UNIVERSITY OF THEATER AND FILM ARTS
Doctoral School


# Documentary Filmmaking in the Age of Digital Interface

Storytelling techniques and application strategies in linear and web-documentary


Theses of the Doctoral Dissertation


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My research at the Doctoral Program of the University of Theatre and Film Arts examines how digital culture and new media art transforms the possibilities and forms of documentary filmmaking and non-fiction storytelling. What is happening today in digital storytelling and representation of reality is reminiscent of the prominent formal solutions and experiments of the 1920s avant-garde film history. The reason for this is the appearance of high-speed broadband in private households, the collaborative Web 2.0 and the rapid development of digital technological devices. The hypothesis of the dissertation starts from the observation that from the beginning of the 2000s, as a result of media convergence, it can be perceived that the digital sub-genres and platforms of non-fiction storytelling have become more and more numerous. In addition to linear documentary, interactive web-documentaries, 3D documentaries, cyber documentaries, documentary video games, mobile documentaries, 360-degree videos, virtual reality and augmented reality projects, transmedia installation and live performances have emerged as a genre; many innovative areas where the stories of reality and technology could meet. In this thriving technological culture, we can rightly consider digital media as an alternative medium to traditional film, where a platform that affords interactivity pushes authors to experiment with interaction, changing the form of the documentary from linear to non-linear, from authored to collaborative and from video-based to multi-media based. The result of those experiments is what, in this research, will be referred to as web-documentaries that spread the film market over the last years involving the user/viewer to interact with different multimedia platforms and inspire the filmmaker/user experience designer to experiment with multiplatform storytelling.[1] In my dissertation I tried to examine the validity of this observation from a theoretical, practical, and artistic point of view to prove its fundamental existence in today's digital culture.

Moreover, nowadays there are no documentary films produced which exist on their own as single media products. There are no completed films without products for marketing activities, such as a website that promotes the film, trailer or teaser videos, or social media sites (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). The film and the related contents that appear on other media platforms can not only serve marketing purposes, but they can also become storytelling platforms interconnected with each other. In my doctoral research, I was specifically interested in this form of non-fictional storytelling, when the author decides to intentionally place certain elements of the story on other media platforms. This way it leaves the viewer (user) to discover

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[1] Sandra Gaudenzi: *The Living Documentary: from representing reality to co-creating reality in digital interactive documentary*. London, University of London, 2013. 13-14.

the story world and its order of sequences and interactions by their own creating cross- and transmedia universes.

While developing the theoretical framework of my research, my initial research questions were how to transform a traditional linear documentary into a cross-media project and how to use multimedia tools to extend non-fictional storytelling. How can the linear documentary and the multimedia website interact with each other? What storytelling strategies does a linear film and an interactive website work with? How the viewer/user engage with the same subject in several media platforms (linear film vs. interactive website)? In addition to the linear forms of documentary storytelling, what multimedia tools can be involved in the distribution or educational processes after the film is completed?

To answer these questions, I used the views of Sandra Gaudenzi, one of the best-known British theoreticians in the field of interactive web-documentaries. Gaudenzi's suggestion to define web-documentaries is that in today's dynamically changing genre environment, she considers all works of art to be web-documentaries that seek to capture reality through digital interactive technology.[2] In the second chapter of the dissertation, I outlined the beginnings of media technology and film history leading to the appearance of the genre through illustrative examples, examining the specific characteristics of the genre in the light of postmodern tendencies and comparing its storytelling techniques with the linear documentary film. In this chapter, I also reviewed the different types of web-documentaries in terms of what the authors suggest as solutions for user and artwork interaction, illustrating each category with a variety of examples.

In the third and fourth chapters, I approached the above-mentioned issues from a practical point of view. During the three years of my doctoral training, I developed and partially completed a cross-media project plan, that I detailly present in the dissertation to illustrate my authorial and research questions. The project includes a completed linear documentary (*Easy Lessons*; 2018) that had cinema release in Hungary and an interactive, multimedia web-documentary project plan (*Transit*) that puts the story and theme unfolding in the documentary into a broader context through photography, video, audio and infographics. In the dissertation, I also touched on the innovative marketing and educational applications of web-documentary to widen the possibilities for future use of the genre.

What proves the relevance of my research is that in the last few years more and more digital exhibitions opened at top international documentary festivals (IDFA DocLab, Sheffield

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[2] Gaudenzi i.m. 69.

Doc/Fest: Crossover Summit, Sundance Film Festival: New Frontier, Tribeca Storyscape, CPH:DOX: INTER:ACTIVE). Development training programs, pitching forums (IDFA Forum, Docs Barcelona Interactive Pitch, Cross Video Days, Sunny Side of the Doc, Sheffield Interactive Fund Pitch) and funds (Crosscurrents Doc Fund, TFI New Media Fund, Science Sandbox Non-fiction Grant) appeared on the international documentary market focusing on cross-and transmedia projects. The changes in the habits of the viewer lead to both traditional television and newspaper open to on-line multimedia platforms. That is why we see more and more multimedia projects related to traditional television programs on the television' webpages (BBC, Arte TV, Channel 4) and multimedia reports on the on-line interfaces of the printing press (Le Monde, New York Times, Guardian).

However, in the Central and Eastern European region, and especially in Hungary, cross- and transmedia storytelling is a quite rarely used artistic practice, not to mention the web-documentary production. In recent years, there was only one web-documentary film produced as an isolated experiment, but it did not attract a significant audience and critical reception in Hungary (Júlia Halász and Mátyás Kálmán: *Happy New Year Hungary!* 2015). It also shows that web-documentary as a genre is still a virgin terrain for Hungarian media artists and academics, one of the main reasons for this is the lack of funding sources and trainings. The theoretical questions and the object of analysis of my dissertation are intended to fill this gap somewhat, in addition to reflecting on this topic through my own artistic work, presenting my own film and cross-media project plan that will hopefully provide inspiration to readers, professionals, artists and students interested in non-fictional new media art.