the material turn and interactive documentary: a panel

Edited by Adrian Miles
introduction
Critical theory and philosophy across many fields in the humanities has become awash with what has been characterised as ‘the material turn’. This material turn, which seems to involve varying combinations of what is known as Object Orientated Ontology (Harman), Actor-Network Theory (Latour), process philosophy (Whitehead), speculative realism (Bryant), or agential realism (Barad), emphasises some move toward a posthuman understanding of what the world is, and our relation to it.

Some of these materialist theories seem to be adept for describing and analysing the relation of the social and cultural to the technological. It is in this spirit that many of these materialist theories are being appropriated by an emerging group of media scholars to rethink what media is, and does, from posthuman, technological, and ecological perspectives. In the case of interactive documentary this workshop wants to investigate how, or in what ways, this material turn might matter for how we understand what interactive documentaries are, what they do, and what they might be for.

As Jane Bennett argues:

*the constructivist response to the world also tends to obscure from view whatever thing-power there may be. There is thus something to be said for moments of methodological naivete, for the postponement of a genealogical critique of objects.* (p. 17.)

In this spirit of methodological naivete this pamphlet has emerged from a panel at Visible Evidence XXIV, held in Buenos Aires in 2017. What follows consists of a series of propositions and interrogations of new epistemologies and ontologies for understanding interactive documentary through a materialist lens.

The format of the workshop was for each participant to have five minutes (and ten slides) to make key points or ask key questions as prompts for discussion, debate, and detailing amongst panellists and
audience.

Participants were invited to further develop their thinking in light of the panel. The work, as curated here, is deliberately between the tone of the presentation and a finished article. They are more formal than a panel, and shorter and less refined than an article. In this manner they are part of an ongoing experiment in alternative academic practices and forms that seek to open, critique, and revision scholarship as a black box.

YMMV.

References


Adrian Miles, Melbourne, November 2017.
Judith Aston

the new materialism: human and algorithmic agency within interactive documentary
Slide One is a quote from the introduction to my co-edited anthology *i–Docs: The Evolving Practices of Interactive Documentary* with Sandra Gaudenzi and Mandy Rose. The book contains a number of chapters which bridge the divide between theory and practice to tackle key topics and themes within interactive documentary. Many of the contributors have spoken at the biennial i-Docs symposia, and the book is divided in three sections: “Co-Creation”, “Methods”, and “Future Horizons”. The quote of Slide One confirms that, in curating the i-Docs research group and its associated symposia, Mandy, Sandra and myself are keen for interactive documentary to remain an expansive concept that provides a platform for interrogating diverse forms and embracing a variety of emerging trends. Within these forms and trends I am keen to put people, as opposed to machines, at the centre of the design process and to engage in debate about our evolving relationship with computers that acknowledges a humanist perspective as my starting point. It is within this spirit that I turn my attention here to considering what the material turn, and the concept of the posthuman, has to offer and how this might be inflected within the field of interactive documentary.
Slide Two is from a Twitter post that juxtaposes Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, at the Mobile World World Congress in 2016 with the iconic 1984 television advert that introduced the Apple Macintosh personal computer. Zuckerberg is seen smiling amongst a sea of seated people wearing VR headsets who are unaware of his presence in that moment. This photograph was interpreted by many as having Orwellian overtones, as a warning against what might happen if virtual reality with its isolating tendencies becomes a mainstream medium. Zuckerberg later qualified this image by saying that he was smiling because the audience were engaged in a shared communal experience, which was the opposite of social isolation. However, the comparison I am making here is to the Apple advert because this shows a woman saving humanity from the conformity of George Orwell’s Big Brother. Though never specifically stated, this woman was widely understood to represent Apple with Big brother being IBM, which was why Apple’s tag line in this ad was “1984 won’t be like ’1984”. When combined with Chris Milk’s recent comments (2015) about VR being the ultimate ‘empathy machine’, this image of Zuckerberg troubles me, as I worry about its implications of technological determinism and an overly utopian view of technology as a force for good.
In interactive documentary interest of late has been shifting away from interactivity and towards immersion. Immersive VR has become the next ‘big thing’ that people are trying to build sustainable business models in and for. This move toward immersion is partly a reflection on the current state of technological developments in VR, with the promise of more immersion taking the focus away from interactivity. It is, however, limiting to be thinking only about virtual reality, because augmented reality, mixed reality, and of course artificial intelligence are big players too. Different platforms and creative uses of these technologies offer different combinations of interactivity and immersion and so these ‘affordances’ have to be seen as interrelated and intersecting factors for interactive documentary. I wrote the post in Slide Three after the 2016 iteration of the i–Docs symposium, arguing that it was important for interactive documentary to not be subsumed by our current obsession with virtual reality. Focusing on Janet Murray’s four principals for interaction design (1997): procedural (composed of executable rules), participatory (inviting human action and manipulation of the represented world), encyclopedic (containing very high capacity of information in multiple media formats) and spatial (navigable as an information repository and/or a virtual place) as affordances, I reiterated my humanist perspective and made a plea for interactive documentary to remain expansive and platform agnostic.
Bringing this discussion back to the Internet, my concern with keeping human, as opposed to algorithmic, agency at the centre of its operations has become even more important in light of recent political events within my own country. The debate around foreign interference through social media in the Brexit vote is mounting, and the assertion that Russia used Twitterbots and trolls to post more than 45,000 messages supporting the leave campaign in the run-up to the vote is troubling (Gibbons et al, 2017). There are also forces working against democracy within our own concept of the ‘free press’. In particular the tabloid headline of Slide Four, written in November 2016, was widely criticised at the time for its blatant disrespect for British parliamentary process and the rule of law. It was, however, still deemed to be legal. Whilst there was clear human agency and an identified author at the heart of this headline, irresponsible writing of this nature sets a tone which is anti-democratic. My point here is that in this type of climate, news-aggregating sites are making the situation worse by inviting unidentifiable statistical manipulation. As a result, modern social media institutions can be seen to be fuelling the problem.

On the other side of ‘the pond’ from Britain we have a different take on this debate with Trump and his onslaught against the ‘fake news’ of the American liberal press. Slide Five is from his February 2017 speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington DC, in which he referred to the media as the “opposition party” to his administration, and blamed news organisations for stymieing his agenda. Trump’s notion of the news media as an “enemy of the people” shows no understanding or respect for the role of the free press or for the personal integrity of journalists. This is language more typically used by U.S. leaders to refer to hostile foreign governments or subversive organisations, and it echoes the language of autocrats who seek to minimize dissent. Trump’s desire to shut down criticism as “fake news” can be seen as a move towards the world described by Orwell’s novel Nineteen Eighty–Four. In Orwell’s novel the Ministry of Truth rewrites the past to erase it, and once rewritten it becomes forgotten so that the lie becomes the truth. This obsession with ‘alternative facts’ is therefore a very dangerous turn away from the democratic principles of tolerance and debate.

It troubles me, in relation to my involvement with interactive documentary, that the very tools I want to use to promote diversity and respect for multiple points of view appear to have been hijacked by forces that run counter to this agenda. In relation to this, anthropologist Paul Stoller’s public provocations in the *Huffington Post* are noteworthy. Stoller (2017) states that we need a slow, listening anthropology to counteract the fast culture that surrounds us. His argument is that “in fast culture our on-line connection creates social disconnection….we are flooded with information and yet we seem to become more and more ignorant about the world of politics, culture and social life” (n.p.). Referring to Sherry Turkle’s 2015 *Reclaiming Conversation* he suggests that “in the fast culture of the Age of Trump, perhaps it is time to slow down a bit, engage in conversation and take the time to reclaim our humanity” (n.p.). In Turkle’s words: “We had a love affair with a technology that seemed magical…it worked by commanding our attention and not letting us see anything but what the magicians wanted us to see. Now we are ready to reclaim our attention — for solitude, for friendship, for society” (361).

My response to this dilemma of technology, speed, listening, and the social body has been to come up with the term ‘emplaced interaction’. My intent is to decenter our growing dependence on social media and the potential seduction of virtual environments. I have discussed emplaced interaction in my contribution to the i-docs anthology (2017b), and more recently online (2017a). Emplaced interaction wants to marry the digital with the analogue to create shared experiences that include face-to-face communication and place making as being important to community. When applied to interactive documentary such emplaced interaction offers a strategy which marries the digital with the analogue to create shared experiences at their core. These experiences might come out of long-term engagement with place, or they might be short-term interventions, creating what have been called ‘temporary autonomous zones’ (Bey 1991). With clear resonances with Sherry Turkle’s work, I use emplaced interaction as a strategy which can help to “keep technology in its place” and which works towards ensuring that, in a globalized world, “the Internet, virtual reality and ultimately robots do not take us over” (Aston 2017b, 234).
On the one hand there is Edward Said’s observation that “humanism is the only – I would go so far as saying the final – resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history” (1978, preface). On the other is the challenge of Rosi Braidotti’s ‘critical posthuman stance’ (2016) that asks us to think about what it means to be human in a post-anthropocentric world. This critical posthumanism is a world linked to ‘new materialism’ (Dolphins and Tuin 2012) which acknowledges that things and other living organisms, as well as humans, have agency. Having spent time with Tibetan monks and lived for a year in Java, I am in full agreement that we need to consider the entanglements that human and nonhuman agency brings. This is very much part of my own worldview and I recognise the multi-perspectival and non-hierarchical intentions that lie behind them. My preference, however, is to place these within a responsive and evolving (even reconstructed – Crowley 2011) humanist tradition, as opposed to rejecting humanism outright in favour of posthumanism. This is because, in particular, moving human agency to the periphery in a posthuman world implies that we must make room for a new centre. My concern is with regard to who or what will occupy this new centre (AI and robots perhaps?) and that it could lead to us abnegating our responsibility to seek solutions to the mess that we have created.
Karen Barad’s distinction between interaction and intra-action (1996) is also worthy of consideration. Whereas interaction focuses on the essential independence of separate entities, intra-action focuses on the mutual co-constitution of these entities. In this sense interaction stresses relationships between discrete entities whereas intra-action stresses relationships within inextricably linked entities. Barad argues that if we look at the web of relations that exists around things, this wider context implicates us all in the need to confront common problems. This contribution from new materialism makes a lot of sense to me. It reminds me of a passage from *The Third Policeman*, one of my favourite books (O’Brien 1993), in which a policeman is said to have been riding his bicycle so much that he and it have become one and the same “as a result of the interchanging of the atoms of each of them” (88). O’Brien goes on to say that “when a man lets things go so far that he is more than half a bicycle, you will not see him so much because he spends a lot of his time leaning with one elbow on walls or standing propped by one foot at kerbstones.” (89)
On a less surreal note, Barad contends that intra-action, as a form of ‘agential realism’, gives us a greater sense of collective responsibility and removes the argument that if something doesn’t affect me I don’t need to do anything about it, simply because with agential realism so much affects so much else. Agential realism provides a collective sense of ethics, situated by Barad within posthumanist discourse, from which we could all benefit in these complex and interconnected times. As Paul Stoller argues so coherently in his Huffington Post articles, retreating into nationalism and protectionism cannot work. The question then is how can interactive documentary make a positive contribution? With its emphasis on polyvocality and multi-perspectival points of view, through juxtaposition, non-linearity, and the employment of mixed media modes, interactive documentary has a key role to play. For me, however, keeping human agency at its centre still remains central to this, as we have a collective responsibility to rise to the challenges of the 21st century and to not let the potential for technological dystopias take us over.


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