

Database Documentary: From *Authorship* to *Authoring* in Remediated/Remixed Documentary

By Hart Cohen

Abstract

The engagement with documentary from its inception as a film form is frequently a set of references to documentary auteurs. The names of Flaherty, Grierson, Vertov and later Ivens, Leacock and Rouch are immediate signifiers of whole documentary film practices. These practices have given rise to histories and criticism that have dominated discussion of documentary and provided the foundation for more nuanced thinking about problems of the genre. One of the seminal texts in the field, *Documentary* by Erik Barnouw (1974) celebrates the auteur as the structuring principle for his historical review of documentary. It may be a reflection of the influence of this book, that so much of documentary criticism reflects the auteur approach as a starting point for analysis.

The shift towards a new documentary format, the Database Documentary, challenges the concept of an auteur in its presentation of documentary materials. This format relies on a remediation technique that recalibrates documentary media within new distributive networks supported by the web and enhanced by converged and designed visual and sonic interfaces. The reception modalities are necessarily removed from the familiar forms of projection and presentation of documentary film and television.

The research focus for this paper is how the concept of authorship (the “auteur”) is transformed by the emergence of the relatively new screen format of the database documentary.

The paper reviews some of the more recent examples of Database Documentary, the contexts for their production and the literature on new conceptions of documentary knowledge that may be drawn from these examples. An analysis of the authoring program, *Korsakow* and the documentaries that have been made using its software will demonstrate the route documentary has travelled from authorship to authoring in contemporary media production.

Keywords: Database documentary, documentary film, authorship, remediation

Introduction

As Geert Lovink has written, “We no longer watch films or TV; we watch databases...” (Lovink 2008: 9) In the context of his book, *Video Vortex: Reader Responses to YouTube*, the comment was directed at the proliferate consumption of *YouTube* video – a consumption that had little critical assessment. I begin with this quote because database documentary shares with YouTube the web platforms that are the “common ground” of these types of media practices. Lovink is saying that the web-based media consumption grounded in the database structure is consumed in a manner that distinguishes it from film or TV. Further, this kind of consumption or use of web-based media is substantial and is growing exponentially. We still do watch films and TV but increasingly these media are remediated within web environments.

I intend in this paper to address how this new environment has impacted on long-standing relationships in the production and consumption of screen media and in particular, documentary.

So what is a database documentary? Early scholars in this field such as Lev Manovich and Fabian Wagmister argued in agreement with Lovink that the database is a key model for new media production. It seems they feel this way because the database platform allows for many variations in format that can revolutionize the documentary form. Wagmister in his work, *Modular Visions*,

The triangulation among modern art, Third Cinema, and digital database structures could provide a new model of creation for those searching for a pluralistic, process driven, truly interactive audiovisual medium. This triangle composed of the aspirations of the modern art movements and revolutionary cinema as its base... (Wagmeister 2000)

Database Documentary is a relatively new form of documentary storytelling that uses the combined elements of digital media and on-line platforms. Traditionally, the kind of documentary production linked to Database Documentary is built on a research practice in which access to an archive or other sources of knowledge and information is key. Archives are normally collections of texts, images, letters, and objects, usually in support of an individual's work or legacy or that of a social or public institution. Archival materials can be the core of a documentary production because they provide the evidence for an argument, the germination of a story and illustrations for possible links within the subject of a film. The archive is in effect a kind of potential database – a repository of materials that selectively can form the central motifs of a conventional documentary production. The Database Documentary departs from the conventional documentary in the manner in which it treats the archive to provide resources and structures in order to shape the access to it. In this regard, the role of a Database Documentary producer is closer to a *curator* or designer. The move towards the Database Documentary as the platform of choice suits the contemporary interest in non-linear storytelling enhanced by the web. Writing prior to the emergence of the so-called Web 2.0 or the more ex-

tensive mediatization of the web, Gunther Hartwig wrote, "...The notion of audience interaction and participation is a driving force when creating New Media documentaries" (Hartwig 2001: 7).

My interest in authorship and its transformation within database documentary is strongly linked to the emergence of audience participation and interaction within the narrative structures of the media form. As the web models interactivity, it encourages non-linear forms of interaction such as browsing, linking, sharing and communicating through multiple levels of the production. Database Documentary utilises these aspects of the web and its communicative features to project rich and diverse story elements while proposing varying approaches to how the stories will be accessed and ordered. The following paper introduces Database Documentary and argues, through a contextualisation of its practice, for a new kind of documentary authorship and by extension a new knowledge formation.

Authorship and the Documentary Tradition

The "author" is the anchor of a key concept in media and non-media aesthetics. There is a lengthy history to the concept of the author in film (sometimes referred as "auteur" in respect of the French film critics and theorists who coined the term).¹ The "auteur" was mostly applied to classical Hollywood cinema where directors were made equivalent to authors. The many sceptical accounts of auteur theory, in turn gave prominence to cinematographers and other members of this essentially collaborative art. Despite this, the idea of the author was adapted within the Documentary genre. One of the key textbooks on Documentary used in teaching was Eric Barnouw's *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (1974).² This text was highly influential in defining a Documentary canon and did so in terms of pointing to key individual directors. Their names stood for whole film practices and collapsed aspects of their film practice (editors, cinematographers) into side-bars to the main story of the film's production.

What drives Barnouw's work and other similar histories of the Documentary is the idea that individuals can be the mnemonics to the major cinematic movements that characterize the Documentary in the 20th century. Like auteur-driven film criticism, Barnouw's approach suggests that the logic of these films – their narrative systems and their semiotic strategies are attributable to these individuals.

While this construction of Documentary history may overstate the role of these individuals, it has clearly established a view of Documentary history that has remained intact for over 40 years. This is born out by a more recent text on the history of Documentary but which supplements their influence with a broader account of the Documentary form. Ellis & McLane's "A New History of Documentary Film" suggests that:

Characteristics documentaries have in common that are distinct from other film types (especially from the fiction film) can be thought of in terms of (1) subjects (2)

purposes, viewpoints, or approaches; (3) forms (4) production methods and techniques and (5) the sorts of experience they offer audiences. (Ellis & McLane 2005)

In this text, Ellis and McLane reproduce the canon found in Barnouw as their starting point, but then proceed to develop the range of mediating features of the Documentary tradition (alluded to above). While there are these important shifts in how Documentary is conceived, the authorial presence in both historical and contemporary terms continues to have an impact on the consideration and influence of Documentary.

While the debate around authorship and Documentary continues (see the recent special issue of the online journal, SCAN)³ within the forms that have historically exemplified Documentary production (both audio and audiovisual), my intention here is to look at a new forms of documentary production (the Database Documentary) and in this way offer a comparative view on how authorship and the idea of the “auteur” shifts within this relatively recent innovation.

Recent Examples of Database Documentary

In 2005, Marsha Kinder of University of Southern California’s Department of Cinema and Television led one of the earliest examples of a significant Database Documentary titled, *The Labyrinth Project* <http://college.usc.edu/labyrinth/about.html>. This project has had several upgrades and new iterations since its inception, however continues to use the original model as its foundational conceptual framework. Kinder and members of her team presented the most recent development of *The Labyrinth Project* to the Visible Evidence Conference in Los Angeles (August 2009).

In the current context of remixable *YouTube* era video, questions now arise as to how to distinguish this kind of Database Documentary from the “profusion” of video on the web. Kinder’s work over ten years has been, in her own words, an experiment with the pleasures of beivity, modularity and remix (all attributes of *YouTube* video) with the caveat that her use of these materials must carry both “conceptual power and aesthetic rigor”. (Kinder 2009: 54) The challenge is set by the erosion of a clear line between “grassroots creators and media professionals” (Kinder 2009: 55) – a situation that has vexed many media production teachers at all levels of the academy.⁴ Specifically she equates utopian visions of new media with the technological determinist ideas associated with Marshall McLuhan’s media theories. This view, however, is somewhat reductive of McLuhan’s contribution to our understanding of media – one that anticipated many aspects of the digital media environment. In this regard, expressions of new media utopias can be seen as a form of ideological discourse in the manner that Raymond Williams suggests, “...as a system of representation in the general production of meaning and ideas...” (Williams 1977: 55) in which horizons are bound by both contingent and possible worlds of the future.⁵

Kinder offers a short-hand definition of database narrative that is useful when considering both her work and the key question of authorship. Database narrative is an:

...empowering form that reveals the process by which characters, actions, settings, objects are chosen from an underlying database and recombined to make stories. (Kinder 2009: 58-59)

In the examples of small-scale video works found in the *Labyrinth* project, the Database Documentary narratives are built through re-combinatory acts of media selected from archives to form new and alternative narratives. Through a mix of design, choice and chance (Kinder 2009: 60) the narratives are open to creative impulses by contributors as diverse as media artists, cultural historians or lay persons intent on crafting their story from the archive resources provided. There is a deliberate constraint placed on the narrative frames to enhance the potential for longer narrative pieces. Termed “narrative lures” by Kinder, these longer stories counter the brevity and intensity of the clips or modules to allow for a “greater conceptual power to prevail”. In her presentation to the Visible Evidence conference (August 2009), Kinder illustrated the differing ways the *Labyrinth Project* calibrates its materials (normally delivered over the web) for re-ordering or re-presenting media as immersive large-scale installations in a museum environment. Kinder is clear that the re-ordering for both small and large-scale platforms “raises questions of agency and authorship”. These questions limit the viability of a single-author source for these narrative events. This is an important and distinguishing feature of database documentary separate from the documentary traditions considered by Barnouw and others alluded to above.

Kinder’s examples of database documentary stories from the *Labyrinth Project* frequently blur the lines between the professional media artist’s and the public lay persons’ contributions to the fashioning of a media work. This allows for the interactive dimensions provided through the website to vary the relative intensity of the participatory dimensions. In a large-scale immersive museum installation titled, *Jewish Home-grown History: Immigration, Identity and Inter-marriage*, the participatory dimension is present but understated. The work intends to provide an axis that runs from professional historical and cultural interpretations to the evocation of personal and popular memory. In the now familiar blurring of the professional and the lay versions of history, between private and public histories, the site is intended as a vehicle of empowerment for individuals to challenge official views of history to which they may now wish to respond – to embellish, to correct and to offer alternative views to the public record. Combining a mapping facility in a browsing tool, the user can “author” their immigration journey to the USA through space and time, upload images to support these maps and then see further as the browser provides contextualising materials from archives - newspapers, media clips, commentaries and quotations. Projected onto a large screen in a museum

environment, as Kinder puts it, is a “database documentary narrative on the fly with the user as a performer of history” (Kinder 2009: 62).

This is a key feature of database documentaries that suggests a departure from the traditions of 20th century Documentary associated with the canon established by many critics and historians. The opening of the form to a “live” responding and producing activity by users and audiences, substantially changes the role of the authorial presence in the work.

In other works by Kinder (e.g., Russian Modernism – an on-line constructivist module in which users learn by building the courseware), the participation of lay users is more intense and contributes more extensively to the creation of the work. This work also features a version of video work that is found on *YouTube*. In this regard, this illustrates that *YouTube* can complement the project website where the further contextualisation of the work elaborates extended meanings within the historical context of Russian modernism. This engagement with Russian Modernism presages the link between Dziga Vertov – a classic contributor in the mode of “auteur” to the Documentary tradition and the Database Documentary. The analysis of this connection is taken up by Lev Manovich’s use of Vertov in the *Language of New Media* (2001) (Manovich is in one of Kinder’s segments of interactive lectures on Russian Modernism). With this converged auteur and the practice of “authoring”, the influence of Russian modernism on remix culture comes full circle. It suggests rather than being opposed traditions, the Database Documentary has an reverse legacy in the work of Vertov – the inspiration of Cinéma Verité – a key sub-genre of Documentary production.

As indicated above, Kinder’s most recent Database Documentary is both an on-line exhibition and museum installation. The on-going instance of the *Labyrinth Project* suggests that there can be new possibilities opened up for documentary production within the emergent contexts provided by alternative platforms for the building of media representations. Further, given the mix of levels and intensities of participation, examples of Database Documentary have yet to reach consensus on a standard of presentation. It may be the case that this period for Database Documentary is similar to the late 1800s when a number of cinematic forms competed with each other until the Lumière brothers’ projections enabled a cinematic form to consolidate itself into an industry (Barnouw 1974).

Theoretical and Practical Contexts for the Production of Database Documentary

Database Documentary depends on a number of concepts and media practices associated with the emergence of media forms that relate to digital technologies.

In his earlier work (*The Language of New Media*), Manovich seeks to introduce the idea of a *cinematic language* in the context of digital or what he calls *new media*. It is interesting that in the 8 years since this work was published, cinematic

forms have flourished on the Internet in conjunction with the development of digital media tools. Digital media devices (still/video cameras, mobile phones) allow for a seamless connection to the Internet where sites for sharing filmmaking tools and making media abound. *YouTube* is a direct beneficiary and spur of this step change in the mediatisation of the Internet. The trajectory from a film language theory to remix and software studies bears out a view that Manovich is seeking to fill in the gaps in a historical project of new media practices where no such history currently exists. This leads Manovich to engage largely in a cataloguing activity of new media forms and practices. It was his useful connection between Vertov's film, *Man with a Movie Camera* and conceptions of databases that led to insights in the links between this early 20th century film activity and contemporary web-based media practices.

In the service of contextualising Database Documentary and positioning the concept of authorship within it, this paper now follows two trajectories: first, an analysis of those aspects of the link between film and the web (drawn from Manovich and others) that use a concept of *database* to project new conceptions of documentary knowledge; and second, the analysis of the authoring program, *Korsakow* to demonstrate the route documentary has travelled from authorship to authoring in contemporary media production. The following section reviews four key concepts that assist with understanding the theoretical and practical contexts for the production of Database Documentary and the consequences for authorship: remediation/remixability, interactivity, convergence and participation.

From Remediation to Deep Remixability

If the idea of remediation (Bolter & Grusin 2000) had one key concept, it was to link old and new media in the representation of one medium in another. The serial links of art and media forms over time reminds us of McLuhan's insight that found that every new medium was a re-capitulation of the older one it succeeded. This meant that new media did not supplant old media as much as re-use it for its own designs and purposes. Older media such as radio and video in turn, are found in webcasting and digital media practices. A digital picture is both like and unlike a photograph. A webcasted so-called "reality" sequence on *YouTube* resembles, but is not, a documentary. *Remediation* is defined as a "... borrowing, refashioning, homage through montage, or replacement of one media to another. (<http://readhed.blogspot.com/2005/03/remediation-defined.html>). The idea of *remix* (Manovich 2005) builds on this definition and re-iterates how the Internet can be used to explode the fields of media towards creative purposes such as that termed by Barb Dybwad as *collaborative remixability* (see Manovich 2005). For Manovich the web 2.0 environment pushes remix further:

...Although "deep remixability" has a connection with "remix" as it is usually understood, it has its own distinct mechanisms. Software production environment al-

lows designers to remix not only the content of different media, but also their fundamental techniques, working methods, and ways of representation and expression.

Different media begin to be combined in endless new ways, leading new media hybrids, or, to use a biological metaphor, new “media species”.

What became known as “mediatisation” refers to the Internet’s capacity to incorporate and re-use media forms to stream across platforms and applications. The specific remediation projects may differ widely but it is of importance to the examples of Database Documentaries that the emphasis is frequently placed on *old media* (for example, old photos or Super-8/16mm film). These may be scanned/digitised for use in databases and delivered either on-line or in other forms (locative media or downloadable media). In this regard, most, if not all projects involving old media involve a process of remediation and remix and Database Documentary is one kind of media project that frequently makes use of this process. The implications for authorship should be clear – in re-using media materials, the source texts may have been authored by someone other than the persons (or machine) who are re-shaping these materials. In remediation, this is a constant feature and sometimes a vexed one in the context of un-authorized use. Remix goes a step further by moving beyond content to the mixing of software applications. Manovich is emphatic about the key moment in which the software applications can be combined and hybridised in creative media works. The author function is transformed to an authoring one in which the orchestration of software replaces the more traditional content provision. As Manovich writes, “...The fact that this effect is simulated and removed from its original physical media means that a designer can manipulate it a variety of ways...” (Manovic 2006). The shift to the term “designer” from author also signals a different relationship to the creative process and raises questions about the role(s) now required in the making of creative media works.

Interactivity

Interactivity is germane to the lexicon of Internet media but is not a term that according to Manovich has been well understood in the general attempts to account for digital media experiences (Manovich 2008). The term has been debated for some time as to its appropriate level of definition for Internet relationships (Flew 2008). In application to screen media and specifically to Database Documentary, there are new possibilities of narrative afforded by non-linear forms of “interactivity” in relatively recently developed “authoring” programs such as *Korsakow*. (*Korsakow* projects are Database projects that build sequences through tagging – see a longer elaboration later in this paper.) Having recently experimented with *Korsakow*, Adrian Miles rejects the term, “interactive”, in favour of “...combinatory environments which provide templates or structures that provide for the connections being formed...” and opposes the authoring/publishing dyad

for these types of Database Documentary, where these architectures are instead, "...engines that allow content to be contributed and "mixed" in an ingoing basis." (Miles 2008: 225-226)

Again the implications for authorship are clear. Interactivity for a screen media artist is the emergent co-creating relationships that are facilitated by the Internet. In this definition of interactivity, the boundary between producer and consumer is blurred. Unlike interacting with *old media*, in digital media practices, there is an emphasis on producing *within* the interaction. Interactivity may be defined as (1) user to user interaction (social media, blogs), (2) para-social interaction, where online media generate new forms of user engagement with the content (social networks) and (3) user-to-system interactivity, or the ways in which users engage with the devices they are using (shared applications, file sharing). (McMillan 2002) These concepts can be deployed in relation to one another, for example, greater opportunities for participation may enhance the interactive quality of the producer-user relationships. When audiences can contribute to the *content* of Database Documentaries, the work is opened to new ideas and new forms of articulation... There are ways in which the content ceases to become an absolute narratively defined thing and rather a resource for a range of possible configurations in narrative or in a form that is reticulated along different lines than a linear narrative. In terms of *authorship*, the single source point for the creation of work no longer exists in this more distributed form of media practice.

Convergence and Transmedia Storytelling

The possibilities afforded by *convergence* within a web 2.0 environment open creative opportunities for the users and align them not only with other users but also with other producers of screen media. The key term that now represents the facilitation of digital media in online environments is *convergence* and the range of activities associated with these environments are grouped under the term of *convergence culture* (Jenkins 2006). Database Documentary depends on convergence, which combines the computer, the content derived from media and the networking facilities of the Internet. Convergence refers in the first instance to the interlinking of computing and IT; communication networks and media content that occurred with the development and popularisation of the Internet and the convergent products, services, and activities that emerged in the digital media space.

The second element of convergence is the evolution of devices (computers, mobile phones, television, etc.) towards multi-purpose conduits for a range of activities involving digital media. While the term *Web 2.0* designates the convergent forms and Internet media practices that have made *YouTube*, *My Space*, *Facebook* and other social networking sites popular, new possibilities of distributed media have sought to bridge the gap between mainstream media and new media.

Sites such as Ustream <http://www.ustream.tv/discovery/live/all>, Livestream <http://new.livestream.com/> and many others augur the launch of “Social TV” - term emerging to describe the potential convergence of Television and Social Media.

The model of authoring for Social TV varies in relation to the content provided and reflects the different models already a part of the Television landscape. Transmedia storytelling may reflect a need for collaborative models of authorship. Not unlike the cinema, historically, models of authorship have moved between single identified authors and collaborative teams that collectively realise the final work.

The materials often associated with ancillary materials to the core story tend to be corporately produced for social marketing or advertising campaigns. Alternative models are now emerging to harness the ancillary content (research, back stories) in storytelling models that create very different multi-levelled story experiences. See [01/22/transmedia-storytelling/](#)

Web 2.0's contribution has allowed for individuals to become online storytellers and to re-define how authorship is re-calibrated within the various narrative functions of Internet media.

Participation

Participation by the subjects of documentary in the work itself has always been a key feature by which a documentary was judged. This is no less the case for Database Documentary however, the rise of Web 2.0 is very much based on a concept of participation to effect the idea of *collective intelligence*. In media studies, an earlier engagement with the concept of participation centred on audience activity and involvement in media contexts. Community media (Downing 2009) and participatory communication (Servaes, Jacobson & White 1996) are two ways of expressing this interest. Also, studies in media audiences suggest that *active* and *resistant* audiences may define participation in the media audience context.

Authorship shifts in the context of the level and intensity of user involvement in the Internet. Variably termed, “sharing”, cyber-community, or simply interactivity, the Internet is primed for a significant re-calibration of engagement and practice. With greater participatory opportunities, the nature of authorship will change: Authors may proliferate as they have within the Blogosphere to create their own dynamic and presence. To summarise, remediation/remix, interactivity, convergence and participation are all buzzwords within the world of digital and web-based media. However, as concepts they require constant scrutiny as the practices themselves evolve to render these concepts obsolete. In the process, ideas of authorship will shift and change. In this context, the role of the author does not disappear but is re-calibrated to take up new and different activities and skills in the service of the production underway.

Authorship, Database Documentary and Vertov

New media objects may or may not employ these highly structured database models; however, from the point of view of user's experience, a large proportion of them are databases in a more basic sense. They appear as a collection of items on which the user can perform various operations: view, navigate, search. (Manovich 2001)

As suggested above, the work of Lev Manovich provides a relatively early (2001) attempt to theorise new media practices. In more recent work his analysis has struggled to maintain pace with the emergent spheres of web 2.0 and social media platforms. Manovich's analysis of Dziga Vertov's films is used to anchor a reading of digital media while his use of *database* is the organising concept for understanding web information design. It is both of these engagements that makes his work relevant to the understanding of Database Documentary.

It is perhaps a fortunate alignment when Lev Manovich selects Dziga Vertov's *Man with A Movie Camera* as a film, which in his terms, epitomises the database format.

In this fashion we can connect Database Documentary to *authorship* through one of the most significant *auteurs* of documentary film, Dziga Vertov. Manovich calls Vertov a *database filmmaker*. This description is uncannily close to the term, *Database Documentary*, now more common in circles where this practice has developed. It connects to the models of how we make artefacts on the Internet and the methods associated with older media such as Vertov's best-known film, *Man With a Movie Camera*. How, we might ask, can a figure of the early 20th century have a bearing on the theories and practices of screen media arts in the early years of the 21st century? Almost 100 years ago, Vertov's filmmaking practice was not long in train after the very outset of the cinema's existence as both an art form and an institution of mass entertainment. It took place within one of the most explosive periods and contexts for arts practices, that is, Soviet Russia in the period following the Russian revolution of 1918. The answer lies in the argument made by Manovich – that Vertov's film, *Man With A Movie Camera* epitomises the database structuring model that is best able to describe the relationship between digital media and information in web-based environments. If further evidence of his auteur status is required, it would be in the adaptation of Vertov's term, *Kino Pravda* or literally “film truth” better known in its French iteration as *Cinéma Vérité*. *Cinéma Vérité* represents a international documentary movement started during the period of the French New Wave and emulated in a number of films but most emphatically in Québec under the influence of Michel Brault. The partnership between Brault and the noted French documentary filmmaker, Jean Rouch led to the portability of camera and sound equipment. This in turn led to a hand-held camera movement that overwhelmingly defined the cinematographic style of films that came to be known under the name of *Cinéma Vérité*.

Dziga Vertov thus set in motion a significant tradition of documentary filmmaking but one that had to be interpreted and created in his name by those

artists who saw the distinctiveness of films such as *Man With a Movie Camera*. This film connects Russian modernism to contemporary works that use database and remix strategies.

...*Man with a Movie Camera* traverses its database in a particular order to construct an argument. Records drawn from a database and arranged in a particular order become a picture of modern life -- but simultaneously an argument about this life, an interpretation of what these images, which we encounter every day, every second, actually mean...

(Manovich 2001: 240)

This reading of *Man with a Movie Camera* aligns it directly with that part of the Internet that organises and makes accessible large and complex bodies of information. All those digital objects and coded materials on the Internet are forms of data. The *base* of the database is the space or place where the data can be stored. Storage of data can be web-based or it can be a designated digital repository. Manovich is keen to cite the database as the premier *logic* of the web and the digital materials that are processed as web-based objects and procedures. But this seems a world away from the modernist vision of Dziga Vertov. It demonstrates an explicit turn away from the idea of a single-identity author constructing a narrative even loosely based on a series of records. However as suggested by Marsha Kinder's project on Russian Formalism, it suggests that a deeper interrogation of the relationship of Russian formalism to contemporary remix digital culture is warranted.⁶

There are a number of features of Vertov's film, *Man with a Movie Camera*, that link forward to the Database Documentary. The film takes a database approach in that it catalogues many aspects of its subject materials. The film shows "collections" of images of many types including both social types and emergent technologies such as those found in transportation machines of the period. Most significantly the film presents a catalogue of new visual effects in the cinema, for example, slow motion, stop action and post production. The editing process is fore-grounded as a part of the film's construction as we are shown processes related to montage, split-screen and variations in editing rhythms.

Critical accounts of the *Man with a Movie Camera* have suggested that the film engages its audience at a number of levels of abstraction. It is self-referential in that it reflects upon its own processes of representation and invites the viewer to think about and engage with this reflection. At least three levels of abstraction can be identified:

- i) the story of a cameraman shooting a film
- ii) the account of an audience watching the film and
- iii) a day in the life which is the film itself.

Vertov's film is deemed to pre-empt a language of cinema in that it catalogues its content as social relations and communication techniques.

Because of the open-endedness of digital media devices, digital filmmaking is seen to empathise with Vertov's film in sharing a *resistance* to a finite language of visual representation. However in many instances (Youtube is one example), the web is a vehicle for mainstream media material that follows predictable structures.

If the analytical work can continue to grow in many directions, serviced by several readers/users, questions arise regarding the authorship, reading logic and overall experience of media materials. The experience of media will depart significantly from the past and current experience of film and television whose staple is the narrative or structured story by a single, identifiable author.

In this regard, *Man With a Movie Camera* does *not* share the Wikipedia model in its production as a film. *Man With a Movie Camera* is an experimental documentary and part of the avant-garde cinema movement in the 1920s that connected filmmakers and artists from such nations as the Soviet Union, France, Spain and Italy. This avant-garde uses cinema to experiment with narrative and other forms. Because this early period of cinema was, by definition *experimental*, it works for Manovich to frame digital media within this tradition because of the particular relationship that avant-garde artists had established with cinema. However, the cinema in its period of invention and driven by exploration is characterised by a cannon of auteurs (for example, Flaherty, Grierson) in the genre of the documentary.

With the Lumières short films from 1896 a pre-cursor of documentary form, the form of cinema that became *codified* as narrative cinema in the sense of Hollywood narrative form, was first developed and consolidated by DW Griffith (in the period from 1908 – 1915 (Metz 1974). Vertov's work emerges about 10 years later. By comparison, digital filmmaking has also had a relatively short history and is mediated by a range of related screen media practices from computer games to digital animation. It is interesting that the prolific emergence of film in the late 1890s was matched by a similar expansion of digital media in the late 1990s. In this regard the current developments in digital media have continued unabated and do appear to be consolidating around a technologically stable set of practices in the manner of the cinema in the early part of the 20th century.

Database Documentaries, Authorship and Narrative

One of the key questions posed by Manovich is that of the relationship between database and narrative. In an effort to explain this relationship, Manovich uses the example of the computer game. The user/player/gamer experiences the game as a story - and in many instances games have all the elements of a film - characters, plots, villains and settings. As a gamer you are drawn into the narrative to solve a problem or compete in some fashion to win. Unlike a film or book, the viewer/user gains entry points to affect the outcome of the story. However there are

similarities in the logics of the users in both games and films and increasingly these forms have moved closer towards one another.

In contrast to most games, most narratives do not require algorithm-like behaviour from their readers. However, narratives and games are similar in that the user, while proceeding through them, must uncover its underlying logic -- its algorithm. Just like a game player, a reader of a novel gradually reconstructs an algorithm (here I use it metaphorically) which the writer used to create the settings, the characters, and the events. (Manovich 2001: 199)

The gaming example also has implications for how one conceives of the authorship of a database. It is well known that gaming companies invite their users – “gamers” – to offer suggestions for how the game could be improved. The users potentially become “authors” of the experience by introducing complexity and by implication would modify the narrative elements of any gaming experience. Though on a different scale, the well-known practice of screening pre-released films to selected audiences is not dissimilar. These producer-led initiatives have frequently resulted in changes to films as substantial as the changing of sad endings to happier ones (*The Lovely Bones* 2009) and altering the length of shots and subsequently the length of the whole film (*Crocodile Dundee* 1986).⁷

Manovich’s point, however, is that Vertov’s film works as both a database *and* a narrative to produce his new form of cinema. The database is defined here as the compendium of cinematic techniques newly discovered in the era of cinema of the 1920’s. (Manovich 2001) The narrative in Vertov’s film is a *story* about the cinema. It is a story of about the presentation and demonstration of the emergence of new cinematic techniques. These techniques were able to show the audience a new way of seeing themselves and their social context. The author of this story is Vertov – he is literally “*the man with the movie camera*”.

As a narrative, Vertov’s film presents an argument - a way of speaking about and showing a strong interest in the meaning of its subject matter. The viewer of *Man With A Movie Camera* is engaged deeply in the story of a society at a critical point in the development of many technologies (with particular attention paid to new communication technologies) but also a society deeply divided as to the prospects of social change.

If we follow Manovich’s argument, conventional narrative and the visual culture that it supports should have become obsolete. Instead, conventional narrative persists, as does the dominant renaissance perspective of representational realism associated with mainstream media and visual cultures.

The key question posed by Manovich’s theory of the language of new media is:

...How can our new abilities to store vast amounts of data, to automatically classify, index, link and instantly retrieve data, lead to new forms of narrative?... (Manovich 2001: 208)

Put another way, how can a narrative take into account that its elements are organised into a database and use this knowledge to effect new forms of organisation?

Just as a game cannot know it is a game (Burnett: 2003), a narrative cannot know it is a narrative or what its own constituents are. There is a limit to this kind of objectification of what is, in fact a relationship between humans and the technologies that are used to develop the vehicles for narratives be they the more limited form developed for games or the more elaborated narratives that can be found in other forms (novels, films).

Manovich's locates the structuring principles in digital media forms to the narrative sequences as codified in the cinema of the 20th century – what was alluded to earlier as the D.W. Griffith contribution to the founding of Hollywood narrative cinema.

...When databases act as narratives, they are acting out the model of narrative cinema... (Manovich 2001: 232)

The Presence of the Author

This model of narrative cinema importantly does not preclude the inclination for digital media to orient its representations toward types of montage in which images are juxtaposed in radical ways or presented as multiple and superimposed in a single frame. It justifies the continuing co-habitation on the web of both narrative and database structures and allows for a Database Documentary to cohabit the documentary genre space with conventionally authored documentary.

For example, in one of the most significant documentary festivals held in the world, the International Documentary Festival Association (IDFA) in 2009 featured hundreds of documentaries with a relatively small showcase of Database Documentaries. Significantly, a catalogue of the festival's offerings was available on a touchscreen device for attendees to view both trailers and full-length versions of the films. With about a dozen Australian documentary films presented at IDFA in the 2009 competitions, there was sufficient indication of contemporary trends in authorship. For these films, the dominant mode of authorship was anchored by both a voice-over and the incorporation of the filmmaker as an actor in the film – that is implicated directly in the narrative as it evolved. The five films I viewed where this occurred were I. *Psychopath* (Walker), *The Snowman* (Levant), *The Mathilda Candidate* (Levy) *The Miscreants of Taliwood* (Gittoes) and *Contact* (Dean). *In A Good Man* (Uberoi) voice-over was used extensively but the presence of the filmmakers was not used as a plot device.

This trend towards self-insertion in pro-filmic space is logically an interest in displaying the key relationships in the film and as a means of creating intimacy within aspects of those relationships. They may also be seen as a means of irrevocably marking out an authorial presence and logically as a way of defining the source for the concepts and arguments as well as the knowledge interests of the film. The presence of the filmmaker in the pro-filmic reality of the work is not a new device in documentary however the prevalence and emphasis on this mode of

narrative may be a response to the perception that directors may be losing their independence to the whims of broadcasters who have been seeking to maximise audiences and doing so at the expense of originality and the challenges to audiences that independent filmmakers can bring to the screen.

The interest in Database Documentary may be a means to realise a different authorial presence than offered up by the “insertion-of –the-author” model alluded to above. Instead the author turns to “authoring” or as suggested below to re-working already shot and edited sequences in ways that opens at least to some extent the participation and intervention of the viewer/user.

Korsakow: Authoring/remixing/storytelling/

Adrian Miles (Miles 2008: 223) uses the terms “hard” and “soft” to characterise the differences when video moves from a fixed and contained platform (as in a broadcast documentary) to an interactive platform using an open or flexible architecture. His recent work on video editing systems calibrated for interactive distribution and consumption is decidedly biased towards the “presentation of things...representational and indexical”. In this regard it is worthy to examine the way Miles contextualises these practices and to examine one form of video editing and authoring program in detail, called the *Korsakow* system.

Miles begins a conversation about video editing with the definition of the minimal unit of a videographic narrative structure. Here he follows closely on Christian Metz’s earlier work in which the lowest indivisible unit is the shot (Metz 1974). In Metz’s film semiotic, the lowest indivisible unit is in fact a *sequence* in that as a narrative unit it cannot be restricted or defined in terms of either a single frame (when speaking of celluloid) or an single image but rather as a set of frames or images because it is through a juxtaposition of shots that sequences are built. Sequences allow a narrative structure to be built towards the telling of a story and in the Hollywood cinema (which Metz was mostly interested in) these tended towards conventionally structured stories within a 3-act structured narrative arc using linear editing approaches.

Miles re-asserts Metz’s point on the shot/sequence as the minimal unit as a means of explaining the remixing video editing practices such as Korsakow. Returning to the hard/soft distinction, the limit that for Miles defines a “hard” video is when publication/export out of a video-editing program removes any further manipulation of the shots/sequences. “Soft” video is able to retain the potential of manipulating/editing shots/sequences *after* publication. And it is this quality that is rendered into a user-generated non-linear program by the authoring software known as *Korsakow*.

The Korsakow System is defined on its website as,

... an easy-to-use computer program for the creation of database films. It was invented by Florian Thalhoffer, a Berlin-based media artist. Korsakow Films are films

with a twist: They are interactive – the viewer has influence on the K-Film. They are rule-based – the author decides on the rules by which the scenes relate to each other, but s/he does not create fixed paths. K-Films are generative – the order of the scenes is calculated while viewing... (see <http://korsakow.org/>)

In Miles' Korsakow film, *Fragments for a Vog* (<http://vogmae.net.au/fragments/>), a number of small screens set below a central screen provide a set of choices for the viewer for the continued non-linear presentation of shot/segments. Under the central screen, a poetic or somewhat elliptical phrase captions the sequence. This recalls an earlier work titled, *Life After Wartime* by Kate Richards and Ross Gibson (see www.lifeafterwartime.com) The selection of one of the smaller screens in turn generates a new central screen and a set of new smaller screens beneath it. The content in Miles' film is a selection of scenes that suggest "slices of life" including outdoor scenes, family and friends. In this sense it does hark back to the earliest Lumière's slices of life filmed as experiments in some of the earliest examples of cinema alluded to above.

Miles refers to the Korsakow system as "Director-based" and one that uses individually tagged already published (and digitised) clips or sequences. The author effectively develops a library of tagged clips – some sequences can have multiple tags allowing for complex sequencing when selected by users. The searches by users effect a search logic similar to the Boolean logic found in many web-based browsers. Clips can have tags within their timelines allowing for matches to be made within the clips according to the authored rules.

Miles summarises the stages through which a Korsakow Database Documentary proceeds paraphrased as follows:

1. An authoring process of tagging already digitised clips and assembling these into a clip library.
2. Clips are arranged and marked for placement on the web page with a central screen bounded by a number of thumbnail screens. The selection and juxtaposition of sequences allows for both sequences and screens to be aligned to one another.
3. In an unusual implication for authorship, not only is the sequencing subject to user-based selections but with particular programming constraints, the sequence selection can be determined *outside the agency of both the author and the user*.

Miles summarises the implications of this kind of agency thus:

...This poses significant and fascinating problems in turn for narrative practice in such softvideo environments as we move from being video makers creating specific and single video works towards being designers of combinatorial engines and the possible narrative, and non-narrative, discourses they enable... (2008: 226)

This is an important manner of distinguishing *authors* from *authoring* and the formulation of a discourse appropriate to developing a new critical language for a new media form.

Conclusion

If there is a conclusive direction for re-thinking the future of authorship in documentary via Database Documentary, it may be the case, that as Miles concludes, it is a move from content creation in the sense of how documentary filmmaking has been a film practice based on authorship and publishing in the institutions of film and television to “design and systems development...towards the architecture of poetic and possibly autopoietic systems...” (Miles 2008: 229).

There is a sense that Miles is attempting to create a theoretical language appropriate to what he sees as an important departure in the construction of media artifacts. His insistence on a more subtle attribution than the terms “interactive” and “authoring” imply for Database Documentary suggests this commitment. It may be that these more subtle distinctions can be used to encourage a re-think of basic operations in the field of editing and media formations. There is, however, a sense that the understanding of post-published editing programs like Korsakow also relies on older semiotic theory (Metz) and aesthetics (Montage/Russian Formalism). This reliance seems not to be acknowledged in Miles’ push towards this new horizon of media architectures at least not in the sense articulated by Manovich. The implications for contemporary understanding and teaching of documentary film practice are serious because both the language of theory and the intellectual antecedents for practice are indispensable for a truly *radical* approach – if we understand the definition of *radical* as working in terms of the *roots* of concepts and ideas. The Database Documentary is re-defining the fundamental tenets of documentary practice and authorship. In the process it is opening new avenues for re-thinking the professional models of media practice. In this regard, the conversation should still be, from the documentary producers vantage point, one that respects the role of the author, the sources of the documentary genre – in the past and present – and a view that remains attentive to how it is changing in the face of new media contexts and practices.

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Notes

- ¹ This critical tradition is associated with Francois Truffaut, Jean Luc Godard and others of the Cahiers du Cinema group. Later Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael, American critics continued the debate surrounding auteurism in the cinema.
- ² There were a number of other similar books on documentary History that appeared around this time, e.g., Alan Lovell and Jim Hillier, *Studies in Documentary*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972); Elizabeth Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1975)
- ³ http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display_synopsis.php?j_id=18
- ⁴ For Kinder, the issues cannot be resolved only by partisan arguments that both groups tend to use. She suggests that there are important lessons to be learned by taking a glance backwards to earlier eras of media innovation when similar claims by lay and professionals alike were made.
- ⁵ In this regard, the emergence of structured theories about digital technologies has expanded greatly in the past decade since the publication of Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* in 2001. Since that time, Manovich has extended his views to engage with and underscore his theories of so-called new media (see *Remixability* (2005) and *Software Takes Command* (2008)). *Software Takes Command* lifts its title from the classic text by Siegfried Giedion titled, *Mechanisation Takes Command* – a book that was a significant influence on the thought of Marshall McLuhan (Theall 76). In linking his work on software to Giedion and McLuhan, Manovich's intellectual project continues his earlier work on developing a historical view of the emergence of new media – albeit within a personalised and anecdotal approach to an as-yet to be defined field with no discernable methodology.
- ⁶ One of Marsha Kinder's Database Documentary projects was termed *Russian Formalism*. In a direct link to Manovich's use of Vertov, this specific work (which features Manovich in one of its segments of interactive lectures), the influence of Russian modernism on remix culture comes full circle. See Kinder, Marscha, "The Conceptual Power of Online Video: Five Easy Pieces", in *Video Vortex Reader Responses to Youtube*, Lovink and Niederer, Eds., 2008, 61.
- ⁷ *Crocodile Dundee* was re-edited for American audiences on the basis that long takes were not as pleasing as short ones.

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