

Narrative Strategies in Web Documentaries

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Paper received 23.02.16; Accepted for publication 10.03.16.

Abstract. The present paper discusses the features of multimedia storytelling in the interactive documentary as a rapidly developing and promising genre of the digital age. The main narrative techniques, particularities of focalization and degree of viewers' involvement in web documentaries have been analyzed. The material of the research is the multimedia project *Prison Valley* (2010) which is an example of semi-open narrative. The study revealed that the analyzed media discourse is a complex combination of several interactive modes (hypertext and participative), structural types (narrative and collaborative), as well as linear and non-linear narrations.

Keywords: *web documentary, narrative strategies, media discourse, interactivity, hypertext.*

The term “documentary” was coined by John Grierson in 1926 to define movies which observe actual events and objective truth. While feature films are committed to storytelling and can be referred to as fiction, documentaries can be interpreted as non-fiction. Thus, documentary films, as opposed to feature films, are focused on representation of reality, on persuasion or education of the audience. Basically, fiction largely rests upon the cause and effect relationship, while the structure of documentary is rooted in the problem-solution. Bill Nichols [12] defines the documentary concept as a film which speaks about events and situations with real people; these stories must convey plausible perspectives and portrayals of lives, not a fictional allegory. That is, documentaries introduce particular problems, explore their background and current state of affairs, and eventually possible solutions are offered or at least insinuated. Moreover, the filmmaker has a distinct opinion which essentially shapes the entire story.

In order to implement their objectives, fiction and non-fiction apply quite different narrative techniques and structures. Argument is the main instrument of documentary movies while feature films appeal primarily to viewers' emotions. The range of conventional formal elements in documentary includes archival photographs and footage, historical documents, voice-over narration (“the voice-of-god”, or the all-knowing narration) and interviews (witnesses, experts and so on). All these techniques contribute to the effect of truthfulness in the movie. The recent tendencies also display the prevalence of handheld cameras with “fly on the wall” perspectives which render the narrative as unobtrusive as possible. However, documentaries are not confined to these traditional tools. In fact, the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are very often blurred since it is impossible to completely detach documentary from feature film. Thus, documentaries may apply all kinds of elements which are available in the cinematic language: camera angle, lighting, sound and so on. In fact, the elements of fiction are essential for the effective achievement of documentary's primary objective, that is, to influence the viewers, to affect their perception. For instance, if it were not for some part of storytelling, dramatization and re-enactments in all documentaries, these films would be too plain-looking and tedious indeed.

Currently, documentary movies tend to incorporate and absorb all possible means of technologies. As a matter of fact, the postmodernist trends of merging heterogeneous

experiences and melting borders between discourses have significantly influenced the documentary genre. In this context, the notion of digital documentary is rapidly developing nowadays. Just like traditional documentaries, the web type of this genre reflects the aspects of real life; it tends to display current events, as well as historical perspective [9]. Web documentary adopts the main strategies of its predecessor, namely, the public cultural strategy which is intended to instill such virtues as “unity and discipline” into the viewers [8, p. 52]. That is to say, the major strategy of the documentary genre is essentially to provide the audience with “a pattern of thought and feeling,” and thus to perform a kind of identity management [8, p. 52]. It is also necessary to observe that apart from these traditional purposes, the basic strategy of web documentaries involves the stimulation of user's explorative, configurative and role-playing functions [1]. At the same time, web documentaries reveal a number of unique characteristics which are not typical of conventional documentaries.

Indeed, digital technologies are constantly changing the possibilities of the documentary genre. A web documentary extensively employs the multimedia tools and interactive potential of the Internet, as well as the non-linear narrative techniques. Directors promote the cinematic experience far beyond the limits of one's screen. For instance, web documentaries are hypermediated, that is, they demand participation and interaction from the audience. As a result, the audience of web documentaries is actually transformed into participants and co-creators. Interactivity as a defining characteristic of web documentaries essentially signals “a shift from passive to active audience engagement” [11, p. 199]. This genre extensively uses such technologies as information architecture, visual design, and the like. It is also necessary to observe that web documentaries are basically the clusters of information which may have numerous contributors and authors. Kate Nash remarks that web documentaries employ such features as “use of interviews and observational sequences, sound and images collected on location, and commentary either in the form of voiceover or text” [11, p. 197]. In fact, the audience becomes immersed in a number of discourses.

It is also worth noting that web documentaries suggest a wide space for possibilities. In addition to conventional editing techniques, such as sequences and montage experimenting, juxtaposing the heterogeneous material (image and sound), and combining footage [12], web

documentaries apply a range of unique features. For instance, web documentaries can have discussion forums that provide the extensive basis for participation. That is to say, the authors tend to diversify the documentary's contents through interaction with users. Moreover, web documentaries often use digital cameras and Web-cams and thus "can distribute and broadcast their material in real-time" [9]. It is also necessary to observe that web documentaries possess such feature as multicursality which implies the idea of "several possible courses through a website" [5, p. 185]. Thus, while the linear documentaries demanded only a cognitive participation from viewers (the audience had to interpret the text), the interactive documentaries actually require physical participation (for instance, clicking or speaking) [6, p. 10]. In such a manner, online documentaries actually redefine the conventional idea of documentary [2, p. 213].

Within the framework of web documentaries, one can distinguish narrative, categorical and collaborative types of structure. These three basic types of structuring determine the way how users come in touch with the provided web documentary materials. The narrative web documentaries "may include observational style webdocs and simulations in which the user's journey provides narrative coherence or webdocs that focus on the filmmaker's journey" [11, p. 200]. The categorical web documentaries involve the simultaneously existing number of objects, as distinguished from the chronological alignment in narrative mode. By contrast, the collaborative web documentaries are based upon the contributions from users. One can also define several modes of interaction in web documentaries [3, p. 8]. For instance, the conversational mode is based on the idea of uninterrupted and smooth transition of sentences. The hitchhiking mode, or hypertext, is probably the most widespread in terms of web documentaries. This mode involves the non-linear narrative through which the user can navigate. In other words, there is a closed system, controlled by the author. Meanwhile, the participative mode is more open to user's contribution. Finally, the experiential mode creates "a kind of interaction which is unpredictable, based on different variables: not those designed by the author anymore, but the ones that exist in reality" [3, p. 9].

Thus, web documentary is a productive digital advancement of recent time; it is a new field of audiovisual creative activity. The web genre provides its viewers with the possibility to shape their own narrative spaces, thus transforming them into active explorers and co-authors [14]. The sphere of web documentary has already demonstrated a number of experiments with diverse artistic strategies and conceptual backgrounds. Numerous web documentaries, different in terms of style, effect and experience, have been suggested to the audience in recent years. One of the most famous web documentaries, *Prison Valley* (2010), discloses the features of American prison industry in the city of Cañon, Colorado, which shelters 13 prisons with the total population of 36.000 people. Hence, 16% of Cañon citizens are inmates. The directors of *Prison Valley*, David Dufresne and Philippe Brault, extensively examine the issue of custodial restraint in Colorado. The documentary brings up a number of social, judicial and

economic issues as to the structure of the US prison system. The authors discuss the slave labour of prisoners, medical care and death in prisons, penitentiary reform activism and other delicate issues. The user joins the filmmakers' journey and thus obtains the opportunity to extensively explore the depths of these issues. In fact, the local economy of Cañon largely depends on the prison industry within the area. It is also necessary to observe that the number of prisoners actually affects the life of the entire population in Cañon city. In other words, those who live outside prisons also experience psychological stress. In this context, the interactive format of *Prison Valley* is very important since it renders this bizarre atmosphere palpable for the audience. The eerie atmosphere of the city which is ostensibly the capital of the US prison industry immediately captures the viewers' attention. The sombre landscapes as seen from the windshield of the filmmakers' car are disturbing indeed. The voiceover adds to this effect by calling Cañon "the clean version of hell" [4]. Thus, the authors employ a number of masterful audiovisual combinations which certainly provide the ultimate experience.

Prison Valley as an interactive documentary proves to be highly engaging indeed. It is a vivid example of the 21st century multimedia storytelling which can be accessed via its own site, Facebook, Twitter, the producers' blog, as well as via iPhone application. In other words, *Prison Valley* as a web documentary is a flexible and userfriendly cluster of information.

In terms of its interactive structure, *Prison Valley* is the filmmakers' journey which involves numerous encounters with Cañon City residents. At the end of each video section, users can choose whether to leave the documentary or continue the journey. The narrative develops chronologically with a voiceover referring to some of the previous encounters. Users cannot change the order of segments when they watch them for the first time. It is required to view the fragments chronologically; after that, one can move forward or watch the fragment once again. That is to say, the narrative cannot be unravelled deliberately; the authors restrict the development of the story within the chronological framework and certain order. Indeed, the fragments of *Prison Valley* "are organized to be experienced almost in a linear way, in order to control the flow of information" [3, p. 18]. Meanwhile, the author's function is to create the possible ways and options, as well as to control and inspire the users' interaction. The user's role is therefore to explore the issues of the US prison system, to choose certain options and to collaborate (for instance, at the documentary's forum).

The first section of the documentary is the fourminute introduction which cannot be skipped. Next, the interactive section follows. It involves registering or connecting via Twitter or Facebook. Further, a wide range of complementary material is offered, such as maps, interviews, photos, newspaper articles, statistical data, additional footage and the discussion forum. *Prison Valley* as a web documentary reveals distinct features of interactivity which "opens up the possibility of multiple informational pathways" [11, p. 200]. The viewers have to patch the scattered fragments, and thus they become the co-authors of the narrative. As a matter of fact, *Prison*

Valley provides the audience with two levels of interactivity: through navigating the documentary's interface and by interacting with other users and characters during chat-sessions. Users can select "Chat", "Ask", "React" or "Live" buttons and thus navigate through the forum. At the forum, visitors are welcome to discuss the issues of incarceration, as well as to get in touch with the characters [6, p. 201]. Users have the possibility to explore the reporter's motel room, to leave messages for heroes and even interact with them directly on fixed days. Thus, *Prison Valley* is "an interactive Web documentary that leads to comments and debate" [6, p. 177]. Thus, the narrative in *Prison Valley* reveals both linear and non-linear features.

The format of *Prison Valley* implies that the user can choose multiple options provided by the author (by clicking the buttons "Rear window", "Leave room", "Forums", "Clues", "Notebook", "News", "Desk" and so on). From this perspective, *Prison Valley* can be regarded as a hypertext. Moreover, throughout the documentary, the viewers can freely access forums, communicate with other users and protagonists, express their opinion and so on. In other words, users have the opportunity to contribute their own version of reality. In this context,

Prison Valley can be considered as a representative of the participative mode as well. Hence, *Prison Valley* is an intricate combination of several interactive modes (hypertext and participative), structural types (narrative and collaborative), as well as linear and non-linear features. The latter feature allows us classifying *Prison Valley* as a semi-open narrative.

Thus, web documentary is a productive mode of modern narrative, and *Prison Valley* is a vivid example of this genre. The experience of the filmmakers' journey is effectively infused into the audience by virtue of its interactive potential. Making one's way through the mixture of data on the US incarceration system, the viewers have the possibility to realize that modern technologies can be creative and engaging indeed. *Prison Valley* reveals a problem-solution structure: the documentary's narrative examines the aspects of American incarceration; different viewpoints are presented and analyzed; eventually, the viewer has to form his or her own opinion as to this issue. *Prison Valley* implements the basic strategies of conventional documentary genre, as well as the major features of its digital descendant, effectively triggering the explorative, roleplaying and configurative functions of the user.

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Нарративные стратегии в веб-документалистике

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Аннотация. В статье исследованы особенности мультимедийного повествования в интерактивном документальном фильме как активно развивающемся и перспективном жанре цифровой эпохи. Основные нарративные приёмы, специфика фокализации и степень вовлечения зрителя в веб-документалистике рассмотрены на примере мультимедийного проекта "Prison Valley" (2010). В ходе исследования выявлено, что анализируемый мультимедийный дискурс представляет собой сложную комбинацию нескольких интерактивных режимов (гипертекст и "режим активного участника"), структурных типов (повествовательного и кооперативного), а также линейного и нелинейного повествования.

Ключевые слова: веб-документалистика, нарративные стратегии, мультимедийный дискурс, интерактивность, гипертекст.