

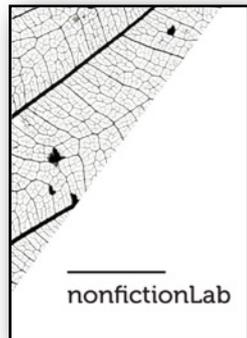
the aesthetics of documentary interactivity

**A pamphlet that emerged from a
curated panel at Visible Evidence
XXII, Toronto, 2015.**

the aesthetics of documentary interactivity: a pamphlet

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Adrian Miles

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sketches

This sketch pamphlet arose from a collective panel discussion during Visible Evidence XXII in Toronto.

The panel was structured around invited participants considering interactive documentary and aesthetics. The strict constraint of 10 slides, with each slide being onscreen for 30 seconds, with an accompanying 5 minute talk, was applied. The ambition was to raise questions, queries, and concerns, seeding ideas and issues to be picked up from the floor to be discussed more broadly — all depending on what might emerge as matters of concern. We were less interested in final positions and answers than in thickening ideas and approaches to interactive documentary.

While we unfortunately — given it was a documentary conference — have no documentary record of the ensuing discussion, as is often the case questions and concerns gravitated toward production and consumption issues from the point of view of existing practice/s. Unsurprising.

We hope, collectively, that we have managed a minor intervention into an expanded reconfiguration of what interactive documentary is, does, and can be.

What follows are the slides and accompanying commentary by their authors. It is hoped they are received and become prompts to further thoughts, arguments, and ideas, rather than answers.

Adrian Miles, Melbourne, 2015.

**interactivity: I am not going any further
(Karelle Arsenault)**

Let's think out loud.

Brainstorming with myself.

I can't tell you how many times I had to rewrite my five minute presentation for this panel. Adrian asked us to send him our ten slides a couple of weeks before the conference. At that time, I thought I knew what it would be all about. But things have evolved, especially during the Visible Evidence conference.

I would rather not share mashed up ideas with you, but I have to rethink what I originally had in mind; I have to put things differently. Therefore, I will continue with a "brainstorming" approach, tossing some ideas out, some questions and thoughts I have about interactivity. This is the way I usually work when it comes to thinking "complexity".

Do you think so too?

Discourses on i-productions are positive.

Now, I won't proceed directly from what you can read in my slides, but rather respond to them.

First: "Discourses on i-productions [interactive productions] are positive." Today is the last day of the conference, the last sequence of panels: do I (still) think this, after what I've heard during the past three days? Yes and no.

I would now put it differently; differently then how I formulated it at first. Yes, in the sense that I feel, within others discourses, a strong impulse to make interactivity serve the creation of culture (Born, 2010), and meaning (Gitleman, 2006). Yes, because I feel that this impulse is in some way supported by utopian (and perhaps deterministic) reasoning: are participation and collaboration that effective?

But no creators are blind enough to believe this will be our salvation, or that this is all justified because it is "new". So no, because all of them are questioning these practices, their practices, more than they are presumed to be.

Born, G. (2010). "The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production." *Cultural Sociology*, 4(2), 171-2008.

Gitelman, L. (2006). *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture*. Cambridge, MA / London, GB: MIT Press.

What do I do with this agency of mine?

How to make sense of it?

Let me take up this presumption: that i-spectators* are going to respond in the right ways to the interactive forms of a given i-production and navigate their way through it as planned. This means that, up to a certain point, the i-spectator's agency is, at the same time, planned, or guided. I say "planned" because interactive creators doubtless think of how i-spectators will make use of the openness they're being afforded. This fits with Eco's concept of the "(model) reader" in other words, the writer (the i-production creator) has the reader (the i-spectator) in mind when the former writes (produces). I believe i-makers (to use another neologism) assume the i-spectators will make use of the freedom they are given, but will they do so? I-makers must hope for it.

*I introduced this expression in my Ph.D. project proposal to talk about the participant, user and/or spectator of interactive productions (interactive documentaries). Since none of these designations were, for me, representative enough, and since I neither found "user-participant", "spectator-user", or even "spect-actor" (notably O'Flynn, 2012) satisfying, I opted for a more general form, which became i-spectator, for "interactive spectator", spectator of an interactive production.

Eco, U. (1985). *Lector in Fabula* (Le rôle du lecteur). Paris, France : Le Livre de Poche.

O'Flynn, S. (2012). "Documentary's Metamorphic Form: Webdoc, Interactive, Transmedia, Participatory and Beyond." *Studies in Documentary Film*, 6(2), 141-158

I'm a "don't-ask-me-to-participate."

What kind of *i-spectator* are you?

Take me, for example. I am a "don't-ask-me-to-participate" person. Those of you who attended my presentation on Thursday afternoon might remember that I do not personally like interactive productions. First of all, if I choose to watch an i-doc, it is usually because the subject interests me. Secondly, I look at its design: do I like its aesthetic? Nonetheless, even if I do not particularly enjoy interactivity itself, I may like the movement it generates within the production.

*There's a medium between me and the production,
between me and the other participants, between me and the author(s).*

Creating/creation of meaning.

Positivity: knowledge through experience.

However, as I make my way through an i-production, my eyes following the pattern or assemblage of colours and in turn leading my fingers, I will mostly skip the participative forms of interactivity. If a parallel story is happening between other participants, in relation to the production, inside the production, I might be curious to know where the people come from, but I will not bother too much about what they have to say, presuming that my own opinion isn't relevant to them, and vice versa – therefore, I will not contribute.

So, basically...

What about me?

Arguably, that's because I will remain behind my screen, just as I remain or "lean-back" (Nielsen, 2008) behind my television screen, behind my book, behind my journal, etc. Yet I can also be captivated by an i-doc, even if it rests on participation or collaboration. But what will I ultimately take away from it? What meaning? What perspective on "reality"? Will I feel that my experience is incomplete if I do not "participate"? But that (completion) is not the objective. No experience is truly incomplete, given that it is always a personal experience. In a way, it might even be closer to "reality": it is what I see, what I choose to see.

Nielsen, J. (2008). "Writing Style for Print vs. Web." Retrieved from <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/writing-style-for-print-vs-web/>





So, basically...

What about the others?

So do I “freely” choose what I want to see, just like I do when I pick a movie, or buy some other cultural product? What I am to see and understand is always partial: that is subjectivity. And so my subjectivity guides my agency, and vice versa. The same goes for the other i-spectators engaging with the same production, whether at the same time, or not. Do they contribute? Are they like me, or not? If I get to see what they are “subjectivizing,” I take part and they take part in an assemblage of subjectivities and agencies mutually influencing each other.

So, basically...

What about the i-doc maker(s)?

An i-doc is an assemblage imagined in advance by the i-doc maker(s), who puts their faith in the i-spectators' willingness to contribute, if that is the intention.

An i-doc should, I believe, engage the i-spectator into the process of creating meaning and culture. The interactive maker must build an environment that favours this. It should even be the main goal of any i-production. As is it, creating meaning and culture is never something that can be done by one individual. It is always done through a process of reciprocal or cross-influence. But I am going in another direction now, and expanding my discussion beyond its original scope. I need to refocus a bit. In any case, what I just said makes me think of i-docs as another way of creating meaning, or creating meaning through collaboration.

So, basically...

What about the interactivity and the production itself?

I do not specifically like this expression from Sandra Gaudenzi (2013) as I find it deterministic, but I will make use of it now: after what I just said, the production does become a “living documentary.” Not because of its structure, but because it becomes a vessel of cultural knowledge, of meaning, making its way, “surfing” through the Internet, therefore disseminating culture, entering the loop of culture. But, again, I am off-topic. So digital interactive writings (see the Manifeste pour les nouvelles écritures*), from which i-productions originate, create cultural objects. Objects that change each time someone watches them, objects changed by interactivity, but also objects intended to create personal experiences, individual ones.

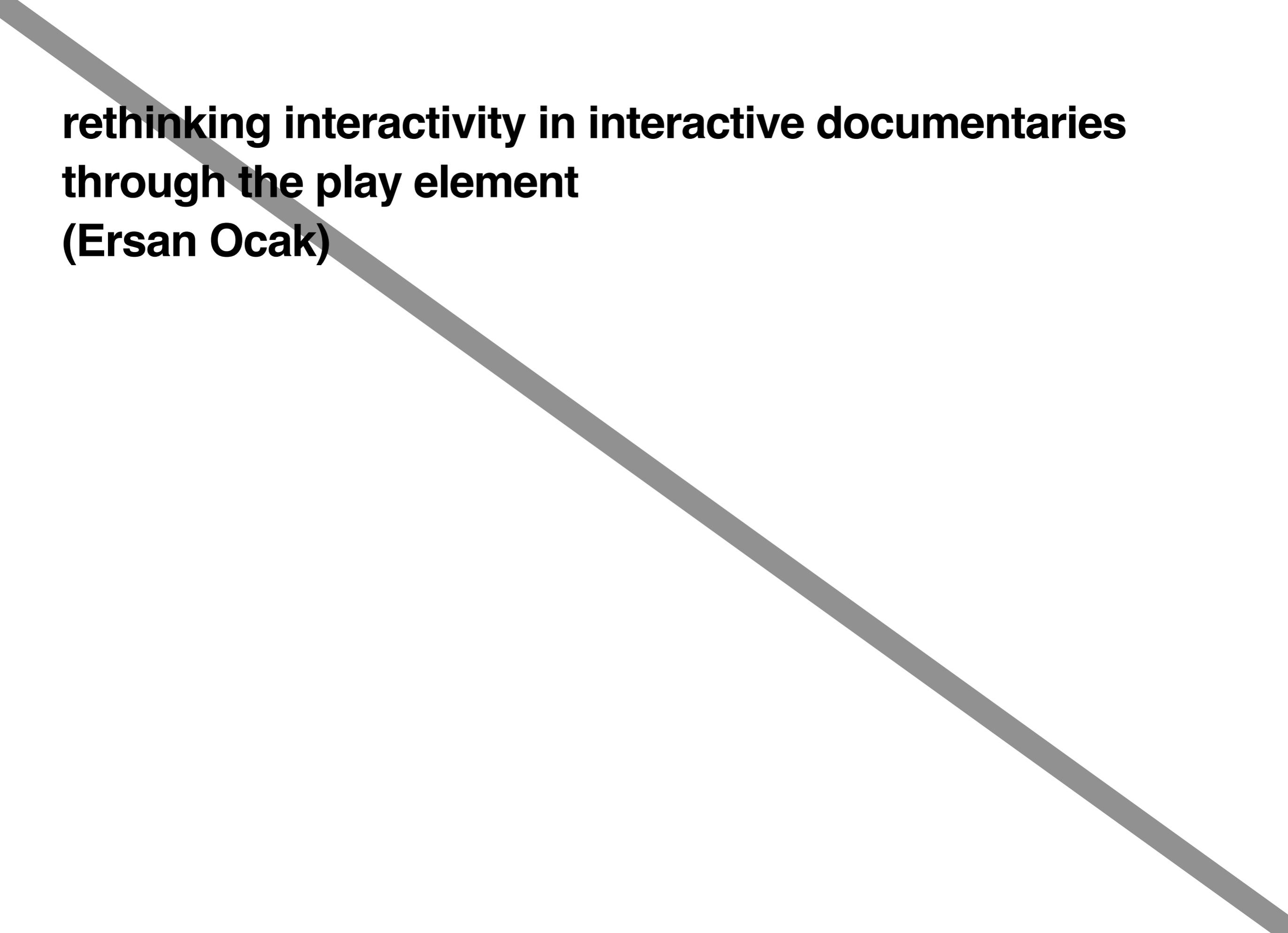
*In French: http://www.ledevoir.com/documents/pdf/manifeste_nouvelles_ecritures.pdf.

Gaudenzi, S. (2013). “The Interactive Documentary as a Living Documentary.” *Doc On-line*, (14), 9-31. http://www.doc.ubi.pt/14/dossier_sandra_gaudenzi.pdf

Is the presumed documentary still one?

And so what about the *documentary*?

Now I have these words behind me (on the slides) that I am not sure correspond to what I said, or to what I could say to conclude. So I will formulate it differently: what about the “documentary” as a cultural object evolving through a combination of subjectivities and agencies and, at the same time, generating personal and individual experiences? I-docs, in this sense, are made to be personal as well as collaborative. That brings me to an expression Adrian formulated in response to what I said on our group email list: “cultural agency.” To wit: content generated by subjects, part of a culture, maintaining this culture and influenced by this culture. But then, it is probably just another way to say that we are all part of the world, that we influence it, and that we are influenced by it.



**rethinking interactivity in interactive documentaries
through the play element
(Ersan Ocak)**

interactivity [?]

Interactivity is certainly a distinct element of new media and computer use as a whole. It is, however, an **enormously broad and overused term** that requires closer examination.

Stuart Dinmore, "The Real Online: Database Documentary in the Knowledge Space"
Journal of Media Practice, 2014, Vol. 15, No. 2, 123-132.

reconsidering interactivity

New media documentaries (i-docs) let the audience take **an active role as a “player.”**

This player-audience both establishes and unfolds the multi-linear and multi-modal stories of i-docs in a **performative and playful way.**

reconsidering interactivity

Let's reconsider interactivity by elaborating **the “play-element”** in new media documentaries, with reference to the conceptual framework Johan Huizinga's renown text *Homo-Ludens*.

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it **a free activity** standing quite consciously **outside “ordinary” life** as being **“not serious”**, but at the same time **absorbing the player intensely and utterly**. It is an activity **connected with no material interest**, and **no profit can be gained** by it. It **proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space** according to **fixed rules and in an orderly manner**. It **promotes the formation of social groupings** which **tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means**. (p. 13)

Johan Huizinga, *Homo-Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*
Boston: The Beacon Press, 1971.

reconsidering interactivity

New media documentary opens space to "participation" of the player-audience in different forms and scales:

The player-audience can support a new media documentary by **providing content**.

The player-audience can **engage with** a new media documentary through **social media**.

The player-audience can **become a co-creator** in making of new media documentary.



**reconsidering
interactivity**

**a shift from
representational logic
to
participatory logic**

Sandra Gaudenzi, "The Interactive Documentary as a Living Documentary."
Doc On-Line, (2013) 14, 9-31.

interactivity for New Media Documentary

Interactivity can operate in a participatory logic if NMD designer shows **"opennes" to collaboration** in the design and production process of his/her New Media Design project.

interactivity for New Media Documentary player- audience

Interactivity can operate in a participatory logic if NMD player-audience has a **will to take an active collaborative role** in the design and production process of the New Media Design project.



NMD

**designer
player-audience**

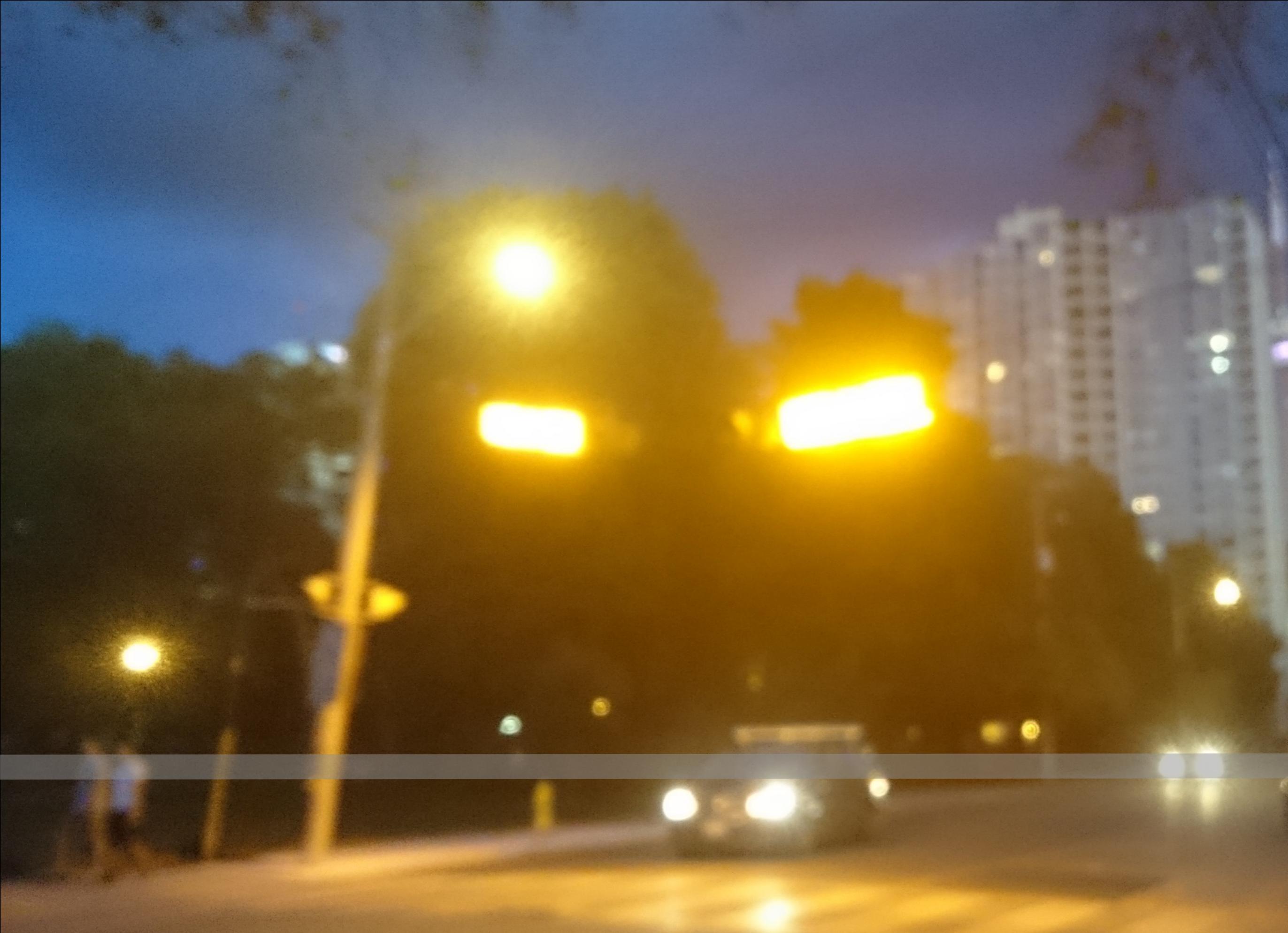
innovative | creative | productive



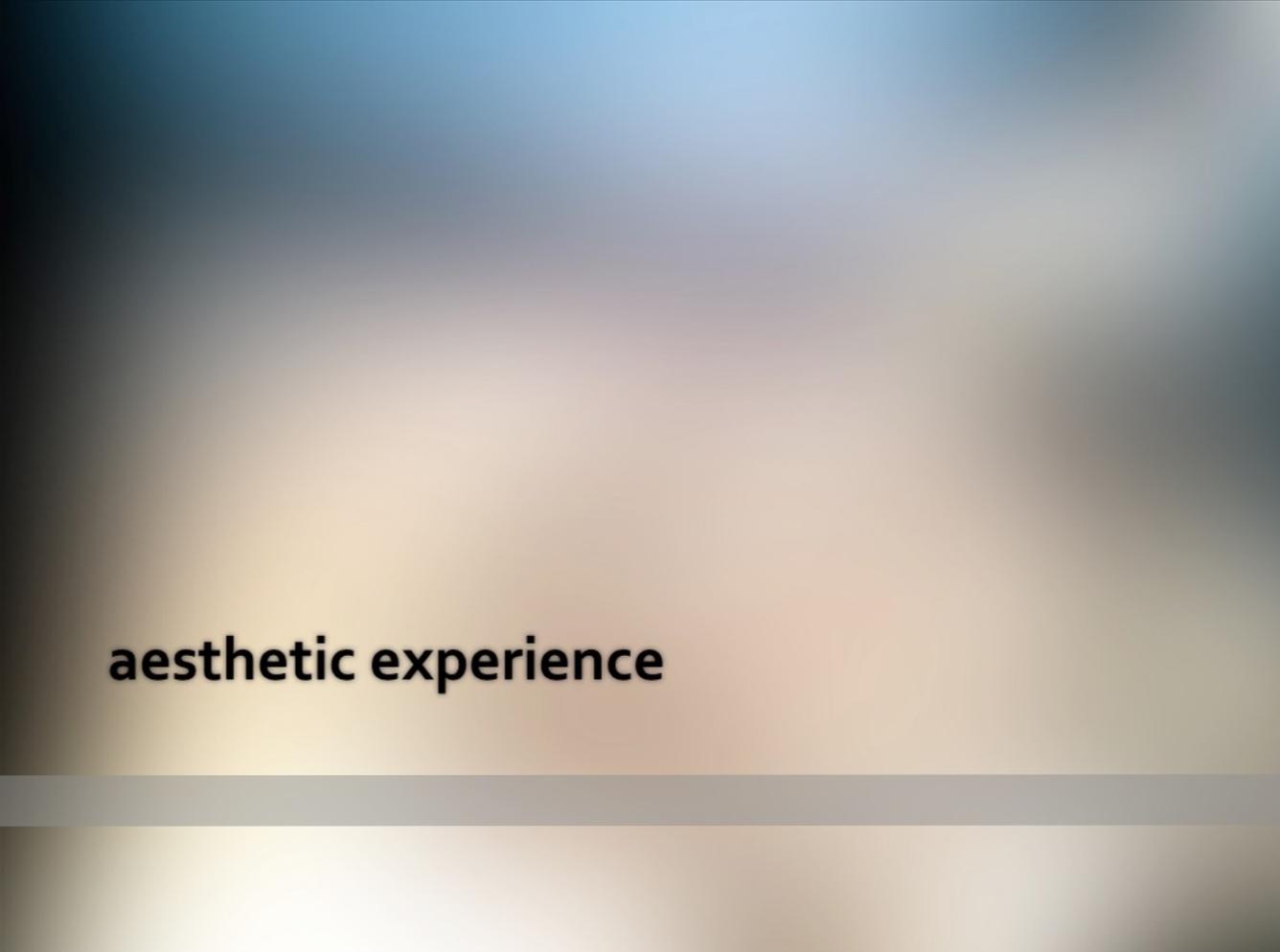
space – time – engagement
(Bettina Frankham)

My proposition is that interactivity in documentary brings to our attention the ways in which documentary exceeds the evidentiary. To me, this has always been a part of documentary practice, right from the earliest days of experimentation with the filmic form, in what Bill Nichols (2010) has described as the poetic mode of documentary production.

moving beyond evidence



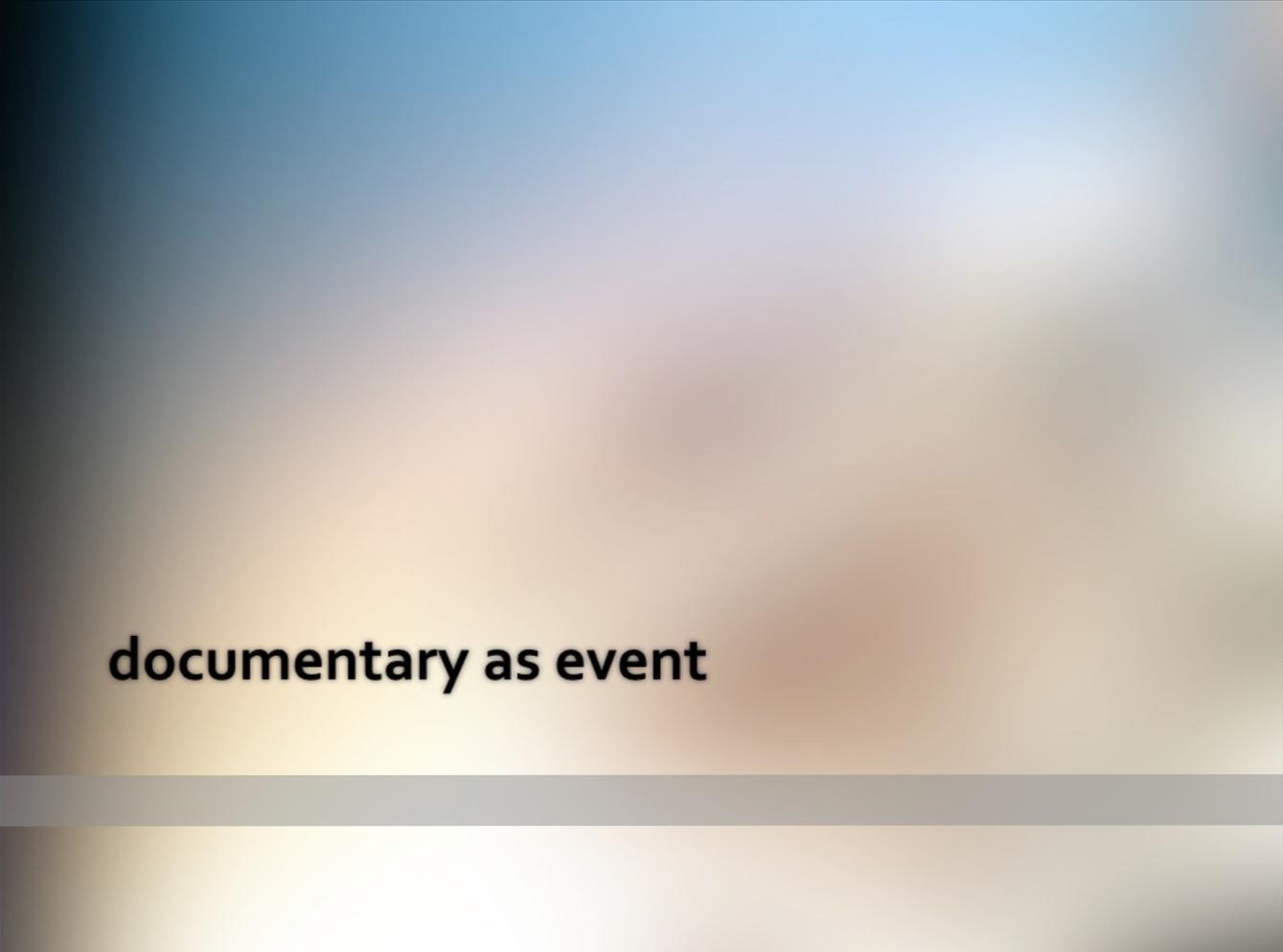
While documentary undoubtedly musters the indexical properties of sound and image as evidence to support its arguments, aesthetic choices are nonetheless always present, even if, just as a set of conventions of naturalism that, as Trinh T Minh-ha (1993) points out, reinforce perceptions of being true and factual. It is possible then to see documentary, not as a replication of the world but as an aesthetic experience in its own right that finds credibility through an indexical link.



aesthetic experience



The inclusion of what Ernest Edmonds describes as “observably interactive” (2010, p. 258) elements, to differentiate them from the interactivity that’s just inside someone’s head, further highlights questions of where the action of documentary is occurring. In line with Ryszard Kluczinsky’s (2010) observations about interactive art, interactive documentary is also a form that relies upon the actions of users to bring them into being. Rather than autonomous objects then, these works might be thought of as events that are not final until they engage a user. Always coming into being while ever there are new interactions.



documentary as event



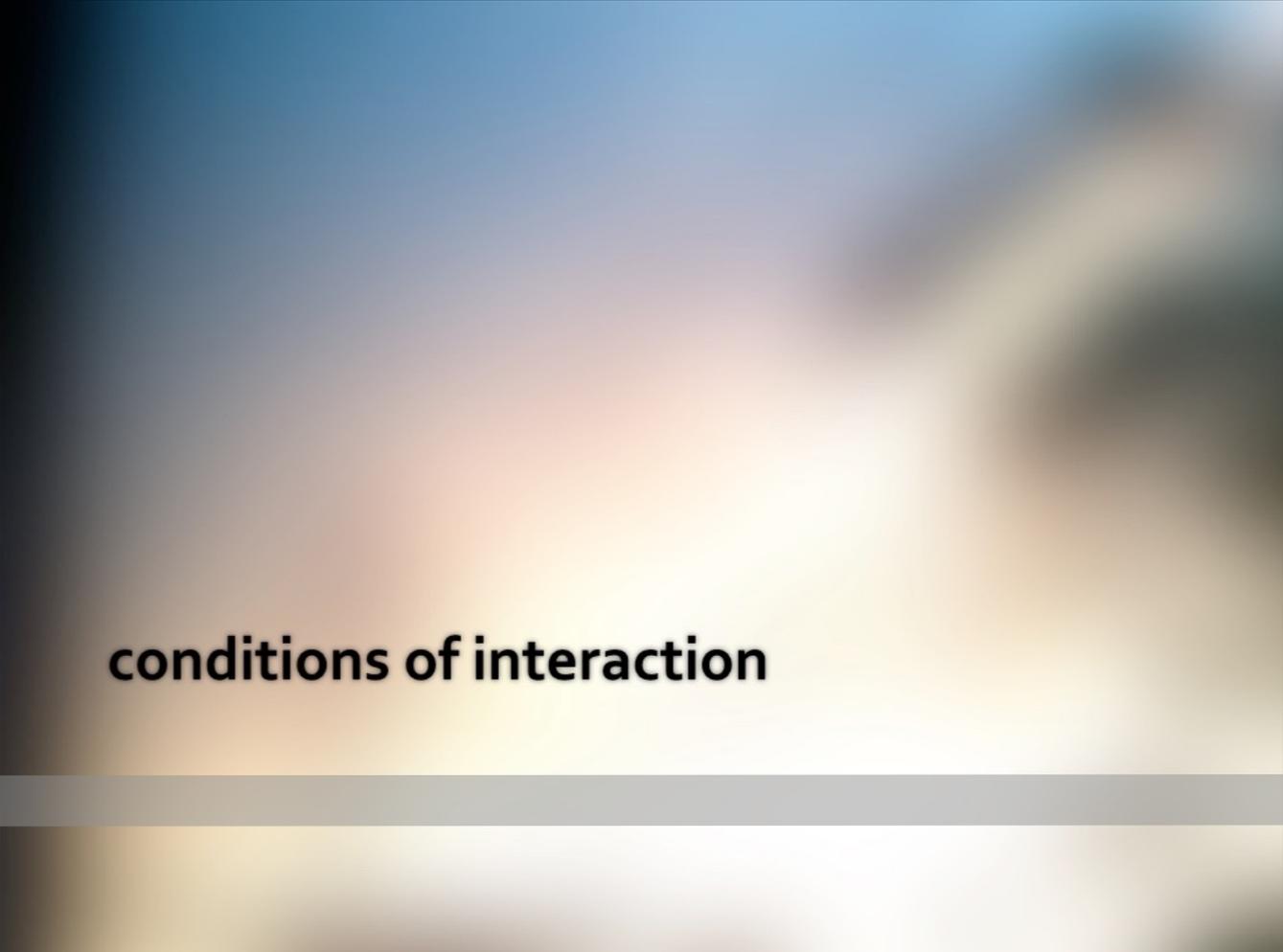
Within a cinematic screening or perhaps even within a broadcast television slot this notion of event could be maintained as people turned up at a specific time to watch the documentary content, often collectively or simultaneously. The problem for online interactive documentary is how to engage users in aesthetic experiences within a fragmented, always on and highly distracted space. The notion of experience and event imply an embodied engagement, but the online conditions can often prompt what Laura Marks, in critiquing certain documentary approaches in installation, has described as cognitive consumption (2012).



cognitive consumption



So the conditions of the interaction need to be seen as a key part of the overall rhetorical strategy that can be applied to a work. Beyond considerations of graphic design, although that's also significant, these conditions include the way user expectations are managed, how a commitment of attention is secured, what frameworks are in place to scaffold learning so users know how to experience the work and techniques for producing the kind of user position required to make sense of the content. And as a side note, thinking about how the work can deal with how users might simultaneously incorporate material from the broader internet.



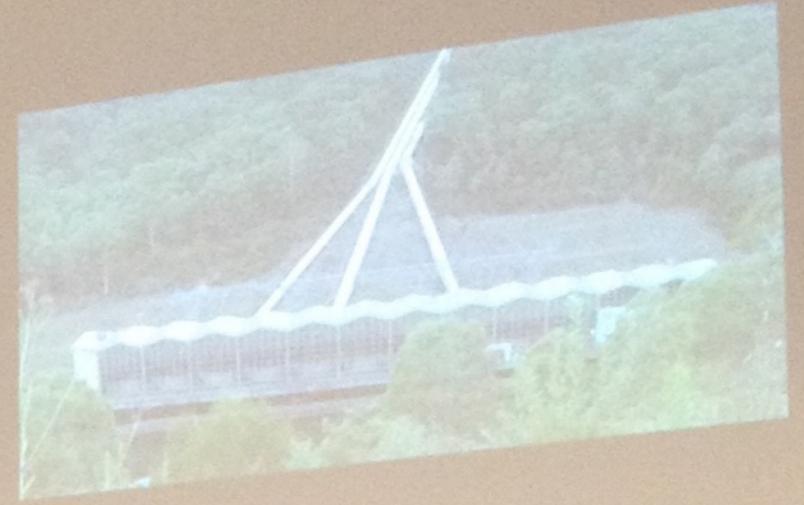
conditions of interaction

DUPONT

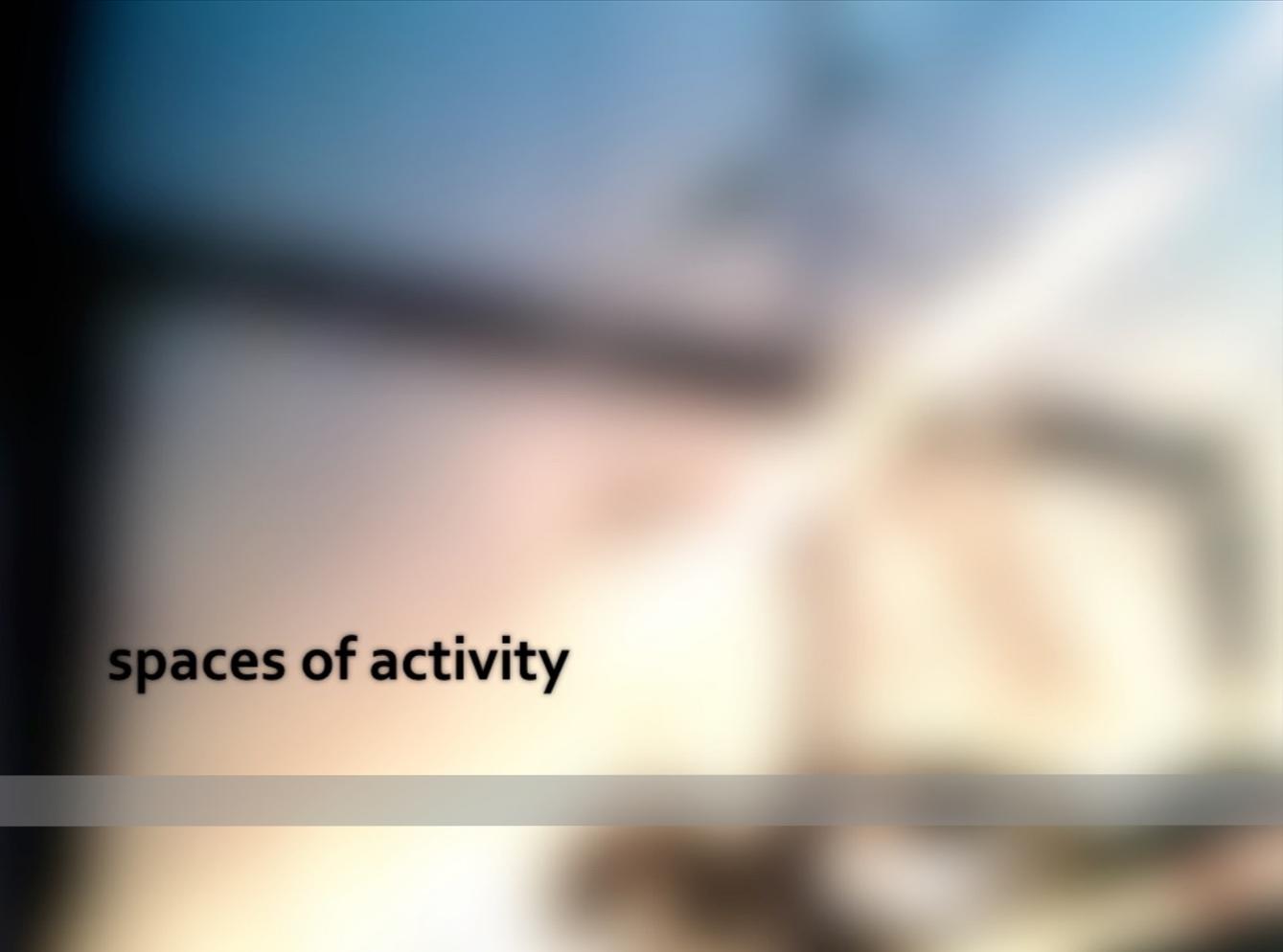
This concern for the conditions of spectatorship isn't something new for documentary practice but in the numbness that can be produced by an emerging form or technology the conditions required for understanding are renegotiated. While new generic conventions around the audience / documentary relationship are being established the way those relations are shaped is worthy of closer attention. Here I'm picking up on critical work in new media and installation art. Of particular note is Nicholas Bourriaud's ideas of a relational aesthetic (2002), Claire Bishop's concept of relational antagonism (2012) and Francisco Ricardo's exploration of an engagement aesthetic (2013).



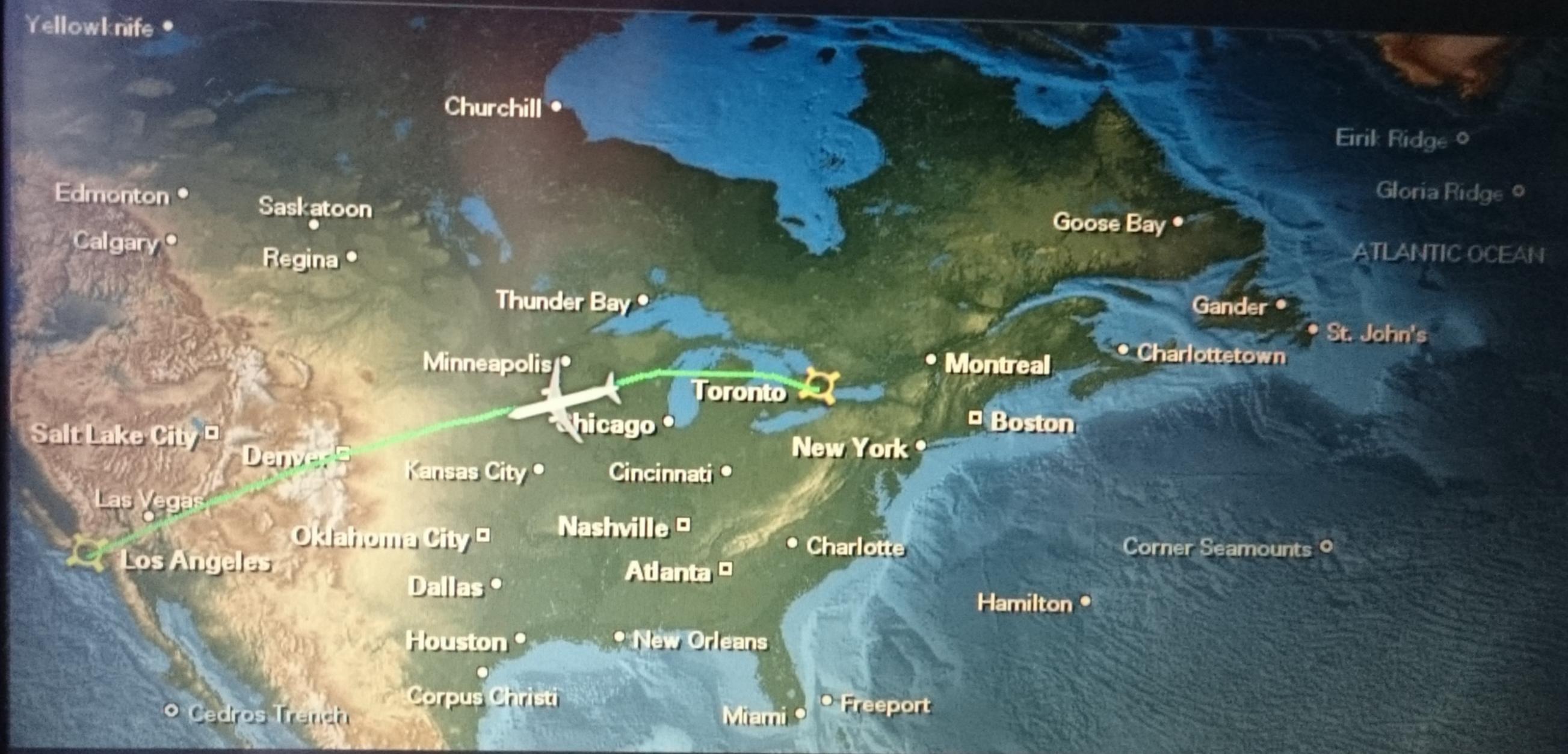
shaping relations



Helpfully, the work of these theorists provides a framing that shifts the focus of aesthetic consideration off the media object and onto the space of exchange that, in this case, is occurring between users and the content of a documentary event. Combining this with Kluszczynski's thinking that interactive art has the shape of an event (2010), points me to an understanding that online and through interactivity, documentary makers can be seen to be shaping spaces of activity rather than completed, autonomous media works.



spaces of activity



MENU



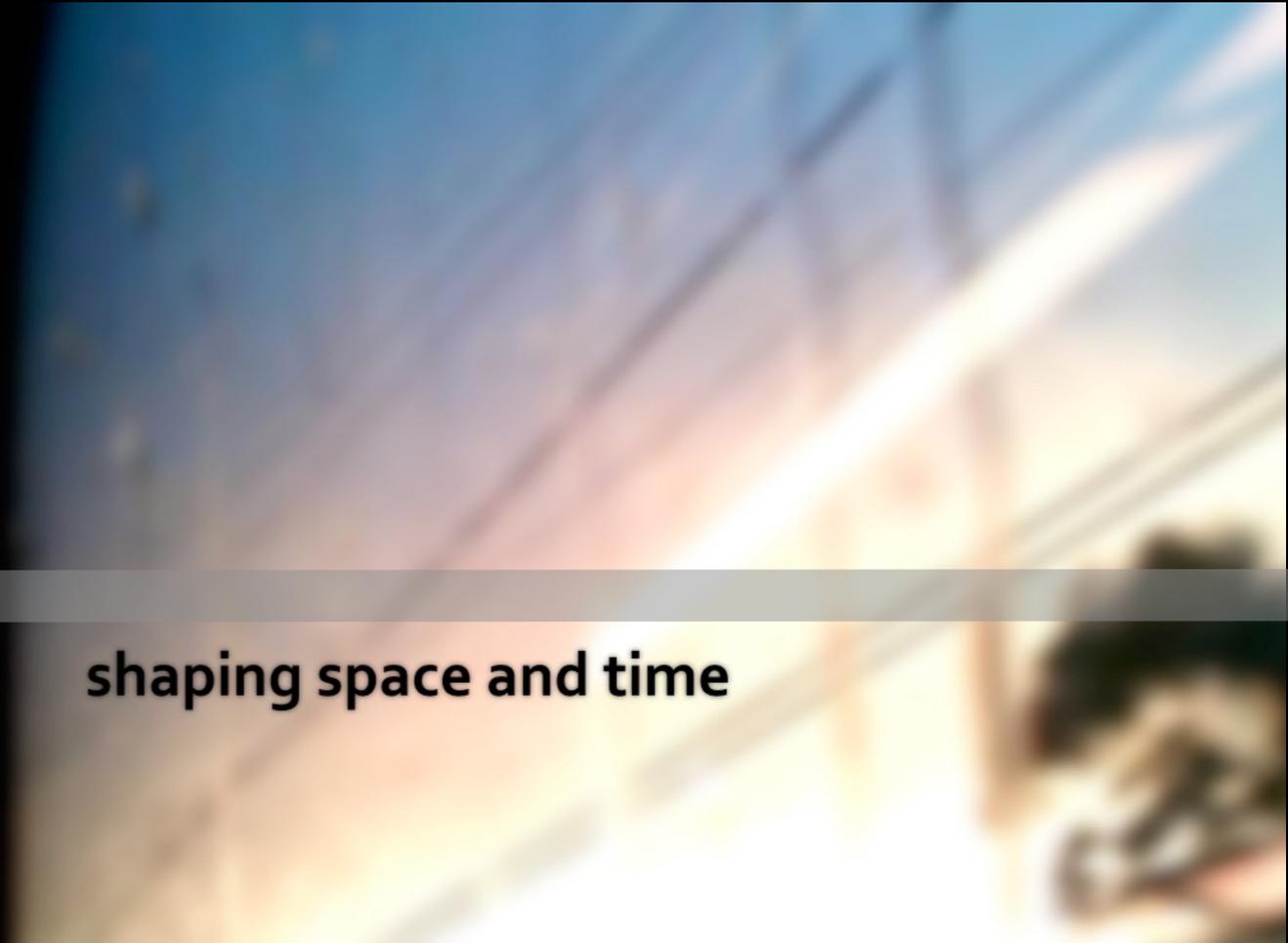
The aesthetic quality of those spaces of activity is important. The depth of engagement is to some extent contingent on the subject matter but may also be considered a factor of whether the conditions of interactivity permit a moment of pause that can slow down the online experience. I'd like to contend that contemplative spaces and spaces of absorption permit the user to step outside of utilitarian demands to engage with a range of interactive pleasures that promote embodied and situated forms of knowledge.



contemplative spaces



The field of creativity and aesthetic decision making for the documentary creator then extends to the ways in which they can shape a sense of openness and the conditions for different attention within a space of activity. In a time poor society, the spending of time is a significant choice. There are options to be considered that impact on how the documentary event sits in relation to the infinity of seemingly shapeless online spaces and senses of time.



shaping space and time



RU

So what are the implications of this for interactive online documentary practice? In the infinity of online spaces there are rich opportunities to acknowledge the complexity and flux of reality. However, as Philip Rosen has pointed out, sequencing and giving form to an ongoing process of understanding is a vital task of the documentary project (1993) and I think this continues into online forms of documentary events. In addition, and returning to Trinh's critique of naturalism, perhaps there is a need to be more conscious and perhaps critical of attempts to beat the Turing test in the way interaction is designed. Perhaps the aesthetic choices around interactivity can be foregrounded and maybe, rather than the always-on of computer enabled processes, some documentary interactions could be about the fleetingness and unreproducibility of human encounters and in that may lay a new terrain and source of debate regarding the real in interactive documentary spaces.

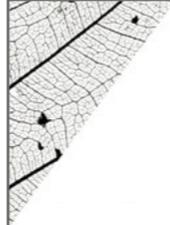


documentary particularities



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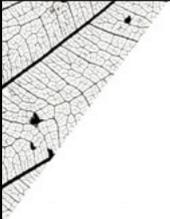
interactivity *is*?
(Adrian Miles)



ontology

The interactive **in** interactive
documentary is too often used as a
lazy, ready-to-hand intellectual place
holder.

Under, even **un** theorised.



what they do not what they mean

Revisit Aarseth's concept of **cybertext**
and **ergodics**



Deleuze's perception, **action** and
affect images

I want to offer two different ways to think about interactivity. Both are materialist approaches and pay attention to what things do. In some ways I want to rehabilitate older work because it is relevant though possibly not well known. Sometimes we act as if all is new, but we probably don't need to invent new wheels, only how to put the ones we already have on new wagons.



cybertextual ergodics

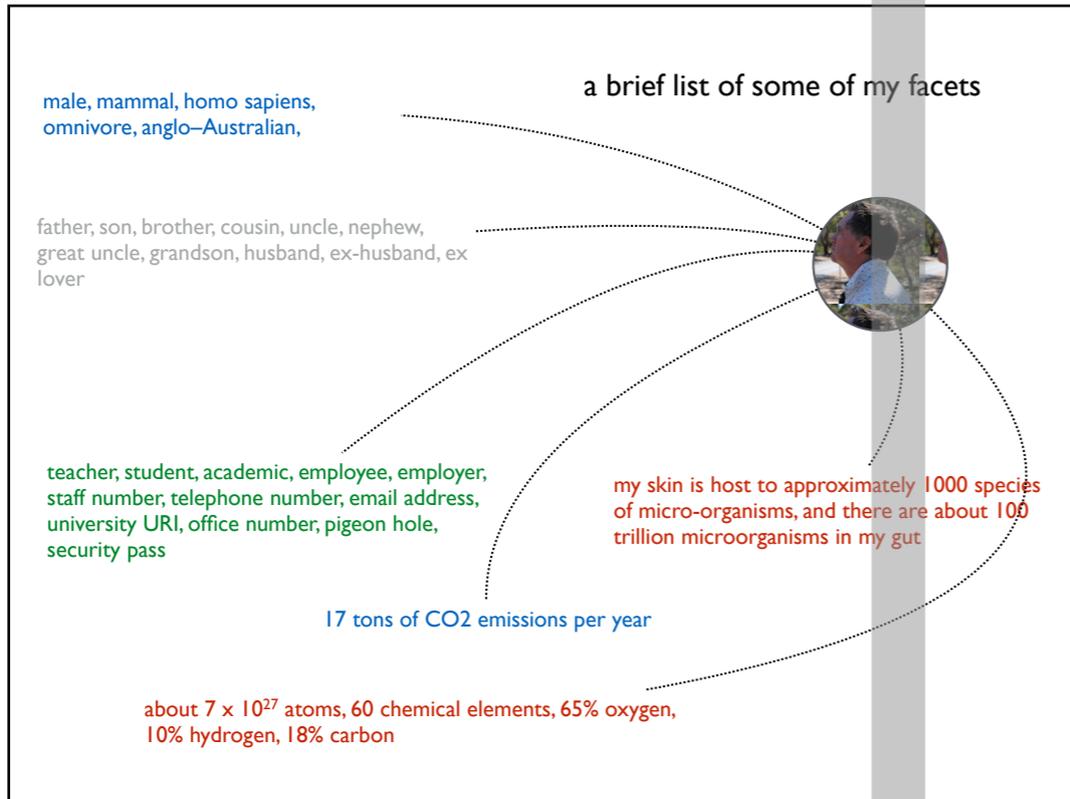
“A cybertext is a machine for the production of variety of expression.” (p.3)

“*nontrivial* effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (p.1)

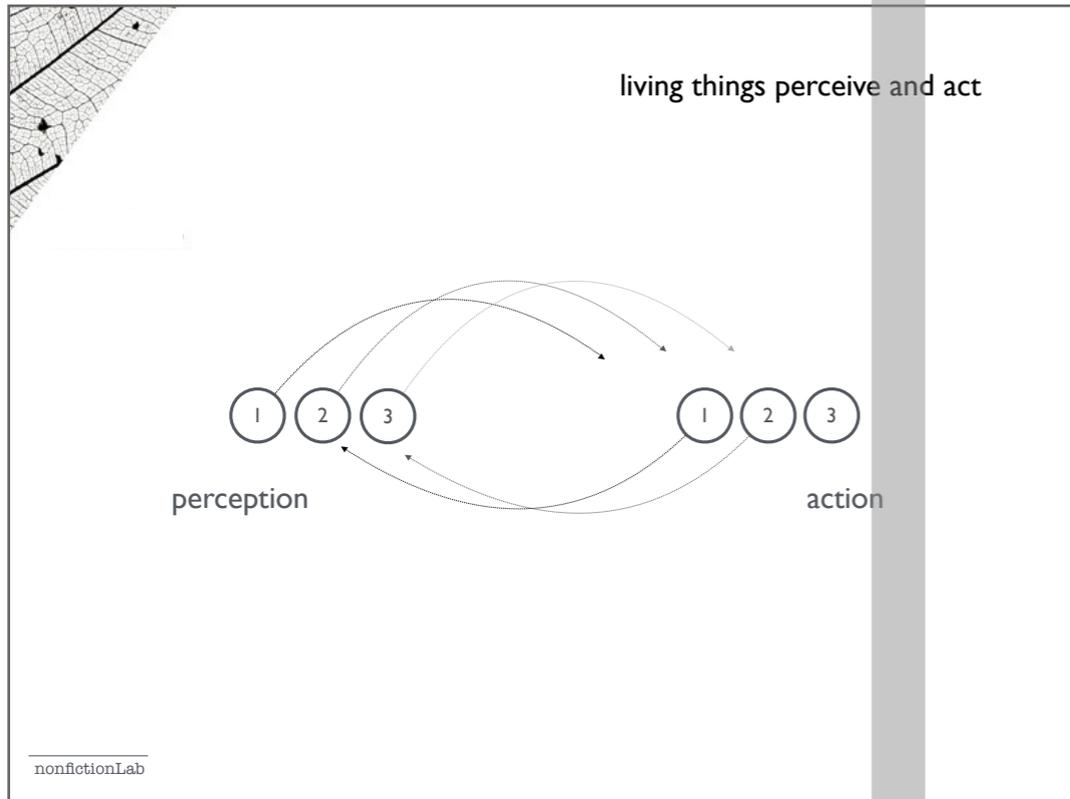
Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997.

nonfictionLab

A cybertext is a procedural machine that does not have to be digital. There are many cybertexts that are analogue, for example the Chinese *I Ching*. Cybertext is a useful term because it reminds us that there needs to be a **procedural machine** for interactivity to be something more significant than just navigation or media control. An ergodic text is where the reader's actions are nontrivial in relation to the work. They are nontrivial from the point of view of the **work** because these actions directly change the work in itself, that procedurally change the very form, content, or relations that make up the work.



For Deleuze, following Bergson, the world is made up of things that present some aspects of themselves to each other. We call these aspects facets. Different things see different facets of each other. This IS the world. Facets acting and reacting on other facets. We only know things via these facets, and things only know of each other through these facets. Facets allow and are relations. Facets and relations describe the entangled multilinearity of the world.



There is a special category of these facets that occurs when a living centre intervenes between them. A living centre folds some facets around itself out of its self interest. This self interest is the way a living thing desires to live, and becomes the motor action that living things manage to do in response to the facets that come to matter. Being able to act makes this living centre a 'zone of indetermination' because it could act otherwise. The sunflower seeks its solar solace, right through to us choosing to read things like this. This is Bergson's sensory motor schema and is the basis for Deleuze's cinematic perception, affect, and action images.

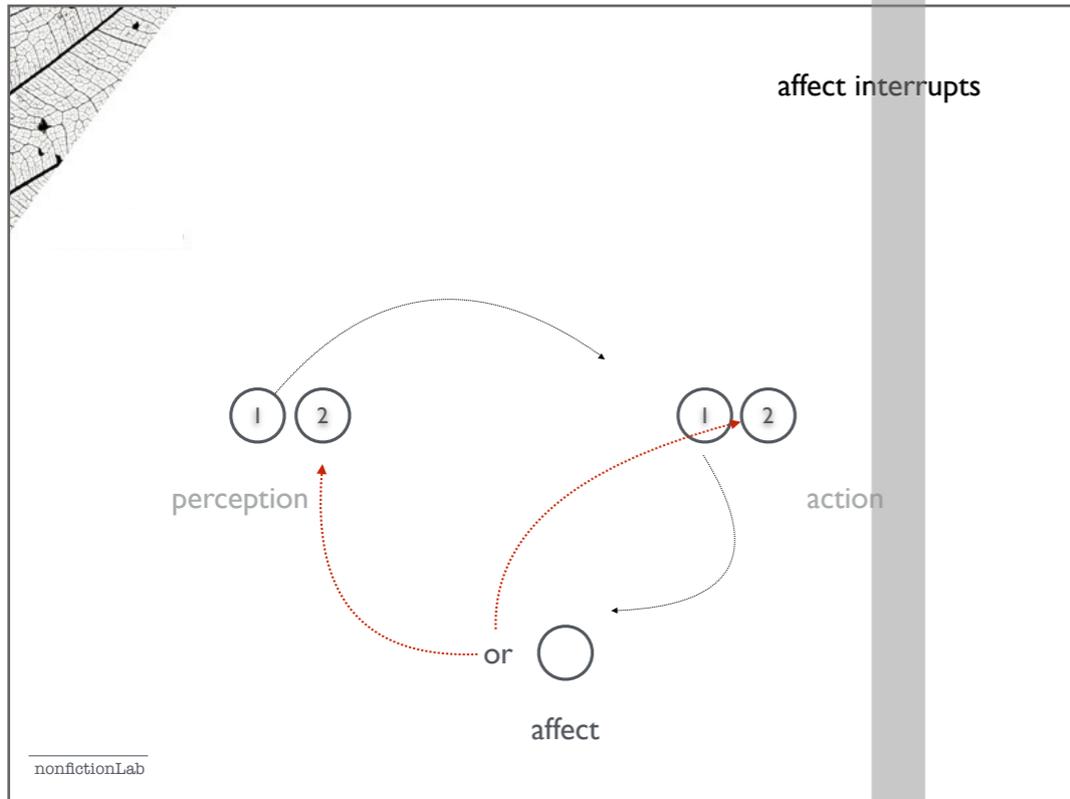


Affect is situated within this zone of indetermination, falling between perception and action.

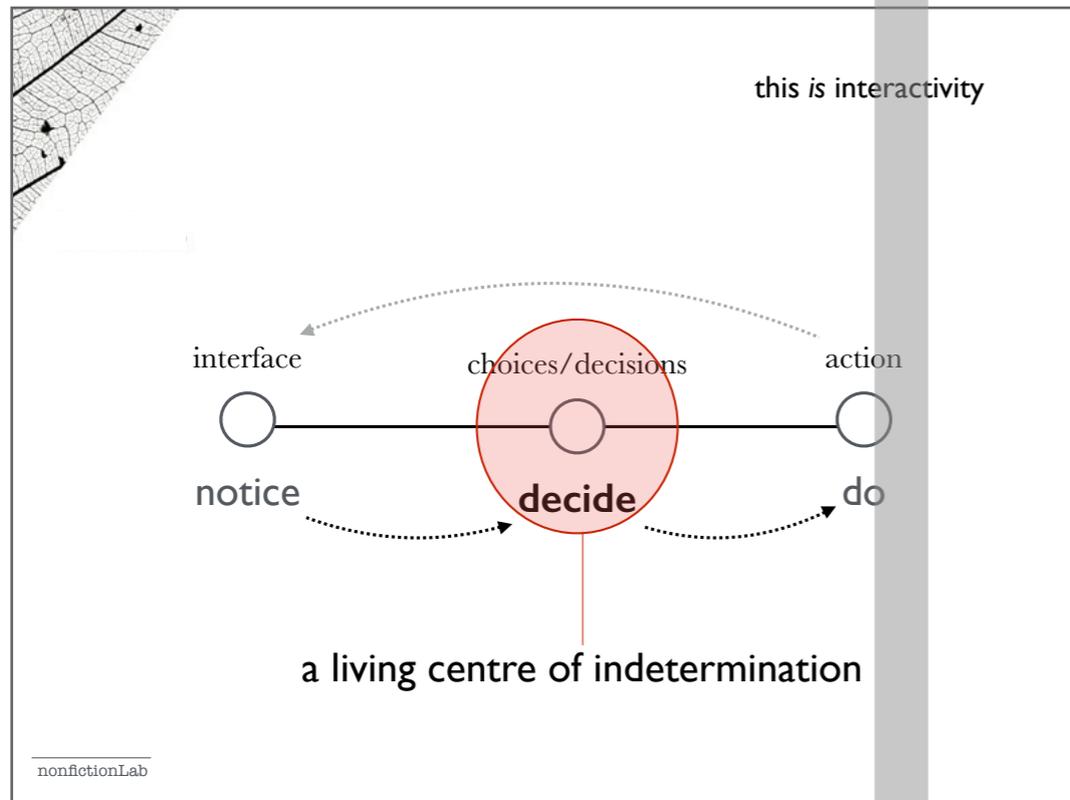
Affect in the sensory motor schema is what remains when something notices and has then acted but this acting does not exhaust the noticing. That tensing you feel seeing the snake, an intake of breath, the involuntary tensing of muscles, that even now might remain.

Even after more or less instantly knowing it is only a picture you can still feel something remaining in and of your body. This is affect.

Affect is what remains when the action in response to perception does not exhaust what was noticed.



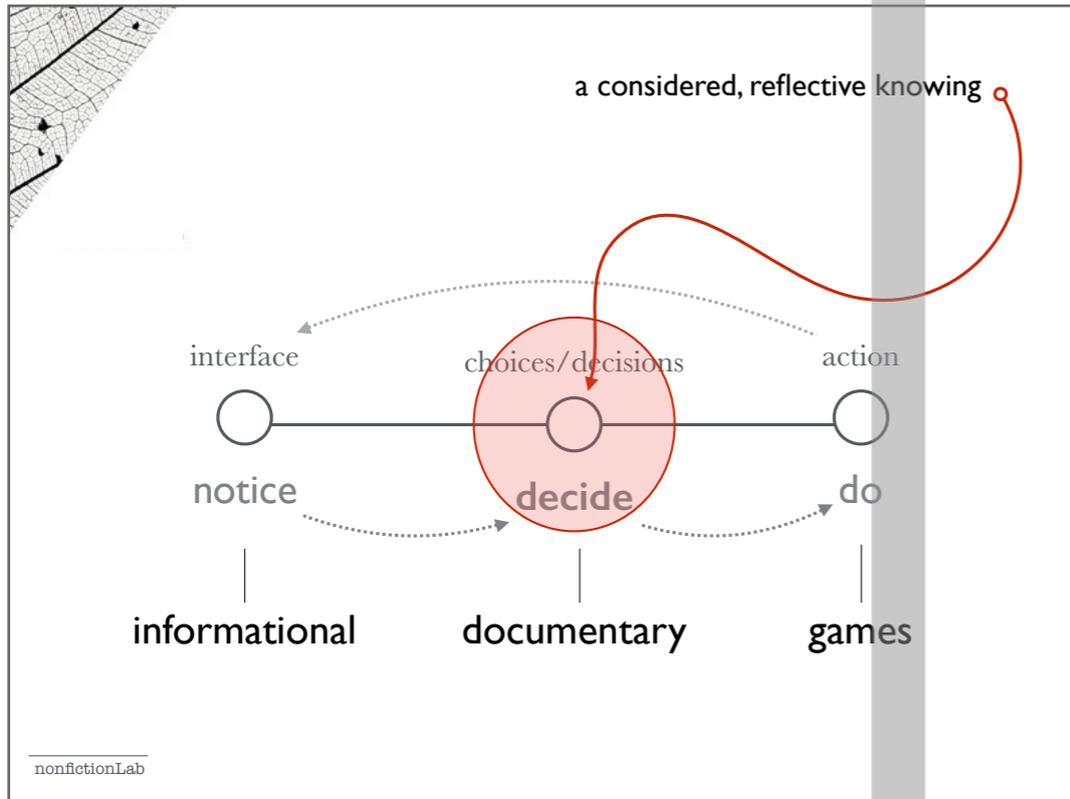
Perception in this model is always a reduction of what is, not an addition, for some facets come to matter much more than others to the extent that they are no longer even noticed. We see the snake, but not really the branches, grass, bracken fern, twigs, leaves, light, shadows, depth of field, pixellation. Perception is to notice, action is to do, affect is to **consider** because in affect my agency is no longer only instrumental.



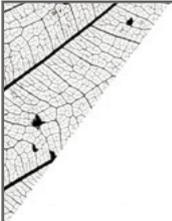
Affect can be understood as when noticing and doing is insufficient.

It is a slowing and an interruption of the ordinary automaticity of action and reaction, noticing and doing. If affect is understood to interrupt the ordinary immediacy of noticing and doing then this makes it ideal for documentary because documentary wants the world to become considered.

For this to happen interactive documentary needs to become a zone of indetermination, a place of affect.



This is an elegant, materialist account for what interactivity is. For interactive documentary the interface is where this noticing and doing happens, but the interface is not what interactivity is. Using this we can see that informational interactive documentaries tend toward perception, and documentary games toward action. On the other hand affect, as the site of a considered and reflective knowing, is where documentary ought to be properly situated.



ergodics and the sensory motor schema

we know the world through faceted relations
multilinearity is about faceted relations
it is affect that lets these multilinear faceted relations be considered
interactivity is significant when it is ergodic and about possible, not trivial, paths
multilinear interactive documentary can acknowledge the faceted complexity of the world, rather than another cultural form that imposes itself upon it

nonfictionLab

We know the world through faceted relations.

Multilinearity can describe faceted relations.

Interactive work that treats interactivity as significant from the point of view of what it does to the work as a thing is ergodic

Ergodic interactive works are about procedural transformations, not navigation or playback.

Within multilinear work affect is what lets us consider these relations rather than just notice or repeat them.

Interactive documentary that is procedural and multilinear is well placed to acknowledge the faceted complexity of the world, rather than imposing ourselves upon it. This can broaden interactive documentary toward what can be thought of as computational nonfiction.



panellists

[Karelle Arsenault](#) is currently a PhD student in Communication Studies at the Quebec University in Montreal. Her master thesis (2013), carried out at Sherbrooke University, revolved around the analysis of the language of the interactive productions of the Office nationale du film du Canada/National Film Board of Canada. She is now working more largely on interactive documentaries within a narrative and phenomenological approach, based on the Foucauldian notion of dispositif and the production of culture.

[Dr. Ersan Ocak](#) is Assistant Professor in the Communication and Design Department in Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey. Being a (visual) cultural researcher, he also works as an independent filmmaker. He makes documentary films and experimental video art works. His main research interests are documentary, video-art, and new media storytelling — specifically new media documentary. His most recent research is on essay film. He also has essay film projects, which will be

designed and produced in the form of new media essays.

[Dr. Bettina Frankham](#) teaches in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney. She is a practice led researcher in digital media arts and production. Her research interests include art and documentary intersections and expanded documentary practice. She is currently exploring the role of aesthetic experience in knowledge creation and is developing an open, poetic approach to media projects that address issues of social concern.

[Adrian Miles](#) is Senior Lecturer and currently Program Director of the consilience Honours lab at RMIT, in Melbourne, Australia. He is the leader of the documentary node of RMIT's non/fictionLab. He does research on hypertext media, networked interactive video, and computational nonfiction, and undertakes theoretically inflected digital projects. Adrian's research interests include interactive nonfiction, pedagogies for new media, and digital video poetics — with a Deleuzian cinematic inflection.

colophon

Hardware

iPhone, MacBook Pro

Software

iBooks Author, BBEdit,
Adobe Photoshop, Google
Chrome, QuickTime Pro,
Vine, Scrivener

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