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### Interactive documentary and its limited opportunities to persuade

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## Interactive documentary and its limited opportunities to persuade



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## ABSTRACT

John Grierson's classic definition of documentary as the "creative treatment of actuality" emphasizes both the genre's indexical link to reality and the maker's perspective on this reality. In recent times, a substantial number of so-called "interactive" documentaries has seen the light of day. In this paper, one dimension of such online documentaries, namely the freedom of users to access content via different paths of navigation as well as to skip material, is discussed from the perspective that a documentary, in a necessarily subjective way, attempts to *convince* the viewer of something. Interactivity limits the maker's opportunities to do so.

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## 1. Introduction

John Grierson, the pioneer practitioner-cum-theorist of documentary film, described the genre as "the creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson, 1933: 8). The "actuality" part of this pithy definition refers to the idea that documentaries portray aspects of a world that is "real," as opposed to fiction films, which portray imagined, make-believe worlds. The "creative" part of Grierson's definition conveys the idea that the director always provides a more or less artificial, subjective perspective on this cinematically captured reality.

Over the past decades, the documentary has seen the conception of many web-based specimens of the genre, often called "interactive documentaries." In relation to documentary, interactivity is "most often understood in terms of the user's ability to exert control over content" (Nash, 2012: 199). That this still covers a wide variety of phenomena is partly because, as Almeida and Alvelos point out with some exasperation, "it appears that nowadays everyone is using the word 'documentary' to describe every single multimedia piece that incorporates video no matter its nature, technique, language or scope, taking advantage of the fuzzy and fragile boundaries of the documentary definition" (2010: 124). To provide order in the vast category of interactive documentaries, Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) propose to distinguish between four "modes": the conversational mode (in which the technology "simulate[s] a world where the user has the illusion of navigating freely," p. 126); the hypertext mode (which "links assets within a closed video archive and gives the user an exploratory role, normally enacted by clicking on pre-existing options," p. 127); the participative mode (which "counts on the participation of the user

to create an open and evolving database," p. 127); and the experiential mode ("the participant moves through an interface that is physical (although enhanced by the digital device) [so that] embodiment and situated knowledge are constantly elaborating new situated meanings," p. 128; see also Gaudenzi, 2013).

Of the four, the "hypertext" mode functions in a way that is most similar to that of classic documentary, since this mode draws on a more or less closed set of content-rich text-internal elements (the conversational mode focuses on game-like "embodied" interaction with a virtual world; the participative mode pertains to a documentary whose contents are open to constant change because users can upload new material; and the experiential mode by definition is heavily influenced by each user's unique physical position and behaviour in the real world). Since I am here specifically interested in the unchanging textual elements in the documentary genre, I will in this paper only discuss Aston and Gaudenzi's "hypertext" mode: the situation in which a user has a degree of freedom to decide on the order of access of material as well as to select certain parts and skip others. The goal is to evaluate what consequences such freedom has for our understanding of what constitutes "documentary" – an understanding that has hitherto mainly been based on its linear varieties. What is gained and lost in interactive documentary compared to its linear variety? If interactive documentary gains further popularity, how will this affect what has traditionally been considered documentary? Will "interactive documentary" come to be seen as an extension of the "participatory mode" of documentary, as Nichols (2010: 180) suggests? Will "linear documentary" end up as an outdated form of the genre, inevitably going to be obsolete?

Section 2 will present the linear documentary film in terms of an "audiovisual speech." Section 3 briefly discusses five interactive documentaries and their possible navigation paths. Section 4

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addresses the characteristics of the interactive documentaries examined in Section 3 in more general terms, implicitly contrasting them with linear documentaries; and Section 5 presents some conclusions about interactive documentaries' rhetorical potential.

## 2. The linear documentary as an “audiovisual speech”

Let me begin by discussing two post-Griersonian definitions of (linear) documentary. Here is one by Carl Plantinga:

I propose that the typical [...] documentary film be conceived of as an asserted veridical representation, that is, as an extended treatment of a subject in one of the moving image media [...] in which the film's makers openly signal their intention that the audience (1) take an attitude of belief toward relevant propositional content (the “saying” part), (2) take the images, sounds, and combinations thereof as reliable sources for the formation of beliefs about the film's subject and, in some cases, (3) take relevant shots, recorded sounds, and/or scenes as phenomenological approximations of the look, sound, and/or some other sense or feel of the pro-filmic event (the “showing” part). [Plantinga, 2005: 114–115]

Here is Bill Nichols' definition:

Documentary film speaks about situations and events involving real people (social actors) who present themselves to us as themselves in stories that convey a plausible proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situations, and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a way of seeing the historical world directly rather than into a fictional allegory.

[Nichols, 2010: 13]

Both definitions emphasize the idea that documentaries present proposals about the, or a, reality rather than about an imagined, fictional world. More than Plantinga, Nichols insists on the “distinct point of view of the filmmaker.” Unsurprisingly, therefore, Nichols elaborates on the notion that documentaries have persuasive goals. He draws on classical Aristotelian and Quintilian theories of rhetoric as a model to clarify the genre of documentary film. Among other things he borrows, and adapts to the medium of film, the idea that an “orator” had the following tasks: (1) to collect pertinent evidence supporting his argument (“invention”); (2) to decide on an optimal arrangement of the available evidence to achieve the best effect (“arrangement”); (3) to choose appropriate stylistic elements (in speeches: tropes and schemes such as metaphor, irony, rhyme, alliteration; in film: metaphor, irony, camera angles, compositions, editing, (non)use of music, etc.) (“style”) to enhance the credibility of the orator; (4) to memorize the speech (“memory”); (5) to deliver the speech in the best possible way (Nichols, 2010: 77–93). In my view Nichols overstretches the analogy with respect to points (4) and (5). Since a film is pre-recorded, nothing needs to be memorized, nor is any on-the-spot variation possible (unlike in the classical orator's oral delivery, for instance in terms of gesturing or intonation). But I think Nichols' analogy is highly insightful for the first three points. From here on I will therefore only focus on invention, arrangement, and style.

The analogy between documentary film and classical rhetoric does not stop here. Nichols also follows the Aristotelian distinction between non-artistic proof (proof of events that is not disputed by any party, and therefore not in need of being argued for) and artistic proof. The latter concerns proof that is *not* self-evident and therefore must be argued to be correct. Non-artistic proof can be triggered by ethos, pathos, and logos. In documentary film, ethos characterizes the credibility, trustworthiness, and charisma of the maker – primarily the director, but also, possibly, the production

company, the sponsor, the TV channel, etc. But good or bad ethos also typifies the social actors in documentaries that draw on witnesses and experts. Pathos is the appeal to the audience's emotions. Logos, finally, delimitates the reasoning itself: it pertains to the relations between premises and conclusions, and between one attested fact and another, and thus to patterns of causality. This is where the principles of rhetoric proper come into play. Logos is characterized by plausibility, not certainty; otherwise no arguing would be necessary in the first place, as conclusions would be the necessary outcome of the objective arranging of non-artistic proofs.

Finally, Nichols borrows from classical rhetoric the threefold distinction between deliberative, judicial/historical, and commemorative/critical types of speeches, and applies them to documentary films. Briefly, deliberative documentaries raise the question “what to do?”; judicial/historical documentaries ask “what really happened?”; and commemorative/critical documentaries attempt to chart “what is he/she/it really like?” (Nichols, 2010: 105–108).

Since the hypertext mode of interactive documentaries allows freedom in how much of the totally available footage is accessed and in what order any parts are accessed, the degree to which such documentaries can be seen as mounting an argument about, or at least a perspective on, a slice of reality is severely restricted compared to linear documentaries. Specifically, stages 2 and 3, arrangement and style (the latter to the extent that it pertains to relations between shots or scenes) significantly lose their persuasive power. In addition, stage 1 can suffer, since not all “arguments” need to be accessed. Since the documentary orator renounces a degree of control in determining the order in which viewers access parts, developing a strong logos becomes much more difficult. Given that the maker has less control over whether, and if so at what stage, emotions are appealed to, the role of pathos changes, too.

## 3. Case studies of interactive hypertext documentaries

In this section I will analyse five interactive documentaries. There is no rationale underlying the choice other than that they have come to my attention and that it proved possible to access more or less all their elements within a reasonable amount of time. No claim to representativeness is therefore made whatsoever. The purpose of the discussion is to enable me to reflect on the central issue in this paper: how do interactive documentaries of the hypertextual variety fare with respect to Nichols' proposal to consider the documentary as an audiovisual speech? Since the user of an interactive documentary needs to make many more choices than the user of a linear one, my comments and analyses inevitably reveal a concomitantly larger degree of subjectivity. Moreover, in the interest of brevity not all clickable buttons in the documentaries will be discussed. For each case study I briefly describe its contents, total length, and interface, all of which are factors that are bound to influence a potential user's decision whether to engage with the documentary, and if so, for how long; or to leave the site straightaway. Obviously this in turn has a crucial impact on the chances that the makers of the interactive documentary will actually be able to mount an argument in the first place.

3.1. *Gaza/Sderot: Life in Spite of Everything* (Jérôme Clement et al. 2008), <http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/#/time/17> (last accessed June 2017)

*Description.* This documentary consists of 2 × 40 videos, each about 2 min long, making for a total length of some 80 min. For most of the days in the period 26 October up till and including 23 December 2008, there is a “slice of life” video clip of a person both in Palestinian Gaza and in Israeli Sderot. There are options

for subtitles in various languages, and an opportunity to offer comments.

*Observations on navigation options.* The interface is user-friendly and transparent; the user is moreover helped via a “how to” option in the menu. There are only a few sensible ways to navigate through the material. One option is to go chronologically through the Gaza clips, and then through the Sderot clips, or vice versa (see Fig. 1); another is to watch the two videos of a single day one after the other; a third option is to follow chronologically the events befalling a specific character via the “faces” button (seven Gaza and seven Sderot characters). Via the button “map” one can locate where each person lives: clicking on that location activates the “time” clips pertaining to that person. The button “topics,” finally, invites access via a list of 48 keywords for Gaza and 51 for Sderot, of which several overlap.

In my view, simply following the chronology of the Gaza and Sderot tracks yields limited benefits. The interest in recurring social actors is better served by following these actors’ complete “stories” via the “faces” track. But either way, these micro-narratives enhance the opportunity for empathy. For instance, we hear after several “instalments” devoted to the Gaza ambulance driver Abu Khalil that he himself has a daughter in poor health, which causes problems pertaining to securing necessary medication. Similarly, we learn that Sderot grocer Sason Sara’s attempt to become mayor is unsuccessful – which makes him bitterly turn down people he used to help, saying they should now seek assistance from the candidate they voted for. The order in which we see these clips, that is, makes a difference, and the interface gently nudges the user toward a preferential order.

3.2. *Out of my Window: Interactive Views from the Global Highrise* (Katerina Cizek, launched 2009), <http://outmywindow.nfb.ca/#/outmywindow> (last accessed June 2017)

*Description.* First we see a text stating that “concrete residential highrise buildings are the most commonly built form of the last century. On the outside, they all look the same. But inside these towers of concrete and glass, people create community, art and meaning.” An “about” button tells us that there is “more than 90 min of material to explore” from 13 cities, in 13 languages, “accompanying by a leading-edge music playlist” of 16 tracks.

*Observations on navigation options.* The “explore” button opens a visual collage of thirteen windows (Fig. 2). When hovering over one, a location is named. Upon clicking on one, the user gets access to the interior of the apartment behind the window. Using the mouse affords a 360° tour of it. From three to five clickable pop-ups (“hotspots”) activate brief series of static photos and some clips accompanied by inhabitants’ sub-titled voice-overs telling about their homes.

The number of sensible navigating paths is limited: one can access by “places” (names of cities, on a map), “spaces” (apartments on the collage visual map), and “faces” (close-up portraits of the people telling their stories). All micro-narratives are first-person narrations by people whose appearance becomes available in photographs and sometimes in moving image clips, enhancing empathy. Once an apartment has been chosen, it makes sense to “stay” there before shifting to another apartment. There is no rationale for accessing the hotspots in any particular order.

3.3. *Waterlife* (Kevin MacMahon, Canada 2009), <http://waterlife.nfb.ca/#/> (last accessed December 2016)

*Description.* The opening screen features the text “The story of the last great supply of fresh drinking water on earth. No matter where we live, the Great Lakes affect us all. And as species of fish disappear and rates of birth defects and cancer rise, it seems one thing is clear: the Great Lakes are changing and something’s not quite right with the water” against a background of calm blue water. The opening screen is accompanied by quiet, somewhat eerie music and bubbling sounds. The site provides information pertaining to 23 themes related to water in general, and the Great Lakes in particular. Listening to all the voice-over texts takes about 25 min; reading all the texts on the slides, which sometimes enable further site-internal clicking, will probably more than double this time.

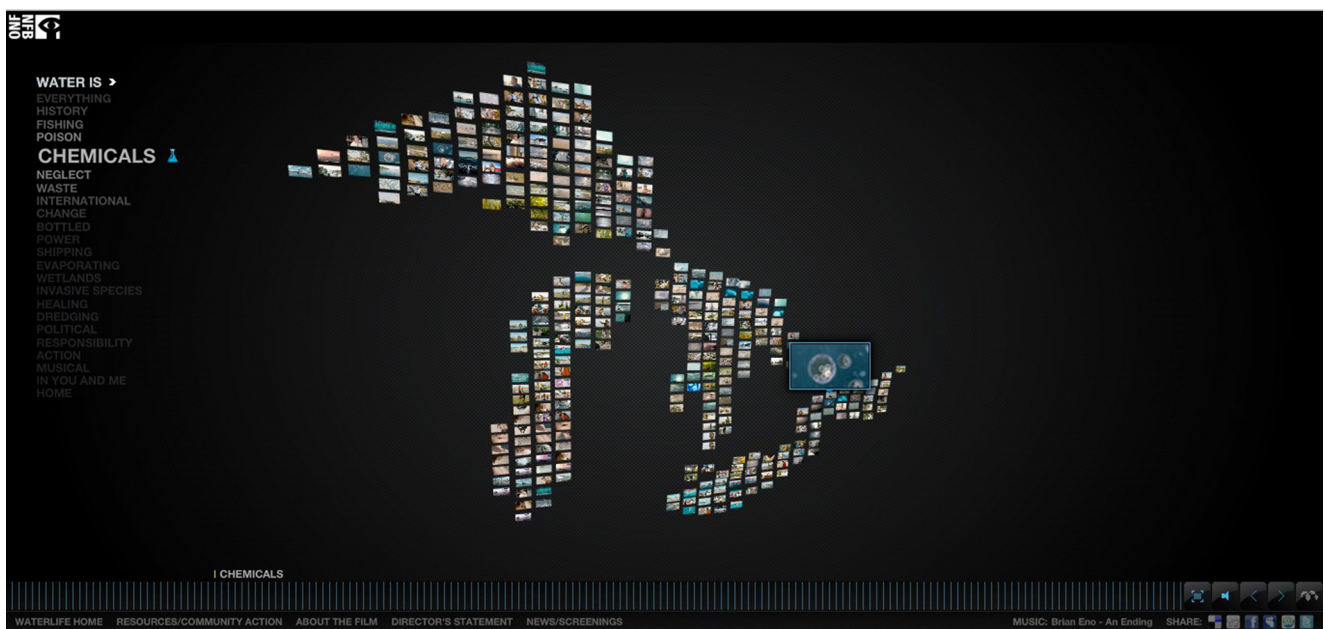
*Observations on navigation options.* Clicking on “enter” in the opening screen accesses the contours of the lakes, consisting of some 350 thumbnail images. Underneath it a “bar” with a large number of vertical lines is displayed. Scrolling over these creates a “wave” out of the lines, while stopping on a specific line textually activates a theme (e.g., “fishing,” “waste,” “healing”)



Fig. 1. Opening screen after *Gaza/Sderot* has loaded: the “time” path has been selected. Alternative navigation paths are, as the menu at the top indicates, “faces,” “maps,” and “topics.”



**Fig. 2.** Screen as it appears after one has clicked “explore” in the opening screen of *Out of my Window*. Clicking on one of the 13 windows in the centre accesses the clip associated with that space.



**Fig. 3.** *Waterlife*: After clicking on “enter,” one sees the outline of the five great lakes. Clicking on a theme (here: “chemicals”) either in the list on the left or in the “wave” at the bottom enlarges one of the images belonging to that theme. Clicking on that image accesses the clips belonging to it.

and automatically enlarges one of the images (Fig. 3). Clicking accesses the clip pertaining to that particular theme. In the left hand top corner, the text “Water is” is followed by a list of these same themes. Clicking on a theme causes the images to reconfigure into an appropriate visual icon (e.g. a skull for “chemicals”), and then leads to one or two slogan-like sentences capturing the theme, followed by the clip about that theme. Audio tracks feature sound bites by one or more experts and stakeholders, while short written texts simultaneously elaborate on the voice-over information. There is always music playing in the background. A screen has opportunities for optional interacting: for instance activating a

sequel text card, or a minimal animation. Sometimes, paperclips appear, which can be “chased off-screen” by moving the cursor toward them. As for the order of access: one way or another, one is steered toward navigating the site per theme.

Since the same five songs are played in a loop, music is dispensed with as a mode to aid the argument, at least at a local (thematic) level. Unless one switches to “hide text,” often users need to divide their attention between voice-over text, written text, visuals, sometimes with interactive elements, and generic music. The paperclips gimmick, when present, provides yet another distraction.

3.4. *Hidden like Anne Frank/Andere Achterhuizen* (Marcel Prins and Marcel van der Drift, 2010), <http://www.hiddenlikeannefrank.com/#/kaart> (last accessed June 2017)

*Description.* This “website” accompanies the publication of a book with the same title, which presents, the site explains, “fourteen unforgettable true stories of children hidden away during World War II,” written by Marcel Prins and Peter Henk Steenhuis, and translated by Laura Watkinson. The site (which I will treat as a hypertext documentary due to its similarity to others analysed in this paper) presents 21 micro-narratives, told by the Jewish social actors themselves. These narrations are accompanied by a total of 205 slides featuring a sequence of static images with minimal animation, illustrating some of the narrated events, and written texts. There are options for English subtitles as well as for a German dubbing track.

*Observations on navigation choices.* The opening screen shows a map of The Netherlands, with a number of location points on it. Hovering with the cursor over a point makes visible an icon. Clicking opens a clip pertaining to a specific person and shows dotted lines connecting it to one or more other icons/locations pertaining to the same participant (Fig. 4). The “content” button lists the 21 stories, ordered alphabetically with the Jewish participants’ first names. Each name opens a series of 7–15 slides with biographical information, a summary of essential events taking place at the various locations where the person hid, some photos, and some quotations from the participant. A name is followed by one to four icons (the same as on the map), each of which opens an audio-track on which the participant tells, in Dutch, mostly for about 90–120 s, about a memorable event befalling him or her during hiding. Other navigation paths would be by location or by person – or simply by randomly choosing icons that somehow look suggestive or intriguing.

As in *Gaza/Sderot* and *Out of my Window*, the viewer is invited to access the micro-narratives pertaining to the participants, and to

stick with these to the end of each story. A degree of empathy with each participant is induced by the information in the summary slides, ending with a photograph of him or her; but presumably not all users will read these slides. The oral stories expand on this empathy thanks to the person’s voice, enriched by the minimally animated visuals. In each of the micro-narratives the participant tells his/her story chronologically, with concomitant causal relations between events, enabling users to experience classic story motors such as curiosity, suspense, and surprise (Sternberg, 1978).

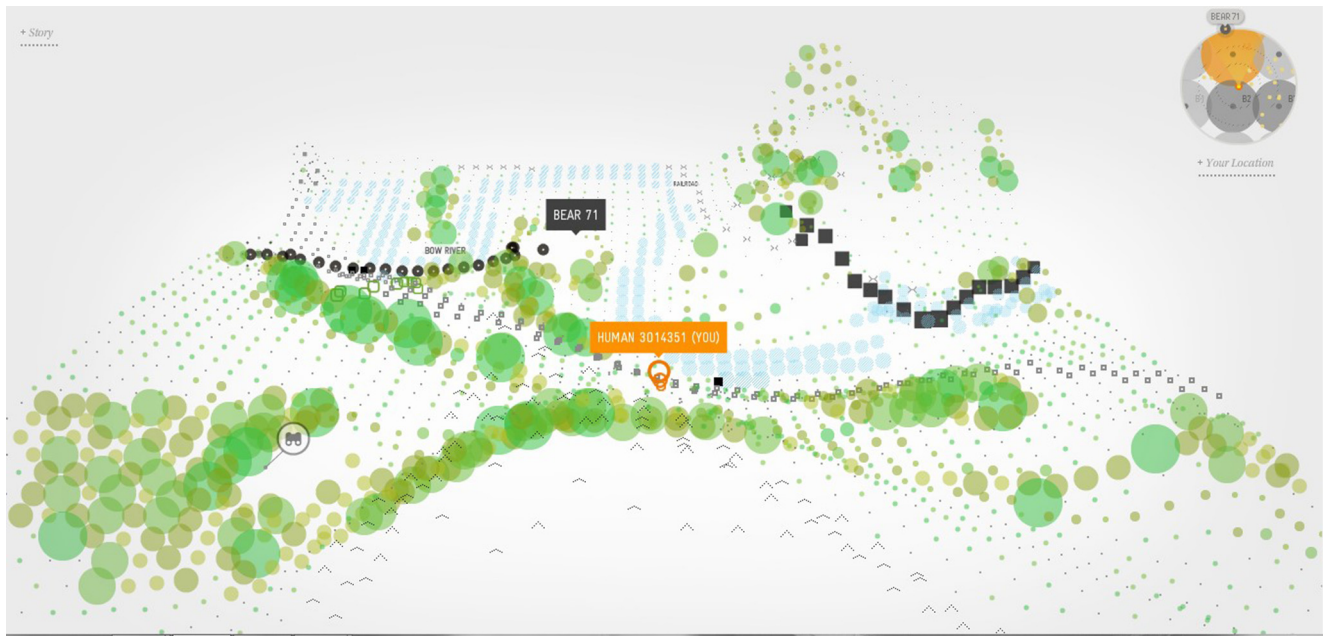
3.5. *Bear71* (Leanne Allison & Jeremy Mendes, Canada 2012), <http://bear71.nfb.ca/bear71/> (last accessed June 2017)

*Description.* The opening screen shows the text, “This is a 20 min interactive documentary,” accompanied by a sad (?) or ominous (?) musical loop. After the film has loaded, we read, “There aren’t a lot of ways for a grizzly bear to die. At least, that’s the way it was in the wild.” We then see footage of a bear being caught, chipped, and released, while a female voice-over begins a first-person narration, impersonating “Bear 71.” Next a stylized map of the Canadian Banff National park, the habitat of the bear, is shown (Fig. 5). The park is crossed by a railroad and several highways, indicating that wildlife and humans live close together here. An orange rectangle has the text “Human [number] you”; the map vibrates with self-propelled movement. In the meantime, the user can follow the anthropomorphized story of Bear 71, from the moment she was caught and chipped, to the moment she dies when hit by a train. The story consists of eleven titled sections. Bear 71 says things like, “Boar grizzlies are no joke. They are like Kronos in the Greek myth; they will literally eat their own young” and “[people] can start a revolution on a smartphone, but they can’t remember to put the lid on a bear-proof garbage can.” Various songs play in the background. Whereas one can stop the narration, the music continues.

*Observations on navigation choices.* The user’s orange “avatar” can move across the territory. Clicking on this avatar opens up



Fig. 4. Opening screen of *Hidden like Anne Frank*. Clicking on a point has revealed three icons related to one of the Jewish participants, and via the dotted line shows the trajectory of his/her journey to hide from the Germans.



**Fig. 5.** *Bear71*: Screen shot of the (constantly vibrating) map of the Banff territory, shortly after the live-action footage of the catching and chipping of Bear 71 has been shown. The orange rectangle in the middle shows the position of the user (“you”) while the trajectory of the bear is given as well. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

some ten thumbnail screens, each with a date and a time code above it, which show brief clips of animals recorded with webcams installed in the territory. The dates suggest the clips are regularly updated, but it is unclear what the user should do with them. Along the way, other moving rectangles and camera icons appear, with texts such as “Raven 12” and “Big Horn sheep 28.” Photographs and short “trail cam” clips, sometimes with sound and writing, provide additional information about the animal. A menu enables the user to “jump” to and fro through the story. Another menu allows the user to select one of the 11 regions of the park; clicking on one “transports” the user over there. Sometimes a short clip begins to play automatically, and cannot be clicked away.

It makes sense to follow the story linearly. The anthropomorphization of bear 71 creates empathy, partly because of tapping into universal events such as needing food, fearing enemies, raising young, and trying to survive. Interestingly, the narration draws on the fictional device of having the main protagonist tell her story in retrospect, from beyond the grave – as in Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty*. The “Chimeras” song, bracketing the story, imposes a sense of completion onto it.

#### 4. General reflections on the case studies

In this paragraph I zoom in on five dimensions bearing on the potential rhetorical effect of the hypertext documentaries discussed. (1) *Length*. Whereas in linear documentary most prospective viewers know the documentary’s length (thanks to information on cinema websites, in TV guides, or in festival programmes), it is not always immediately transparent how much time needs to be invested to see a hypertext documentary. If a prospective viewer is unable to assess quickly how much time a total viewing experience will take, the chances that this viewer will either end up skipping parts or not even start watching in the first place are considerably greater than with linear documentaries, whose length is usually known in advance. (2) *Interface*. Likewise, I assume that the transparency (or lack thereof) of the interface

(e.g., which functions have the various clickable buttons? how many different routes of engagement does the documentary offer? which opportunities are there to switch from one screen to another? which freedom, if any, is there to choose a music track?) is bound to have a bearing on the chances that a prospective viewer will turn into an actual one. (3) *Navigation paths*. An infinite number of choices to navigate through the material further diminishes the makers’ potential to persuade the viewer. So it is a relevant question whether the makers nudge viewers in choosing certain paths rather than others. (4) *Motivation to explore what the documentary has to offer*. Given the fragmented nature of a hypertext documentary, it is always a question how eager viewers will be to surf around on the site, and how likely it is they will later return to it to complete the experience when they interrupt their viewing. (5) *Ethos/Pathos/Logos*. How does the hypertextual nature of the documentary affect the three classical sources of persuasion?

*Length*. If we take a complete viewing experience to consist of accessing all the moving images, spoken language, and written texts (and thus ignoring optional materials), we can say of the five documentaries discussed here that their length is clear straight-away in the case of *Bear71* (20 min), and after some surfing around in the menu for *Out of my Window* (90 min). Figuring out the length of *Gaza/Sderot* is more difficult. After realizing that most clips take about 2 min, one could calculate that (roughly) two months times two clips times two minutes amounts to  $30 \times 2 \times 2 = 120$  min. In reality, since some days are skipped while the brief introductions to the social actors (in the “faces” option) have not been included, the actual length is about 85 min. Estimating the total length of *Hidden like Anne Frank* and *Waterlife* is also difficult for somebody accessing the site for the first time. After viewing some clips in *Hidden like Anne Frank*, users may figure out that their average length is about 90 s. There are 48 clips (signalled by icons), making for a total length of about 72 min – but this does not take into account the time for an optional reading/viewing of the 205 slides. *Waterlife* shows a list of 23 themes and an intimidating number of thumbnail images (about 350). That this does not mean there are 350

clips, as in each case several images are tied to the same theme, is not immediately clear, though. Trying out a few clips gives an impression of the total length of the clips, which is actually only about 25 min – but again, this leaves out the reading of the slides and any further clicking in these slides.

Actually accessing the “core” material in these documentaries, then, takes between 25 and 90 min, which is a range that is similar to that of short to feature-length linear documentaries. But only in some cases length is immediately clear. A lack of transparency about total duration may not bother people who are happy to browse around, but may deter people who prefer a complete viewing experience and want to know in advance how long such an experience will take – and who may thus decide very quickly to abandon the viewing, or not to start engaging with the documentary in the first place.

*Interface.* The degree to which prospective users will benefit from its treasures will depend on how motivated they are to spend time on figuring out how things work and which choices are available. I suspect many users will plunge in straightaway, without reading the “about” section (if available at all). In *Hidden like Anne Frank*, and *Out of my Window* the options are fairly straightforward and focused, but in *Bear71* listening to the bear’s story while simultaneously wandering over the Banff territory, having the opportunity to access various, rather uninteresting, sources of webcam footage, listening to the music, and having to deal with the continuously flickering map was too taxing for me.

It makes perfect sense to initially privilege the *space* trajectory in *Gaza/Sderot*, but if I had not been motivated to persist because of my responsibility as a researcher, I might have decided fairly quickly that I “got the idea” and have prematurely stopped investing time and energy in this documentary. It was only when I realized that all of the social actors “came back” over the two-month period (as suggested by the “faces” option I had initially missed) that I became interested. In *Waterlife* it took me a while to figure out that it was the 23 themes (and the brevity of the clips each gave access to) that suggested the magnitude of the information available, rather than the dauntingly large number of 350 images. Again, as somebody who likes “completeness,” in a non-professional capacity I might quickly have ended my interaction with this documentary.

*Navigation paths.* There are in fact only a few reasonable navigation strategies for each of the documentaries. In fact, all the documentaries afford two or more of the following rationales for navigation: space, time, people, and themes. *Bear71*’s personified voice-over creates empathy, and it makes sense to follow her story chronologically. “Space” is obviously a key criterion both in *Gaza/Sderot* and *Out of my Window*. To a lesser extent this also holds for *Hidden like Anne Frank*: it matters whether a Jewish person needs to hide in a crowded city or in a thinly populated country village where everybody knows each other, while the regular relocations the Jewish persons were often forced to undertake are strongly indicative of their precarious safety. But I speculate that within a given “space” most users are likely to access stories *per* social actor, as this respects the chronology of that person’s life and thus, usually, preserves causal relations between events – rather than click randomly on icons. It is telling that, with one exception, the documentaries enable a degree of empathy with social actors. The exception is *Waterlife*, in which social actors are only present as the voices of stakeholders, often anonymous, who briefly (sometimes in no more than a single sentence) provide comments on an aspect of the pre-given importance of *place* (i.e., the five lakes). Here, the interface guides the user automatically to accessing the information *thematically*.

*Motivation to explore what the documentary has to offer.* Once users have understood the idea of *Gaza/Sderot*, *Hidden like Anne Frank*, *Out of my Window*, and *Waterlife*, and appreciate it, they may decide not to watch it in one go and come back later to see

other parts. Particularly the “faces” paths in *Gaza/Sderot* and *Hidden like Anne Frank*, the “spaces” path in *Out of my Window*, and the “themes” path in *Waterlife* provide relatively self-contained “chapters” that can be followed independently of each other. Seeing only parts of these documentaries thus still yields the central idea. That being said, it may matter what part a user accesses first. The “primacy effect” – the idea that the first scene of a film in principle sets the context within which all other information is processed – that is so crucially important in linear films (see Bordwell, 1985: 37) is to a considerable extent retained in that the opening screens and their concomitant texts serve as an introduction that all users have to access. In the case of *Waterlife*, surprisingly, the “home” theme, which briefly introduces the five lakes, appears last in the list. Since it expands on the information in the opening screen, surely a linear documentary would have started with this. A similar point might be made about the “history” theme, which appears second in the list. On another note, it is possible that a selective viewer of *Waterlife*, which on the whole sketches a rather bleak picture of the situation in and around the Great Lakes, may miss out on the few more hopeful themes. A linear maker would undoubtedly have thought carefully about where to place these – either at the end so as to leave the viewer with some hope, or *not* at the end, so as to drive home the pessimistic message. *Bear71* makes most sense if followed linearly rather than jumping through chapters randomly. After all there is the chronology of the protagonist’s life. For me the surveillance footage was not compelling and invited skipping.

On a more general note, it would be helpful to have more empirically verified insights into the level of engagement with a hypertext documentary (for some facts, see Aufderheide, 2015: 76–77). Comparing free navigation over a newspaper page by a viewer with a linearly structured lay-out of that same newspaper page, as checked with eye-tracking equipment, Holsanova’s findings “suggest that the freedom of choosing entry points and reading paths is not an optimal strategy for attracting readers to stay with a complex material and get a deeper understanding of its contents” (2014: 350). It may well be that interactive documentaries similarly lead to sub-optimal uptake and retention of information.

*Ethos/Pathos/Logos.* Given that all documentaries discussed feature social actors telling about important events that affect(ed) their lives, the role of pathos is relatively strong. But to the extent that the music tracks to be played with certain fragments can be chosen by users, the makers by definition have to forgo the opportunity to create pathos by drawing on the musical modality. The persuasive force of “ethos” is partly dependent on the credibility of the makers – but this presupposes a user knows their names and reputations. Another part of ethos is linked to the presumed expertise of people talking/shown with reference to the topic at hand. In the cases discussed, we could say that all are experts. A third part of ethos pertains to the sponsor and/or production circumstances. To the *cognoscenti*, the fact that *Gaza/Sderot* was co-sponsored by Arte will inspire trust. The same holds for Canada’s National Film board’s backing of *Out of My Window*, *Waterlife* and *Bear71*. Users may recognize the names and logos of bona fide sponsors of *Hidden like Anne Frank* (only under the Dutch button “about this site”). Clearly what is jeopardized most is the logos part of the persuading, since the makers’ need to cede control to users’ choices as to how much of the material to access, and in what order, means that they can only to a very limited extent “build an argument.”

## 5. Concluding remarks

The non-fiction hypertexts analysed in this paper share many features with classic, linear documentary. In some respects they



have potential advantages over the latter. For one thing, they may reach audiences that classic documentaries – often presented on cinema and TV screens, and in festival contexts – may not reach. Related to this, the freedom to access a hypertext documentary to a certain extent in customized order, and to skip parts of it, may mean that a relatively unmotivated user (say, someone having hit upon the documentary on YouTube) will learn at least *something* about a topic that s/he might otherwise completely ignore. Furthermore, the need to physically interact, that is, by clicking and scrolling, may increase some users' interest and involvement with the topic at hand. Perhaps people used to gaming will relish the freedom to choose various navigation tracks, while they might be bored by a linear documentary, which they might simply refuse to watch.

Despite the fact that the documentaries discussed have a clear overall topic, they do not clearly fit one of Nichols' deliberative, judicial/historical, or commemorative/critical categories – although the last one comes closest in that users get an impression “what it is like,” independent of the order of access, and even if they access it only partially. Arguably *Waterlife* is the exception: it adopts the “deliberative” stance that we should be seriously worried about the state of the Great Lakes in Northern America, and by extension about the threats to fresh water in the entire world. This point is made more or less irrespective of the order in which users access the material, and remains intact even if they skip large parts.

Whereas documentaries of the historical/judicial variety could be said to be still relatively amenable to an hypertextual form, this is bound to become more problematic for more controversial topics. Aston and Gaudenzi quote Florian Thalhofer as claiming that “interactivity can set up scenarios whilst at the same time freeing the author from forcing a point of view onto his audience” (2012: 133). But as someone supporting Bill Nichols' view of documentary as an audiovisual piece of rhetoric, “used to persuade or convince others about an issue for which no clear-cut, unequivocal answer or solution exists” (2010: 63), I would maintain that the presence of a point of view (which of course is only persuasively presented, never “forced” on an audience) is *the very point* of watching a documentary in the first place. Only a clear point of view can be evaluated, and subsequently be accepted or rejected by an audience. This asset of linear documentary is further obfuscated in interactive documentaries because viewers of the latter all have different experiences: “*how can we evaluate a text that never reads the same way twice?*” (Dovey and Rose, 2013: 369, emphasis in original). Indeed, as Nash notes in passing, “ironically, in trying to ensure that users come away with a preferred reading of the interactive experience, documentary makers may provide fewer opportunities for audiences to challenge the documentary's point of view” (2014: 387, my emphasis, ChF).

It might be objected that being able to control the order in which a user accesses material only matters for documentaries that are emphatically persuasive, and not for mosaic-type documentaries or for the “fly on the wall” observational variety. But this would at best be a matter of degree. True, one could imagine for instance *Nós que Aqui Estamos por Vós Esperamos* (Brazil 1999), Marcelo Magacão's fine found footage chronicle of the twentieth century, in a hypertext format, affording different navigation paths through the “chapters.” But without a doubt the director advisedly chose to balance the predominantly depressing chapters with more light-hearted ones, carefully considering how to appeal to pathos. Moreover, the documentary ends with the text above the porch of a cemetery, “here we are, waiting for you.” This final shot summarizes, as it were, the entire film's sense of life's brevity and ultimate futility, and would have rhetorically misfired when accessed any earlier in the film. Similar points could be made about

found footage films such as *The Fall of the Romanov Empire* (Esfir Shub, USSR 1927) and *The Atomic Cafe* (Archives Project, USA 1982).

All this is no different for the “fly on the wall” documentary. About the iconic *Salesman* (Maysles brothers USA, 1969), it has been observed that “the need for plot development makes the ordering of scenes suspect, and we can legitimately wonder whether the order is actually non-chronological, structured to suggest Paul [Brennan]'s growing ineffectiveness, when in fact the events themselves might not have contained so neat a progression. For all we know, the scenes could have been filmed in nearly reverse sequence from how they are presented, or in dozens of other permutations” (Mamber, 1974: 167). Whatever one might think of the *ethics* of such possible manipulations, it is clear, then, the editing choices are crucial for the overall persuasive impact of the film's definitive version (so crucial, in fact, that *Salesman's* editor, Charlotte Zwerin, is often co-credited as one of the documentary's makers). The directors needed to create a “good story” – and good stories require the hand of a structuring maker (see Toolan, 2010) no less than good rhetoric does. Even the seemingly loose and random order of a Wiseman film is deceptive: shots, and sometimes scenes, have been meticulously arranged in the editing stage (see Tseronis and Forceville, forthcoming for discussion).

In short, the freedom of the user in interactive documentary comes at the price of proportionally reducing the maker's power to argue, and considerably increases the risk that the user will prematurely stop engaging with the documentary – or not even begin to do so. The more possibilities there are for users to exercise their freedom, the more the interactive documentary approaches the idea of constituting a database (cf. Manovich, 2001) which viewers are at liberty to use as more or less raw material on the basis of which to construe their own interpretation or response. Gaudenzi rightly points out that the most fundamental difference between classical and interactive documentary is the latter's renunciation, or at least weakening, of linearity (2013: 32). With reference to Grierson's definition this inevitably means a shift from the “creative treatment” part to the “actuality” part. Differently formulated, it severely diminishes the possibility for documentary to present a subjectively coloured, possibly partisan perspective on things that “really” happened. To be sure, this feature will only make itself more strongly felt if one also takes into account Gaudenzi's “participatory” and “experiential” variations of interactive documentary. Inevitably, their makers need to rely on ethos and pathos rather than on logos. An undesirable by-effect of this may be a focus on the power of “credibility” (ethos) and “emotion” (pathos) at the expense of rational evaluation of the presentation of artistic proofs and causal reasoning (logos) – a disturbing idea in the age of “alternative facts” and “fake news.”

My reservations pertaining to the hypertext documentaries discussed in this paper should not be seen as a rejection of the form. Non-fiction hypertexts may function excellently as databases that can provide information about a certain topic that can be accessed selectively (much like edited volumes do, and libraries). But they are mostly doing something fundamentally different than linear documentaries typically do; it may thus be a *contradictio in terminis* to talk about “interactive documentary” in the first place, as “‘normal film and documentary theory’ will no longer suffice” (Dovey, 2014: 15) for this format. My concern is that hypertext documentaries per definition downplay the *argumentative* aspects that have been so crucial in the history of linear documentary. If hypertext non-fiction grows in number and popularity, its being labelled “documentary” is likely to result in a further diminishing of the criterion “being argumentative” – and thereby being capable of addressing controversial issues – as fundamental for defining prototypical specimens of the genre.

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