

# CONSTRUCTS OF THE INTERACTIVE DOCUMENTARY IMAGE IN *INSIDE/OUTSIDE*, *THE UNKNOWN TERRITORIES* PROJECT, AND *ESTUARY*

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This paper introduces three original works that use features of interactive documentary arts to explore social constructions of places and their attending narratives. The three interactive projects that are introduced are *Inside/Outside*, *The Unknown Territories Project*, and *Estuary*. The paper asks how tools of layering, compositing and navigation through documentary imagery in photography and film contribute to an understanding of the connection between social relationships and a sense of space.

Social relationships form and become inscribed in spaces (Lefebvre 1991). For example groups organise spaces, from casual meeting spots to courtrooms or sports arenas, to perform differing functions. Those functions are shaped by factors such as the logistics of space; for example, whether a space enables exchange or separates individuals, establishes cultural patterns of expression, such as conversation or ritual performance, and the iconic, indexical and symbolic ways that stories such as those of history, memory and desire become embedded or denied (see, for example, Nora et al 1996-1998).



Fig. 1. Screen-shot from *Inside-Outside* (Coover 2007) depicting the layering of archival photographs, video clips, text on a panoramic backdrop.

Mapping and other forms of visually representing a space can present such relationships. They also distance the user from those relationships by abstracting them from the experience of time within the place pictured. Spatial configurations of information may include time elements, but most often they contain them within another structure. This is true for example in the embedding of video clips in web pages and interactive maps, such as Google maps; video moments are contained within a larger structure that a user navigates in her own time and she can even play differing time-based representations at the same time. The translation of spatial relationships through such maps creates a kind of distancing in which the temporal experiences of places are configured by a user in her own time. This process of translation is not entirely unlike that of the ethnographer who alternates between the role of being within a group, in the spatial milieu in which its relationships are constructed, and outside of it, trying to find ways to extract or abstract details that can offer understanding (see, for example, Clifford & Marcus 1986, Marcus 1990).

Photographic and cinematographic forms of representation of actuality (i.e. documentary film) also engage in spatial practices



Fig. 2. Screen-shot from *Inside-Outside*. The continuing panoramic imagery has no narrative beginning or end. Various characters (played by actor, Brett Keyser) engage with the space in differing ways, both in photographic performance and in the videos, which are envisioned as portals into the past(s), present(s) and future(s).

of organisation, distancing and reconfiguring, that take on new dimensions in digital contexts. For example, in their book *Another Way Of Telling* (1982), John Berger and Jean Mohr present a 142 page photo sequence that is part narrative, part expressive montage and part visual essay. They argue that their montage of images, while appearing cinematic, operates differently from cinema because of the opportunity afforded to readers to turn back and forth across the images. In celluloid editing practices, clips are examined as discreet physical objects that hang from bins or are coiled on cores. They are arranged and often re-arranged into sets, which are spatial configurations, and are given tags and annotations through logs. The clips are gathered, taped and later glued in various physical variations. The editor fingers and scrolls through these, at times making cuts as much by the physical lengths of the clips as by their contents. Likewise, digital editing environments also arrange clips, or more correctly icons that signify clips, spatially. Bins, timelines and menus are forms of spatial organisation from which temporal experiences of actually watching clips are triggered. Where time-based viewership largely stimulates spontaneous constitutive processes (see, for example, Nelson 1978), editing and other hypermedia activities more significantly emphasise conscious and reflexive constitutive processes in which questions that are raised by one image get explored through another. The editing process requires choices and selection. The editor may imagine and create sequences from clips in almost infinite variations, even if, in the final result, all but one of those variations are discarded, and the rejects are forgotten along with the myriad lessons and alternatives they may have offered.



Fig. 3. Screen-shot from *Voyage Into The Unknown* (Roderick Coover 2008). Users navigate a fantastic landscape representing the imagined route lying ahead of John Wesley Powell upon his attempt to be the first Caucasian America to navigate and map the Colorado River. Users join the crew, marking, naming and navigating the landscape, after which photographs and stories transform the experience into a socio-cultural record – one that conceals as much as it reveals.

In providing diverse ways of moving between the spatial organisation and temporal expression of clips, digital and interactive tools expand the editor's reflexivity and choice-making (Coover 2012). Digital technologies enable the inclusion of materials recorded or organised through differing modes as well as the incorporation of other kinds of research materials, such as texts, maps and photographs. They can allow for continual updating and offer opportunities for using algorithms to create versions generated by the computer or user inputs. Further, in locative media projects, virtual 'edits' may even be created by users physically walking among actual places, conjoining located materials en route. In some cases the editor is therefore also theoretician, technician, writer, explorer, researcher and designer, and this may result in projects that are equally experiential or intellectual. There is a risk, however, that structural and technological advances are not developed in relation to in-depth content; in such cases, the exhibition of technological innovation is primarily self-serving to the technological apparatus of which they are a part, and as such there is less opportunity for a two-way exchange, apt application of metaphor or structure, and creative growth.

For the creators of digital works, navigation-based forms of interaction are shaped by computer interfaces, program metaphors and design possibilities. Materials, such as icons, videos and text are displayed spatially. Just as icons are moved about the desktop on personal computers, so, too, are icons pertaining to video clips moved between folders, bins and/or timelines in programs like Adobe Premiere®, Adobe After Effects®, Avid, DVD Studio Pro®, Final Cut Pro® and Media 100®. They may also be placed in other programs that are designed for other kinds of creative and critical practices, such as Microsoft Word® or Eastgate Story Space®. Furthermore, the nature and form of the documentary image itself is transformed through spatial arrangements such as juxtaposition, layering, or compositing (Coover 2011(b), 2012; Manovich 2001, 2006). However, it should be added that the arbitrary assignment of film terms by software companies poses many questions for new makers of motion images. The assignment is presumably designed to make software terms recognisable. However, it shapes ways in which clips are gathered, named and placed within a project based on terms that may not be sufficiently flexible. As few film students under the age of 30 have ever seen a bin or actually cut a piece of celluloid, the assignment of such terms is abstract but their designs impose constraints that may be confining. Perhaps other terms for the sorting and conjoining practices might expand thinking about what time-images are and how they might work together.

In their work, *Another Way of Telling* (1982), Berger and Mohr stress that an important difference between viewing (or reading) images in a book and watching such images in a film is



Fig. 4. Assemblage from *Canyonlands* (the movie), 2012. Elements from the interactive project *Unknown Territories* are also configured into single channel videos.

the forward temporal force of the technology, which Berger characterises as producing a kind of temporal anxiety through the technological provocation to attend to each forthcoming frame. Berger writes,

Eisenstein once spoke of a 'montage of attractions'. By this he meant that what precedes the film-cut should attract what follows it, and vice versa. The energy of this attraction could take the form of a contrast, an equivalence, a conflict, a recurrence. In each case, the cut becomes eloquent and functions like the hinge of a metaphor... Yet there was in fact an intrinsic difficulty in applying this idea to film. In a film... there is always a third energy in play: that of the reel, that of the film's running through time. And so the two attractions in a film montage are never equal.... In a sequence of still photographs, however, the energy of attraction, either side of a cut, does remain equal, two way and mutual.... The sequence has become a field of coexistence like the field of memory... Photographs so placed are restored to a living context: not of course to the original context from which they were taken – that is impossible – but to a context of experience (288-9).

In short, this kind of interplay maximises the conscious, constitutive characteristics of documentary images in ways that resemble the experience of navigating among clips in editing programs, browsers, and various other interactive media environments. Video clips, like photos, may be accessed at various times and for diverse reasons. As Berger goes, in similarly discussing the sequencing of photographs, 'The world they reveal, frozen, becomes tractable.' The choice to use a navigational technique is particularly apt for Berger and Mohr because they are making a project about navigating among the associations, desires and ruptures of memory. Navigation allows users to cross-reference images, to discover formal, tropic, narrative, and expository significations. The ability to juxtapose and link diverse kinds of materials expands the potential for reflexivity. The navigable spatial arrangement of the book enables choice and subjective temporality, where the instant forward motion of single-channel cinema does not. Interactive documentaries may accommodate both forms of cognition by offering a mix of temporal and navigational experiences.

Environments that bring together differing kinds of research materials can enable users to follow the media maker's process, whether by reading field notes and supporting documents or by following how particular sets of materials led to the development of an edit or argument (Coover 2003). When supporting materials and data are available, the user can follow along to see how choices were made and consider alternatives (Coover 2011(a), 2011(b), 2011(c), 2012). The media maker is not deprived of the power to make an argument and have a voice (expressing one's ideas is among the important reasons that individuals make works). In fact, the maker may offer many arguments that would not fit together in the logics of a single-channel work. As evidenced in works by Susan Meiselas, John Rechy, and Samuel Bollendorf and Abel Segretin, among many others, such works can express relationships between the user, maker and subject that raise interesting ethical questions about single-channel media and the messages they may convey through form.

Commissioned by the Museum of the American Philosophical Society, *Inside/Outside* (Fig. 1, 2) considers how competing historical opinions of a two block area of central Philadelphia contributed to the growth and decline of the city; an interactive format is used to juxtapose these views and forge collective engagement with museum visitors that is then enacted through group explorations that are video recorded and added to the work over an 18 month period, from 22 June 2007 – 28 December 2008. The installation kiosk in the museum



presented a layered panoramic image of the park outside the museum. The materials layered upon and around the panoramic imagery included embedded videos, photographs, maps and text (see Fig. 1).

The installation invited viewers to take a virtual stroll (or 'scroll') through a section of National Historical Independence Park adjacent to the museum, with an eye to uncovering fragmentary evidence of the differing histories of the area (about four city blocks). 'Bands' of original text and quotes ran above and below a spiraling panoramic image of the park. Archival photographs and etchings of the urban landscape, taken at differing stages during its (re)development, were layered upon and around the composited panoramic photograph. The videos offered viewers mini-explorations within the park.

The structuring metaphors of walking and exploring were particularly apt. The exhibition looked at how approaches to exploration, including differing modes of representation such as diary writing, map-making, and drawing, shaped the formation of differing kinds of knowledge. The historic park where the work was recorded is a recreation area that had been used in many different ways over the past 200 years. Independence Hall was first constructed in 1732, at which time it sat near the edge of a colonial port on the Delaware River. A small square behind the hall was established as a park to be preserved in perpetuity, and this decree endured though the U.S. War of Independence and the subsequent growth of the city, while the lands surrounding it were transformed by industry. Tanneries and breweries lined the edge of a creek running through the city toward the Delaware River, and a prison was built overlooking the smaller park. As the city continued to grow, the creek – which had become more like an open sewer – was covered, and the industries moved out. The industrial buildings were torn down and replaced by commercial enterprises and warehouses. Beginning in the 1950s, many of these buildings were razed for an expansion of the park. A walker would find few, and discreet, signs of the land's concealed histories in the landscape's topography.

After visiting the exhibits in the historical museum, visitors are likely to walk in the park. Navigating actual or virtual terrains, an urban explorer might come upon clues to its man-made and

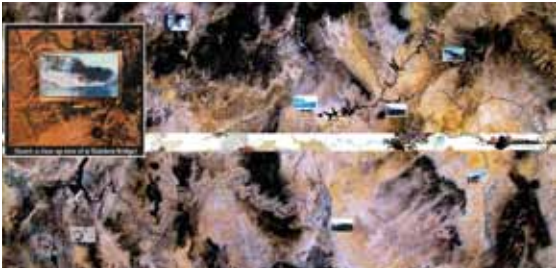


Fig 5. *Unknown Territories* presented in installation form with videos and text elements scattered across a large and detailed satellite image.

natural histories. A number of strategies were employed in the videos embedded in *Inside/Outside* to allow users to search for concealed pasts. For example, each inset video sequence was shaped by a differing method of exploration; one video focused on measuring, another on the wildlife that made its home in that urban setting, another on the concealed waterways that ran through it, and so forth. Each video sequence was recorded in a different season, under differing weather conditions, so that tone and light vary and each draws on differing genre-styles as contrasting modes of representation. The user engaged in an

exploratory process not unlike that of the original researcher; the user gathered and compiled evidence from the landscape.

Modes of exposition, voices and viewpoints mix. A multimedia environment offers the potential to present temporal continuity and uninterrupted (or contiguous) spatial representation, while at the same time allowing for montage, collage, layering, compositing, and other forms of media-mixing, as well as elements of performance; these bring together differing conditions of time in the common virtual (and actual) spaces depicted (see Fig. 2). The media-mixing processes, which are made possible by new tools, can disrupt expectations of verisimilitude that contiguity and continuity imply; in doing so, they can challenge the authoritative stance of objectivity that contiguous and continuous representation is often used to represent. Once dialectically-opposed methods of panoramic art and cinema, such as those of continuity and montage, of close-up and long-shot, or of exposition and narrative, now co-exist. Historical elements can also co-exist, as when 19th and 20th century photographs of identical locations in the park were layered upon a corresponding 21st century image.



Fig. 6. Production map for *Estuary*. *Estuary* applies these techniques of mapping, writing and audio-visual production to investigate the urban spaces of the Delaware River. The project explores industrial uses of the river that shape narratives and social uses of space, whilst speculating on the impact of climate change on those relationships.

The *Unknown Territories Project* (Fig. 3,4,5) includes a set of works exploring how places in the arid American West are constructed through the shared narratives and images of exploration. The project uses interactive Websites, films and installations as it suggests how differing modes of writing (e.g. diary, exposition, fiction) and visual representation (e.g. illustration, photography, film) shape the social production of space. The project emphasises user path-making, by which time elements are gathered to construct cinema-like experiences. Choice-making is a condition that once drew me as a student to direct cinema, as characterised by the films of Richard Leacock, the Maysles brothers and Frederick Wiseman, and to ethnographic film, notably to works by Jean Rouch, David MacDougall and Robert Gardner. There are many other kinds of documentary films that are tightly scripted before shooting starts, as the camera commits a preconceived text to image. However, in both direct cinema and much of ethnographic filmmaking, the researcher-maker may have little control over what occurs in front of the lens. Choices must be made in real-time through a social engagement that includes both human and technological participants: the subjects, the filmmaker and the camera and related equipment (notably the tripod, which stands within settings, and the microphone, which probes more closely to gather good sound). The researcher-filmmaker must make choices in filming (and with related tasks of note-taking, audio recording, etc.) that will capture impressions of an occurrence and provide sufficient evidence from which to develop later interpretations. Interactive and scrolling or browser environments may provide

some of the same choice-making processes to users who may, in some cases, also contribute to the works.

Users in these screen-spaces make their paths among the data. They can see how arguments are built out of research materials and can consider what other choices might be made. A critical reader-user can also consider alternatives, which can result in the construction of arguments that contain within them a range of complementary or co-existing interpretations. This structure is ideally suited for ethnographic practices, that so often weave together many points of view and that must take into account the continual evolution of cultural practices and their meanings. It allows researchers to integrate, organise and interpret materials, to reveal their processes, and to build arguments without excluding alternatives. It allows users to engage in this process *along side* the researcher, following a researcher's interpretive process, and comparing it with alternative options.

*Estuary* examines the human development and harbor activities of one of the busiest port districts in the eastern USA, with special attention given to borders and peripheries where social practices breakdown or are transformed; special attention is given to spaces that have been transformed by creative practices and natural decay. The project incorporates original videography and photography of the industrial docklands of the Delaware River to explore how forces of climate change, such as tidal floods, alter expressions of place. Original recordings, from the river's edge and from a kayak, chart an industrial and post-industrial landscape while recordings of ships in motion, lighthouse signals and seasonal change juxtapose expressions of time.

The original recordings are integrated with dramatic imagery recorded with performers and processed for tropic and tonal qualities, and they are also combined with scientific materials including a chemical surface assessment. The project asks what happens when a river, which once may have been seen as a force washing pollutants away, instead is seen as bringing salt and toxic elements inward toward urban populations and natural preserves. Through multi-modal layering and fragmentation, the work challenges conventional dichotomies of montage and continuity as well as those of navigation and mapping.



Fig. 7. Screen-shot from *Estuary*.

Layering original footage on composited, animated panoramic settings challenges conventions of contiguity and continuity, as elements that make up the panorama, such as images of individuals, follow actions at rates shaped by their own narratives and not by a dominant, technological and singular structure of time (as traditionally established by the technological recording and playback devices). Here, the idea is to return social relations to urban (and *always* also natural) spaces through representational

digital technologies while also liberating experiences of these spaces from the authority of the mono-logical and didactic time-space relationships given by single channel or single-form media. The co-existence of differing time and elements is also a dispersal of their authority. For *Estuary*, this allows, hence, for the development of differing and competing projections of a future, one in which a river threatens to reclaim its industrial past. This imagined reclamation (there is also an important real one to take into account) is itself a reconfiguration of social relations and our common participation in the making of the shared spaces of our cities.

Notes

1. This paper includes passages published in Coover 2011(a), 2011(b) and 2012 in which can be found expanded discussions of uses of layering and compositing, visual research and interactive documentary methods.

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