The documentary as a democratic practice: an interview with the canadian director Katerina Cizek

Cláudio Bezerra & Arline Lins*

Katerina Cizek is a canadian documentary director and known as a pioneer in digital media and documentaries. Two-time Emmy-winning, Cizek has been a part of the digital revolution and has projects that defy our ideas of boundaries when we talk about interactive work. Her documentaries go beyond any kind of taxonomy, not only because they have many different types of media mixed in the storytelling but because they're also a part of the revolution in the digital world themselves as they develop their narrative.

The Highrise project with the National Film Board (CAN) does not just tell stories but transforms what we, the audience, think about the way we're living in our cities, in our houses. It does that by putting us as audience and subjects at the same time. So we become part of the story, we immerse into the characters and we help her create the narrative by sharing experiences of our own. But what motivates her to – as she likes to say – work with and within the people and not just for them? What makes her include the audience as subject and co-creator at the same time?

Katerina's work breaks any geographic limits there might be when we watch or consume a conventional product that puts a screen between the audience, the subject and the director. She unites through technology. That's what made possible for us to do the interview 7.282 km away. We talked about internet and immersive realities using one of the first tools available for the internet: the email. The day was march 10th, 2018.

Arline Lins: In previous interviews and events you've said you're a documentarist but consider yourself a media agnostic. What motivated you to do interactive work on the internet?

Katerina Cizek: What motivated me to work on the internet was when the internet came along. I really consider myself a digital native. I probably sent my first email when I was, I don't know, 8 or 9, maybe 10 years old.

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Because my dad was a quantum physicist at University of Waterloo, one of the first universities to be involved with IBM on computer science. So for me the internet was really part of my life and it seemed a natural place to start making web native work. So it really came easy to me in the same way that all the technologies just come along. For me, it's all part of the tool kit.

Cláudio Bezerra: Webdocumentary, i-Doc, living documentary, docu-games, cross-media documentary... What's the best expression to define the work you do on the internet? Why?

KC: Thanks for this question. I actually am not so and never been so concerned about taxonomy and definitions of the work because I really feel like a lot of the work that I've done is hybrid and different elements of a much larger project get delivered in different media. So the web is just one of the tools that we view for example in Highrise at the National Film Board of Canada where we also did physical installations and live performances, also live readings, also in some ways in which we brought the stories, and the narratives, and the shifting of the narratives into the world. A long way of saying that each of the pieces that I do may get classified in some of these terms, but for me the project is much larger than one technology. I do definitely feel that in terms of classifications we are moving into a new arena of what's possible for the documentary as technology evolves. Emerging technologies such as VR and AR, and sometimes called MR (mixed reality) or XR, which could be any kind of media. That's out in the world often algorithmically driven into immersive experiences. So that's definitely worth a lot of the innovation is happening, but I definitely also feel very strongly about the need to defend the internet, defend the neutrality, defend the democratic capacity and potential of the internet.

AL: During the production of the Highrise project, the citizens of the high-rise buildings had a space to express themselves, a participation in events with the government and other leaders. The matters discussed were motivated by their testimonials. Can we say that the collaborative model fortifies the social function of the documentary? Why?

KC: Absolutely, yes. For me at the hard of the work that I've done for the past 20 years or so, is something that I know, I'm calling co-creation and it's the idea that media makers work with non-media makers. Such as citizens, in the case of the highrise project, but community groups, also involved in the highrise project, the organizations that sat to organize and advocate for the ci-tizens in the buildings. But also professionals, so cross-disciplinary work. In Highrise, for example, I worked with architects and urban planers, critical ge-ographers, also with the civil service, working closely with the municipal go-

vernment of Toronto. So all these different kinds of co-creative relationships between media makers, us the documentary team and these traditionally non-media makers to design the project with the intention of trying to change conditions of the lives of the people with which we work. So those are all … all the work that I do stems from the relationships and the technologies or the ways in which the documentaries eventually articulate themselves and their forms are more off-shoots or results of their relationships, if that makes sense. So rather than the collaborative model fortifying the function of the documentary, I would say it really is.. they are the roots. That's the roots, and the tree, and maybe the fruit is the documentary.

AL: In which way do these new interactive forms of documentary are re-modeling the political practices and the claims for a fair citizenship?

KC: I really see documentary as equated deeply, profoundly, with democracy. So for me the documentary practice is a democratic practice. And for fair citizenship we need democracy. So documentary as a tool within that is very important for me.

CB: The conventional documentary is – almost – always a result of the interaction between the director and the "other person" in the moment of the shooting. How does this relationship with "the other person" characterize in the interactive documentary, especially in your work?

KC: I see the relationships a bit more complicated than that. I see co-creative models disrupting that relationship between the director and the so called "other person" which I call formally known as "the subject". So there's a disruption, perhaps a rejection of this idea that the director is in otherness from the subject. Often they can be the same person. And I also see the relationship with the audience as dramatically shifting with the potential of the internet and all these kinds of algorithmic immersive forms. So it's sort of like the people formally known as the subjects, the people formally known as the audience and, in a way, the people formally known as the documentarians, these relationships are disrupted by these technologies and these approaches and it almost creates a triangle between these groups. So that the people formally known as subjects can have also deep relationships with the people formally known as the audiences.

AL: The representation matter is also an important dimension when we talk about conventional documentary. Bill Nichols' modes are very famous in this subject. In interactive context, representing the world is still an important

question or are they focused in thinking and interacting with and about the world?

KC: For me and for our team at the co-creation studio at MIT we definitely speak a lot about making work, making documentaries with and within communities rather than for them or about them. I think that's a really nice way of answering this question, this kind of debate.

CB: What are the main differences between making a conventional documentary and an interactive one?

KC: I think there's a lot of similarity. Is in fact especially when it comes to the content, or the subjects or the relationships that are possible as a documentarian with the world. And trying to dig deep and profoundly transforming not only people's ideas of a subject but the whole context of you in it. In terms of practice is quite different. The tools and the technologies that are employed and the kinds of work relationships, the kinds of specializations involved in creating both interactive and immersive work is a broad and profound spectrum of technologists and different kinds of producers, social media, people. So it really changes the way in which our work is done, in terms of workflow and the kind of language that needs to be understood between the team players.

AL: Some directors and academics consider the interactivity an important aspect to attract the public to the online documentaries. However they discuss about what they call the interactivity paradox, which is, as long as the documentary becomes more interactive and focuses in the user's experience, it loses the power of storytelling, affecting the public and provoking a social impact. What is your opinion about this?

KC: I think I disagree. I'm not sure that interactivity would dissolve the user's experience, that it would lose the power of storytelling. I'm not sure that I agree with that at all. And I'm not sure that it may be different in terms of the way that the user relates to the subjects and to the stories and the narratives. But I'm not sure that the claims about the purity of conventional documentary is as solid as the statement of this question would imply.

AL: What is your opinion about using "gamification" strategies in the interactive documentary?

KC: Games are an enormous, huge genre. I think that it's an interesting world and a very, very diverse one as well. There is not one type of game. There are so many different kinds. For example, I can think of a fantastic one that recently came out last year called Walden, which is an open world game, it has no competitive features at all, but it allows you as a user to walk through

an intricately and beautifully recomposed world of Thoreau and allows you to challenge yourself with the kinds of ideas that he forces for himself. So I think sometimes in the documentary world you really oversimplify what game means. And in my opinion, as I said before, in terms of my agnostic approach to documentary making, anything, any technologies, any genres can be really beneficial for exploration for the documentarian.

CB: Is it possible to qualify the public of the interactive documentary? Who are the people that seek and interact with these documentaries? What's their level of involvement and participation in these documentaries?

KC: These are very complex questions. Interactive documentaries in a way had their height, their peak a few years ago. I'm not sure that they're being as produced or feel the focus of some of the people that tend to innovate with technologies as much. I think people have moved much more into the immersive space, which doesn't necessarily provide for broad large audiences access to the web. A lot of the immersive, VR, 360º work – all the 360º work is available online – and a lot of the platforms are, for example, New York Times and The Guardian are exploring with the 360º on the web. But a lot of these technologies are not attached to the web and exists for public access through festivals and museums, which is a very, very small audience. So I think in a way we've moved away from mass audiences for now, in terms of the latest emerging technologies, and that to me is actually an issue, a troubling of the field because the interactive documentary attracted me, in the first place, because of the potential to reach wide audiences, global audiences, immediate audiences, because of the accessibility of the web.

AL: You're a pioneer in a new way of storytelling. How is women's participation in the production of documentaries around the world?

KC: Women have always been a part of Cinema, documentary and new technologies. They're not always recognized for their work. Sometimes are the fore front in an innovation, for example editing in Cinema. Back in the early days editing was considered women's work, because it was considered like stitching or weaving or sewing. But as it came to be known that was actually *montage* the key to making the cinema poetic in a way that it was professionalized and acknowledged, the women were pushed out. So it's interesting to think about the role of women in these fields. Definitely in the technology world we have a serious, serious problem. There are not many women there, the numbers are very low. And certainly in Cinema we have the same issue. Documentary tends to be a little bit better than the feature film, but we have a long way to go.

CB: How is the funding for the interactive production in Canada, especially in the National Film Board? Is there any kind of resistance or rivalry between the filmmakers of conventional and interactive documentaries?

KC: I think this is a good question to pose the National Film Board. I'm only on contract there working on a very specific project. As far as I know they dedicate about 20% of the budget – this could be the old figure – to interactive work, and a lot of the filmmakers that end up doing interactive or immersive or new documentaries come from the conventional film world. So I think there's a real nice crossover and definitely an interest on both sides to discuss and learn and experiment with each other.

AL: What projects are your working on now?

KC: I'm the artistic director and the executive producer of a new emergent co-creative studio at MIT Open Doc Lab. And our goal is to champion and advocate for and create space for collaborative methods in documentary. Particularly in emerging platforms. So that's something we're just bringing out into the world, we've been working on it for about 18 months. And I've been directing an interactive documentary at the National Film Board of Canada called Supreme Law, which is about the canadian constitution, but told to the stories of Canada's top Youtube stars. So we've brought together top Youtube stars with constitutional scholars to help make the history of the canadian constitution accessible to younger audiences. It's been a lot of fun and very challenging to merge these worlds.