

MATTERS OF TIME: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO INTERACTIVE DOCUMENTARY

Mathias Schuh

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Institution: University of Amsterdam, Graduate School for Humanities.

Abstract: Recent years have seen the emergence of a new format of documentary representation that departs from traditional, linear documentary film. Interactive documentaries, also dubbed web documentaries or database documentaries, are nonlinear, multimedia, and interactive bodies of documentary work, commonly distributed through the Internet. They turn the user from a passive viewer into an active agent who explores a nonfictional and hyper-narrative story world. Previous research on interactive documentaries has largely focused on defining and categorizing the new media object, or applied postmodernist notions that call the traditional relation of author and user into question. This thesis suggests to contextualize interactive documentaries as part of a larger shift in media culture from cinema to digital media and investigates the implications of that change for documentary experience, temporal perception, and subjectivity. It is argued that the challenge for interactive documentaries will be to strike a balance between cinematic temporality and the primacy of instantaneity in new media environments in order to remain powerful means of nonfictional representation.

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The thesis first discusses philosophical approaches to cinema that address the question of temporal experience and subjectivity in cinematic perception. It is suggested that the temporality of cinema aligns itself with the subjective perception of time, and thus creates a form of self-awareness. Based on that, a phenomenology of nonfictional representation is developed, suggesting that documentary cinema has a particular relation to time, as it is both a time-based medium and a form of cultural memory. This concept is then set in opposition to a phenomenology of new media objects, which constitute a shift from temporal to spatial representation and, by extension, from temporality to absolute presence. It is then argued that interactive documentaries need to find a narrative form that allows for temporal representation while also catering for the user's desire to actively explore the documentary work. This framework is then applied to the analysis of three case studies, *Bear 71* (2012), *Welcome to Pine Point* (2011), and *Thanatorama* (2007), each of which is characterized by a different way of mediating between cinematic temporality and hypermedia instantaneity.

Keywords: phenomenology, interactivity, perception, subjectivity, documentary, historicity.

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