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Interactivity as a key feature redefining documentary reality

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Finding a clear-cut boundary delimiting fiction from documentary has always been a controversial,
daunting and unthankful undertaking. In the last decade, the blur between the two genres has been
reinforced by the rapid advancement of web and AR/VR technologies. Interactive web-documentaries
and virtual reality documentaries do not only promote new viewing habits – from swiping smartphone
screens to scanning horizons with VR headsets, they shake up the very idea of what a documentary is.
In this short scholarly essay, I argue that the feature of interactivity is the driving force redefining the
documentary genre. This thesis builds on two case studies: 1) Interactive documentary *Atterwasch* and
2) VR documentary *The Unknown Photographer*. In the final section of the essay I revisit the definition
of documentary reality and expand it with the addition of André Bazin's notion of *mise en scène*.

Keywords: interactivity, interactive audio-visual media, interactive documentary, web documen-
tary, virtual reality

In traditional documentary film the user is called a viewer. The standard defined profile is that of a spectator. With the advent of CD-ROMs and video games, and more recently of web and AR/VR documentaries, the viewer stopped being solely that, and became an active user interacting with media files and databases, even at times morphing into a co-creator.[1] A user of interactive documentary, therefore, plays an active role[2] in choosing how to consume and/or contribute to expanding the story. While the viewer is invited to look at images which are an author's representation of reality, the user can play with that reality by selecting her own route through documentary material, leaving things out, focusing on selective details, and even, when possible, injecting her subjective appreciation of reality into the story.

In this essay, I argue that interactivity and its corollary – the carving out of an active role for the viewer of images and listener of sound – is what changes the practice of audio-visual documentary most. I further argue that interactivity brings the consumer of documentary media closer to reality, more so than the creative techniques found in traditional linear film.

Before processing to the main argument, it might be useful to stress that for the purposes of this text, I am referring to a notion of 're-ality' and even more so of 'documentary reality' such as defined in 1932 by Grierson. In his "First Principles of Documentary" (1932), Grierson

Introduction

[1] S. Gaudenzi, *The Living Documentary: from repre-
senting reality to co-creating reality in digital interac-
tive documentary*, London 2013.
[2] A. Gifreu, *El documental interactiu com a nou
gènere audiovisual. Estudi de l'aparició del nou gènere,
aproximació a la seva definició i proposta de taxono-
mia i d'un model d'anàlisi a efectes d'avaluació, disseny
i producció.* UPF, Communication Department 2012.

defines documentary reality in reaction to Hollywood's overemphasis on the staged and controlled film:

> We believe that the cinema's capacity for getting around, for observing and selecting from life itself, can be exploited in a new and vital art form. The studio films largely ignore this possibility of opening up the screen on the real world. They photograph acted stories against artificial backgrounds. Documentary would photograph the living scene and the living story.[3]

For Grierson original actors and scenes are "better guides to a screen interpretation of the modern world. [...] They give it power of interpretation over more complex and astonishing happenings in the real world than the studio mind can conjure up or the studio mechanician recreate. [...] documentary can achieve an intimacy of knowledge and effect impossible to the shim-sham mechanics of the studio [...]."

Even though Grierson's principles go back in time, they are still actionable today. Beside the fact that his writing style is witty and straight to the point, I adhere to his definition because it has not lost of its currency in 85 years. His definition is particularly durable because of his choice of words, which leaves much leeway and does not constrain the documentary genre in a set format. He describes documentary reality as the artistic (and therefore free – as in freedom) documentation and selection of "the living scene and the living story". His definition, albeit reactionary to Hollywood, and thereby situated in time and space, remains an open one that limits its interpretation of reality to the creative process of absorbing the 'living' unfolding around us.

As for defining the practice of documentary making, I will be referring to Grierson's conception of "observing", "selecting [...] materials and stories thus taken from the raw" and "photographing the living" in the first sections of this essay. As my argument progresses and starts incorporating the notion of interactivity, I will end up expanding Grierson's basic definition.

As Aufderheide[4] points out, "early academic work is being done on taxonomies for interactive documentary," thereby referring to pioneer work by Nash.[5] She adds: "[...] not even taxonomies are yet stable in this kind of work". I will discuss a more stable definition of interactive documentary by Gaudenzi[6] in subsequent sections, but as a means of introducing the notion, with 'interactive' – as in 'interactive documentary', I refer to a user-centric notion where the user can get a (mediated) grip on reality. The user acts by means of selecting, photographing, recording, telling, or co-creating.

Fictional techniques in documentary

Some will argue that the relatively recent addition of animation techniques or experimental film to traditional documentary images is

[3] J. Grierson, as quoted in *The European Cinema Reader*, ed. by C. Fowler, 2002. The quote is on p. 40.
[4] P. Aufderheide, *Interactive documentaries: navigation and design*, "Journal of Film and Video" 2015, Vol. 67, 69–78.

[5] K. Nash, *Modes of interactivity: analysing the webdoc*, "Media, Culture & Society" 2012, Vol. 34, Issue 2, pp. 195–210.
[6] S. Gaudenzi, op.cit.

reinventing our understanding of what a documentary is. "As technology transforms our orientation to the experience of nonfiction cinema, filmmakers are finding creative means of approaching subjects – and subjectivity. In-between states, the realms of the subconscious and dreams, the bog of memory, the color of emotion: these are all fair game for innovative and unconventional treatment."[7] This is true, but hardly the end of the story.

These creative techniques not directly related to the 'recording of reality' are adding new layers to otherwise classic documentary works. They are 'talking to other senses' that enable us to explore reality in a much more open and often rich way.[8] For instance, in Chris Landreth's Oscar-winning *Ryan* (2004), animation is used to help the viewer sense drug and alcohol abuse. The use of fictionalised or colourful animation brings the viewer closer to what the protagonist is going through. Fiction, here, portrays the human experience and thereby speaks to senses often left unaddressed in puristic documentary forms. But these artistic layers fall short of radically transforming documentary consumption. Expectedly, even though stimulated in other ways, the viewer remains a viewer.[9]

"Interactive documentaries are ways to construct and experience the real rather than to represent it," Sandra Gaudenzi argued in a doctoral thesis she wrote in 2013. Despite what Gaudenzi points at, I would argue that new forms of documentary bring the user closer to reality by offering a simulation of reality. Grierson's definition of the contrary could make us question the 'over-produced' look and feel of web-based audio-visual stories and have us ask whether the new techniques take away from reality by plunging the user into a fictionalised/ fabricated story world.

Propelling the user into a role

[7] B. Adams, *When Docs Get Graphic: Animation Meets Actuality*, "Documentary Magazine", Spring 2009. Last accessed online on 22 June 2017: <http://www.documentary.org/magazine/when-docs-get-graphic-animation-meets-actuality>.
[8] These relatively novel forms of creative documentaries are among other discussed in the 2005 book *Docufictions: essays on the intersection of documentary and fictional filmmaking,* edited by Gary D. Rhodes and John Parris Springer (G.D. Rodes, J.P. Springer, J.P., *Docufictions: essays on the intersection of documentary and fictional filmmaking*, ed. by G.D. Rhodes and J.P. Springer, Jefferson, NC, United States 2005). Although of interest, these discussions have in large part been held already with the wave of mockumentaries and animation-infused essay films of the last 20 years.
[9] In this passage I assume a passive viewer in pre-VR and pre-web times. I acknowledge recent and significant research into film and phenomenology calling into question this passivity, but it is outside the scope of this short essay to discuss the degree to which the viewer might be active when consuming a linear documentary. This phenomenological research can among other be found in *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (V. Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience,* Princeton 1992), where the author claims that the cinematic experience relies on two sides looking at each other: the human viewer and the film "viewer", where both are subject and object of vision. See also *The Skin of the Film* (L.U. Marks,*The Skin of the Film*, Durham 2000) for an exploration of the notion of 'haptic visuality' or, *The Tactile Eye* (Barker, 2009), where the author sees "the experience of cinema as a sensuous exchange between film and viewer that goes beyond the visual and aural, gets beneath the skin, and reverberates in the body".

When looking more closely at what Gaudenzi proposes, "experiencing the real" implies that the user interacts with something already there: a reality that has been puzzled together by a documentary team. "Constructing the real", on the other hand, implies that the user interprets and transforms reality by participating *in* a documentary. Even though constructing is an activity that theoretically requires more input and effort than merely experiencing, when taken together, we can say that both web technologies – bearing the potential of constructing reality via the multi-perspectiveness of users' input – and augmented reality / virtual reality technologies propel the user into a role. Sobchack[10] would add an important nuance here, arguing that this did not start with the advent of web technologies. Experiences *can* be constructive in accordance with phenomenological film theory, i.e. she argued that film is nothing if not an experience of an experience. Further removed from Sobchack's look at classical film and closer to virtual reality, game scholar Timothy Crick argues that "video gaming is a fully embodied, sensuous, carnal activity" (2011).[11] Although the phenomenon of experiencing fictional material (which is the target of Sobchack's and Crick's analyses) is outside the scope of this essay, phenomenology is a research strand that could help strengthen further investigation of interactivity and immersion in documentary.

In some interactive documentaries, the user will be given a purpose,[12] while in other instances the experience will be explorative.[13] This leap in quality and depth of experience distinguishes traditional linear film from new interactive documentary. In new forms of storytelling the narrative is built around the understanding that the viewer needs to act.[14] A bit like in a play or in a video game, where actors perform a function of a larger story, in interactive documentary the user is called upon to resolve a 'detective question' or explore, like an adventurer would do. The user is confronted with a story world in which she has to learn about the "real" in order to navigate and/or construct.

In this essay I present two case studies of new documentary narratives in order to explore the idea of interactivity and the role of the user. In the second section I draw on the case studies to discuss the extent to which web and AR/VR technologies change our understanding of documentary reality.

[10] V. Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience,* Princeton 1992.

[11] T. Crick, *The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming*, "Games and Culture" 2011, Vol. 6(3), pp. 259–269.

[12] For a good example, see Anandana Kapur's article about a work-in-progress documentary conceived as a co-creation project for social change (Ashton, Gaudenzi & Rose, 2017: 26–37).

[13] For a good example, see the documentary game Fort McMoney, among other described in Kate Nash's article (*i-docs: The Evolving Practices of Interactive Documentaries*, ed. by J. Aston, S. Gaudenzi, M. Rose, New York 2017, pp. 26–37).

[14] Kate Nash discusses the active role for the user in her forthcoming paper drawing on interactive documentary *Journey to the end of coal* (S. Bollendorff, A. Ségrétin, *Journey to the End of Coal*, France: Honkytonk Films 2008, Available at: <http://www.honkytonk.fr/index.php/webdoc/>).

Il. 1. Atterwasch, by Marco del Praʿ & Frédéric Dubois. Photo credit: ©Marco del Praʿ

New narratives: two case studies

Atterwasch – A scroll-documentary

In 2014, a small team around photographer Marco del Praʾ and myself released *Atterwasch*[15] a browser-based documentary about a village in Lusatia, on the German-Polish border. The 20-minute documentary tells the story of uncertainty with which its inhabitants are confronted – the uncertainty of whether or not their home will be erased to make way for the extraction of lignite underneath.

Made up exclusively of black and white photography, naïve-styled illustrations, as well as hypnotic sound design, *Atterwasch* was conceptualised for tablets. The user scrolls the documentary and thereby turns the full screen visuals into moving images. Told in reverse chronology, the story starts in a fictionalised future and rewinds into the past using parallax effects and superimposition of images. While the original language is German, this Arte-coproduction was subtitled in Polish, French and English. *Atterwasch* won design prizes and journalistic distinctions, as well as being shown in film festivals. More than 100,000 people have seen it worldwide.

When looking more closely at this short documentary, we can see that the makers have mixed fiction and reality, mainly in order to confront the user. A fictionalised landscape of what the *Atterwasch* village

[15] *Atterwasch* (del Praʾ & Dubois, 2014) is available at: <http://atterwasch.net> in Polish, English, German, and French.

Il. 2. Atterwasch, by Marco del Pra' & Frédéric Dubois. Photo credit: ©Marco del Pra'

could look like in a few years' time is employed to shake the viewer, to put her against the wall. It is as if the authors said: "this is what *Atterwasch* will look like". The prospect of this future reality, albeit fictionalised, rolls out one scenario of a few possible futures for this town. The impact on the viewer is soft. It only helps to create a smooth distortion.

What plays with the brain of the viewer even more, I would argue, is the interaction with the documentary media itself. The example of *Atterwasch* comes handy, as this is a documentary in which interactivity is at an absolute minimum. Like in most websites, the user can click to open a menu to see more information, switch languages or activate an auto-play function. The full-screen interactivity that is proposed in *Atterwasch* limits itself to the scroll movement. But even with such a minimal gesture, I argue, the viewer becomes a user. She is the one determining the speed of viewing. This might seem self-evident and not particularly revolutionary. At the same time, this passive involvement, or *inter-passivity*[16] is what nurtures this false sense of control. The user believes she is in control of the story and can quickly view the entire documentary, although in fact *Atterwasch* invites the user to slow down. This is done, for instance, via the audio level, where the

[16] F. Jaeger, *Von der Interpassivität zur Tiefenästhetik – Neue Kritik für Neue Medien?* / Teil 3. Berlin: Critic.de, 2013. Available at: <http://www.critic.de/ special/von-der-interpassivitaet-zur-tiefenaesthe­tik-neue-kritik-fuer-neue-medien-teil-3–3736/>.

Il. 3. Atterwasch, by Marco del Pra' & Frédéric Dubois. Photo credit: ©Marco del Pra'

narration is loosely pegged to specific protagonists. If one is to listen to the entire narration of a given protagonist – around three minutes each – she will need to scroll gently. If the user is impatient, she will miss out on much of the storytelling.

Now, the main twist to the interactivity as panned out in *Atterwasch* is that the constant scrolling through the story makes the user progressively realise that this village has been around for ages. The format of the documentary helps support the story. Scrolling through the reverse chronology – with fictional content at first, then professionally made documentary content, and archive material at the end – is what makes this form interactive. After a while, she starts grasping the full wealth of what would be lost if the village were bulldozed for the sake of mining. Her repetitive and almost never-ending finger movement brings her all the way back to 1294, when the village was first mentioned. Your action, as minimal as it might be, functions as a 'story augmenter', and the real is pulled closer to you.

In 2015, digital producer Turbulent, in collaboration with the National Film Board of Canada launched the film festival circuit for *The Unknown Photographer*,[17] a VR documentary on the topic of war

The Unknown Photographer – a VR documentary

[17] P. Aufderheide, *Interactive documentaries: navigation and design*, "Journal of Film and Video" 2015, 67, 69–78. Available at: <http://unknownphotographer.nfb.ca/>.

Il. 4. The Unknown Photographer. Photo credit: ©Turbulent/ National Film Board of Canada (NFB)

photography. The completely 3D-modeled environment visually resembles a walk-through with an audio-guide in an augmented museum exhibit. The user is on the battlefields of World War I, and does his own *parcours* through the trenches listening to the first-person narration of an old man trying to recollect what his position was in that period: was he a war photographer, was he a soldier, and what do the exhibited photos tell us?

The documentary was made for Oculus VR goggles (Developer Kit 2) which limited access to producer-controlled settings only. It has been seen by 5,000 people worldwide, a number set to climb with the planned release of the Oculus Consumer Version 1 (app version). *The Unknown Photographer* won many prizes and awards for its treatment and originality in revisiting World War I. It was also recognised for its pioneer venture in VR storytelling.

In *The Unknown Photographer*, the user straps on goggles and finds herself in a fully designed environment, something that would resonate with André Bazin's notion of *mise en scène* (1948).[18] Bazin coined this term to introduce the idea that reality in film can be approached from both space and time – the *mise en scène* being the spatial appropriation of reality. Apart from two-storey-high photographs and audio design drawing on war soundscapes, there are no artefacts from "reality". A completely fictionalised setting it is, not without similarities to the aesthetics found in video games. The user activates a joystick[19] to move around. She zigzags around objects, walks through doors, and follows subtle signposting all along the way. The experience ends in a gigantic cemetery of unknown soldiers.

In this narrative experience, the user is the one "walking through the story", actively exploring and looking around. Like in a museum, the visitor dives into rooms which, albeit drawing on a fantastic aesthetic, transmit extreme feelings: disgust, sickness, cold, isolation, suffocation, heaven-like relief, etc. The soundscape is particularly conducive to feeling immersed in the story. The position of the user, his action of going forward and going back, triggers the storytelling and the progression through the narrative. This advancement and passing of rooms, which is completely *mis en scène*, draws the user into a form of documentary reality. VR documentary, although fictional to a large extent, virtually forces the user into reality by setting the rules of interaction and transferring story progression into the hands of the user.

[18] A. Bazin, *Le réalisme cinématographique et l'école italienne de la libération.* Esprit *Nouvelle série,* 1948, no. 141(1), pp. 58–83.

[19] Soon to be replaced with a joy pad (in the context of the CV1 release).

These two documentary cases drawn from the practice of web and virtual reality creation are only presented here succinctly. They are nonetheless characteristic of "documentary-oriented new media forms", as Matt Soar would put it.[20] Both interactive documentaries are designed to play with reality. Instead of dumping an interpretation of reality onto a viewer, like we expect when going to the movies, both these experiences require the user to 'bounce off' the audio-visual proposition, to find a singular tempo and point-of-view. I therefore argue that interactive audio-visual media require the documentary maker not only to observe, select and photograph,[21] but also to *design* a *mise en scène*.

In *Atterwasch*, the speed at which the user swipes the images determines the listening experience. If one stays put on one image, but listens carefully to what a protagonist has to say, she might end up having a completely different take on the village of *Atterwasch* than someone who is perfectly pacing the images with the sound. Playing with the audio-visual layers (e.g. illustration in overlay over photography) permits the user to consume this documentary in a "parallaxed" fashion. This displacement of image and sound is left entirely to the hands of the user, thereby allowing for a personalised viewing rhythm. This influences the story: a slow navigation will call-up many more sound files, filling the viewing experience with a richer audio soundscape, including more narrative input. A hasty navigation will skip many parallax effects and cut out sound, thereby providing a quick visual overview of story strands. The reality is in the latter case mainly transmitted via frame-by-frame photography, with only limited narrative depth. This superficial consumption of the documentary material is coded in such a way that the user still gathers enough information to construct a reality, but it remains on a reportage-level, leaving out the more poetic possibilities engrained in *Atterwasch*.

The interactive design here is not merely limited to making the viewing experience smooth. Like in *The Unknown Photographer*, yet coming from an artistically completely different approach, the goal in this interaction design is to trigger the user to *do*, and to *act on* or *in* the story. By triggering this active role, the designers plunge the user into a true journey, in which she sheds the role of passive spectator. She is on a path to making choices about where to go, what to look at. *Walking in the film* and making conscious decisions on where to go puts the user in dialogue with the story unfolding. She is not bigger than the film or outside the film, but in a larger documentary reality.

Designing
a *mise en scène*

[20] M. Soar, Book review of *i-docs: The Evolving Practices of Interactive Documentaries*. Accessed on 22 June 2017: <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/i-docs/9780231851077>.

[21] J. Grierson, *First Principles of Documentary*, 1932, as quoted in C. Fowler (ed.), *The European Cinema Reader*, 2002, p. 40.
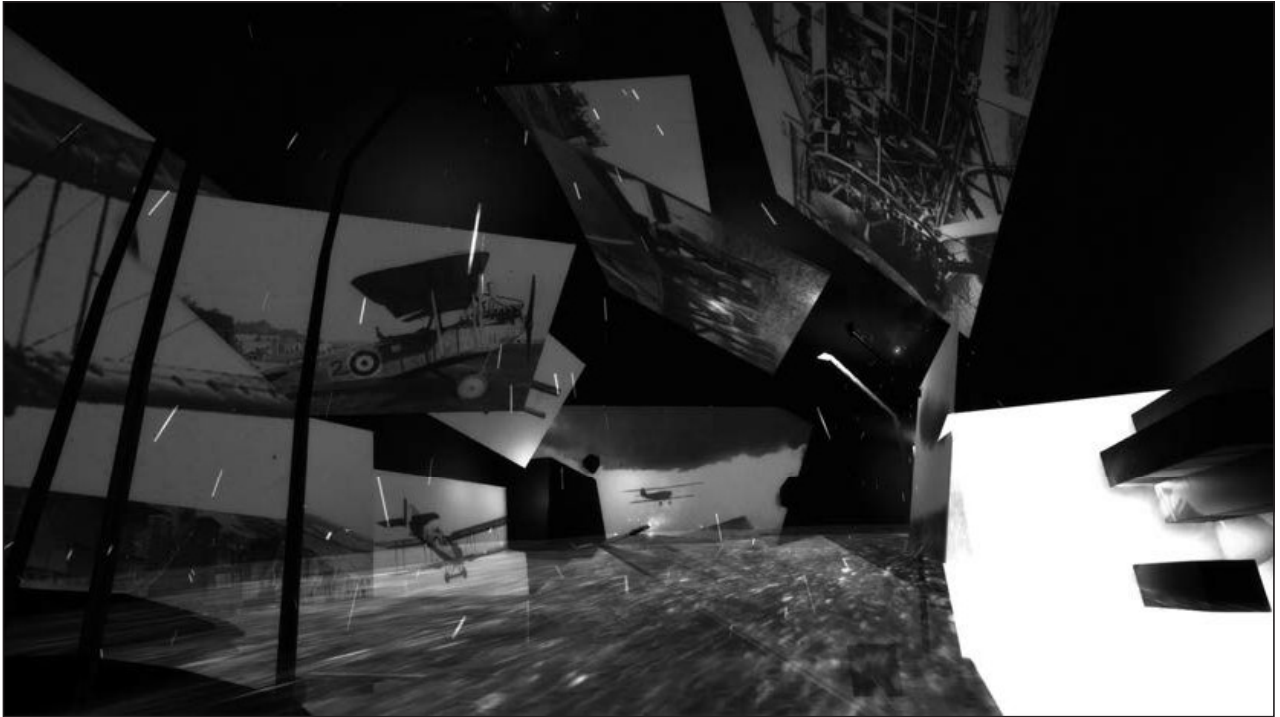
Il. 5. The Unknown Photographer. Photo credit: ©Turbulent/ National Film Board of Canada (NFB)

This said, while this feature of *being inside* is proper to VR documentary – not web-documentary – once the position of the person is cleared (inside the box, not in front of the screen), it is the interactivity confronting the user which transforms the relationship to reality. By advancing, turning, running, looking up and down, by gazing, the user progresses in the story and thereby performs a form of travelling. The act of travelling in the story and being in conversation with the documentary material through 'interactive signs'[22] surrounds the user, making the experience vivid, and as close to reality as one can get.

Designing interaction in documentary new media is not a question of style or aesthetics, I argue. It serves a purpose, and that is to make reality live-off interactions. Every micro-decision the active user makes when turning her head, scrolling or clicking keeps her in the *scène*. This act-react possibility of technology brings the documentary material alive.

Web and AR/VR technologies enable the person to explore and *be*, rather than just *see*. When someone looks outside a closed apartment window, she sees passers-by walking on the boardwalk: she can't talk to them, she can't interact with them. She can only look at how people walk down the street. The web and VR induced narrative allows the person to leave the viewing spot and walk on the boardwalk with other pedestrians. In other words, she gets a chance to play a role in the scene. This is precisely what happens with evolved forms of interactive

[22] P.B. Andersen, *A Theory of Computer Semiotics*, New York 1997.

Il. 6. The Unknown Photographer. Photo credit: ©Turbulent/ National Film Board of Canada (NFB)

documentary. They allow you to converse with fellow users, to take down a different path, to change the perspective, and in short: to live the story. This consciousness of oneself during the story's consumption, triggered by interactive signs, brings the user into being, thereby pulling her closer to reality than a classic documentary film would do.

In an incomparably more developed form of interactivity than that of *Atterwasch*, *The Unknown Photographer* is designed in such a way that the user is on the set. While in *Atterwasch* the user replaces the viewer, in *The Unknown Photographer* the 'actor' replaces the user. Here, too, the sound – and visual-scape is triggered by the progression of the story. But in addition to that, the user can move around in space almost freely. She can go down into the trenches and up again, walk up to a gigantic photograph and lean over a table on which artefacts are lying. The clever interactive proposition, like in many of the VR documentaries released since 2015, brings the consumer of documentary media closer to reality.

Conclusion

Beyond the technical interactivity, digital and networked forms of storytelling redefine the genre by introducing audiences to new modes of consumption. The participatory potential in interactive narratives has the power of bringing users even closer to reality.[23] Technology in this case changes our understanding of documentary, as it

[23] K. Nash, *What is interactivity for? The social dimension of web-documentary participation*, "Continuum" 2014, Vol. 28, pp. 383–395.

brings about avenues for sensing, living, exploring a story, as discussed above, but also beyond that, of being in a conversational and collaborative relationship with the work.

Atterwasch and *The Unknown Photographer* take the user on a tour to "experience the real".[24] Compared to classic film, which is static and closed, in the case studies above, we have seen that the user fulfills a function, other than that of *a person at the window*. This being said, by "constructing the real" together with the user/actor, as suggested by Gaudenzi, interactive documentary is probably *en route* to fulfilling the most noble of its promises: being a site for social change.[25]

Moreover, as the two case studies and the literature on interactive documentary suggest, interactivity and user experience design are key to documentary storytelling today. They are a *mise en scène* element – in other words a fictional/artificial import into the genre – that has the power to bring the user closer to reality.

Revisiting Grierson, it seems fair to ask whether interactivity in web and VR documentary is violating his first principles of documentary. By that, I mean: doesn't the *mise en scène* element in new documentary narratives swing the pendulum back to exactly what Grierson rebelled against: "acted stories against artificial backgrounds". I would argue that the answer resides in the documentary maker's ability to strike a balance between *observing, selecting, photographing* and designing an interactivity-based *mise en scène* of reality. Fortunately, there is no recipe for this.

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