of user experience—are entwined: the always implied subjectivity of any configuration is laid open and becomes decisive for the experience".⁷⁰ In order to build our collective literacy, we are creating non-mainstream, experimental projects that will enable us to reflect upon the way in which we use digital technology to think about and tell stories. In so doing we are less interested at this point in how these projects communicate out to a wider audience than in how these projects can help to transform our own awareness and understanding. As with all forms of experimentation, this does require a degree of commitment that may or may not translate into projects which can

⁶⁹ Landow, *Hypertext 2.1*, 64.

⁷⁰ Anna Wiehl, "Beyond 'Toolness'", 44.

be understood by a wider audience beyond those with an explicit interest in what the different software tools have to offer.

Conclusion

To sum up, in line with an increasing number of scholars across a variety of disciplines, our proposition is that an over-alignment of dramatic narrative with story structure is an example of monological thinking and that this works against the principles of polyphony. As we both work in a film department, we are very familiar with having this debate with colleagues, many of whom believe, as practicing filmmakers, that dramatic narrative is central to their craft and that conflict is needed, in order to produce engaging stories. Whilst we are not against dramatic narrative, our concern is to challenge its centrality, which we link to wider debates about decolonization, in order to contribute to an ongoing opening-up of what storytelling is and how it can continue to evolve. Though aligning with Janet Murray's ideas about kaleidoscopic narrative, we wish to extend the debate beyond her focus on the conventions of dramatic narrative, with a view to helping us to move us beyond the binary thinking of the Enlightenment, which still pervades many of our thought processes to this day. We argue that we need to develop literacies which lead us away from a constant desire for resolution to problems that are in fact ongoing and which require a different approach to narrative and complexity if they are to be adequately addressed. We have chosen ideological polarization and climate emergency as our core themes to explore, in the belief that monological thinking and an overemphasis on the hierarchical supremacy of humans need to be challenged and countered, if we are to successfully navigate our way through the challenges that lie ahead.

We are aware, however, that we can all too easily labor under the illusion that we are open-minded and accepting of polyphony when in fact our version of what this is may be more monovocal and reinforcing of power structures than we may care to admit. We are also aware that, by looking at polyphony through the lens of i-doc practices, we are by no means offering a comprehensive study of possibilities. Additionally, we understand that dramatic narrative absolutely has its part to play within interactive documentary practices and that this is by no means being confined to Western culture. We do, however, wish to challenge the way in which it continues to be used to reinforce the binary and empirical thinking of the Enlightenment, which is not always helpful. We are, therefore, keen to explore areas where a different approach to story might be more helpful and to make the point that, in some cultures such as the Hollywood film industry, the importance of dramatic narrative is overemphasized. We also wish to consider where the limits of an expanded and decolonized notion of story might lie, taking into account circumstances in which i-doc practices do not need to engage with narrative and story at all. These are challenges that require a degree of honesty, dialogue, reflection and openness. This is not to stop us from acting but to keep ourselves in constant check around our own biases and understanding of the problematics, as well as the possibilities, of polyphony as it relates to i-doc and society.

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