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Computer Interface as Film: Post-Media Aesthetics of Desktop Documentary

Abstract: This paper explores a recently emerged audiovisual form called *desktop documentary*, an interdisciplinary computer-based variant of the essay film. As a post-media practice, no longer exclusively dependent on the film medium, desktop filmmaking represents a hybrid audiovisual genre entirely conducted in the digital environment by using and exploiting preexisting materials in new contexts while using the advantages of the Internet, widely used software and digital tools. Desktop documentary filmmaking corresponds to the widespread artistic practice of postproduction – a concept introduced by Nicolas Bourriaud signifying a new state of affairs when all texts of culture are already available (mostly as digital objects) and the artist intervenes on existing materials rather than produces artworks *ex nihilo*. Belonging to the tradition of essay film – a cinematic documentary and experimental mode in which moving images and off-screen verbal voice or textual captions establish complex relations – desktop video essays introduce new post-media aesthetics. Similar to the idea of using everyday materials in the artistic context, initially proposed with Duchamp's ready-mades, which unprecedentedly effaced every notion of the style from their avant-garde aesthetics, desktop documentaries often minimize and abolish cinematic stylistic qualities. One of the most significant aspects of desktop documentaries is that the act of film viewing does not differ from common computer user experience: having replaced traditional film screen with the computer interface, the interactive process of computational multitasking and navigation, performed on various digital data and files, becomes the very content of the film. After the historical overview of the phenomenon and general introduction into the post-media theory, selected works of representative desktop documentarists such as Kevin B. Lee and Louis Henderson are analyzed in their deconstructive approach to traditional and digital filmmaking – subversive both formally and politically.

Keywords: aesthetics; desktop documentary; essay film; experimental film; interface; post-media; postproduction; video essay.

Introduction

The advent of the Internet and global transition from analogue to digital production, distribution, and consumption not only affected the film medium but contemporary cinematic practice as well. In recent years and decades, experimental and

avant-garde film- and videomaking modes heavily went through the process of transformation, adapting themselves to digital and computational practices and aesthetics. One of the new forms of experimental filmmaking emerged in this context is *desktop documentary*. Generally following and continuing the tradition of essay film, desktop documentaries represent a hybrid audiovisual genre entirely conducted in the digital environment by utilizing preexisting materials in new contexts while primarily exploiting the Internet, widely used software, and digital tools.

When confronted for the first time with a scene from a desktop documentary, a viewer usually cannot determine nor discern whether he/she is watching a film (that is, a reproduction of a video file) or is it a common browsing and surfing activity performed on the computer. Therefore, at the moment, desktop documentaries could be considered genuinely hyper-realistic, since they induce cognitive and perceptual confusion similar to the one famously experienced at the first screenings of the Lumière brothers' iconic film *The Arrival of a Train* (1896). Today, it would be virtually impossible for this kind of bewilderment to be stimulated with the same classical black-and-white two-dimensional screen. It would have needed to be produced on digital meta-media and reproduced on digital screens, audio-visually and aesthetically resembling, or even replicating our everyday tasks and operations. This is the very issue which all of the desktop documentaries fundamentally question and examine. They explore the paradigmatic shift in media construction of reality when the old platforms of content distribution – not only theatres and TV receivers but also books, newspaper, radio, etc. – have mostly been replaced by the Internet as a primary archive and source of human knowledge and the technology of interactive digital screens. We perceive reality through the 'lenses' and via the 'logic' of a computer interface with its typical simultaneous multitasking and multiscreen activities, and the new variant of the video essay critically investigates such a new social, economic, and cultural paradigm.

Since desktop documentaries, in their appropriation and exploitation of heterogeneous digital data, files and software do not exclusively depend on the materiality and physicality of the film medium, they represent a paradigmatic post-media practice. Therefore, in order to further approach the analysis of the desktop documentary phenomenon, I will first briefly outline the contemporary concept of post-media.

Some notes on post-media

In a text written some years before the global expansion and massive availability of the Internet, Félix Guattari anticipated the potential emergence of a "post-media era", understanding it as a time of "collective-individual reappropriation and interactive use of machines of information, communication, intelligence, art, and culture."¹

¹ Félix Guattari, "Towards a Post-Media Era," trans. Alya Sebt and Clemens Apprich, in *Provocative Alloys: A Post-Media Anthology*, ed. Clemens Apprich et. al. (Lüneburg and London: Post-Media Lab, Mute Books, 2013), 27.

During the last couple of decades, many theoretical books and papers on *post-media* and *post-medium* have been published: Rosalind Krauss – *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (1999), Peter Weibel – “Die postmediale Kondition” (2004), and Lev Manovich – “Post-media Aesthetics” (2001), to name just a few representative examples. Their theories range from conceptualizations of the formal specificity of the new medium to broad cultural investigations of a new socio-economic state of affairs, but for the following discussion several theses developed by the latter author would be particularly relevant.

According to Lev Manovich, the computer interface constituted a universal working space wherein, for the first time in the history, identical tools – i.e. digital commands, such as ‘copy’, ‘cut’, ‘paste’, etc. – were equally employed in completely disparate art disciplines – and different professions as well. One of the unprecedented key aesthetical innovations formed through the synthesis of a personal computer and the Internet was “*multimedia document*”, defined as “something which *combines* and mixes different media of text, photography, video, graphics, sound.”² The traditional “*typology of mediums*”, grounded in their respective material distinctiveness (classical dichotomous difference between *spatial* and *temporal arts*), appeared to be theoretically, discursively, and epistemologically obsolete and inadequate to explain novel artistic practices.³ Post-media artworks of today transgress the boundaries between diverse media, disciplines, and genres, fluidly presenting themselves as heterogeneous objects, or assemblages, on digital platforms, inevitably participating in the shaping and dissemination of existing knowledge, archived throughout the World Wide Web, while permanently stressing constitutive contribution of the recipient, or user,⁴ for the decoding of the message. As Manovich claims, the role of the new aesthetics of post-media is, among other tasks, to “describe how a cultural object *organizes data* and *structures user’s experience of this data*.”⁵

In the era of dominance of computer technologies, multimedia platforms, and global networking, the filmmaking practice, and experimental and avant-garde cinema in particular, in different ways corresponds to the new digital standards, ranging from pure negation (as is the case with those committed individuals who still passionately work with and continue to explore the limits of the analogue film medium) to acceptance, albeit not without strong critical intervention.⁶ One possible response to the contemporary challenges of the post-media condition, belonging rather to the latter type, is represented by desktop documentaries.

² Lev Manovich, “Post-media Aesthetics,” Manovich, http://manovich.net/content/04-projects/032-post-media-aesthetics/29_article_2001.pdf, 3, acc. February 1, 2019.

³ *Ibid.*, 1–2. As a matter of fact, Manovich associates this obsolescence of media categories to somewhat earlier experimental, at the time highly unconventional, art forms from the last third of the twentieth century, like installations, performance, intermedia, conceptual art, etc.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6–7, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ For an interesting debate on this topic, see: Flo Jacobs et. al., “Roundtable on Digital Experimental Filmmaking,” *October* 137 (Summer 2011): 51–68.

Desktop documentary: essay film in the era of multitasking and multiscreens

During the last several years, the desktop documentary format established itself as an exemplary post-media artistic or cultural practice. Kevin B. Lee – who coined the name for this new experimental genre⁷ – and his colleagues at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago involved themselves in a filmmaking practice “which uses screen capture technology to treat the computer screen as both a camera lens and a canvas. The desktop documentary seeks both to depict and question the ways we explore the world through the computer screen.”⁸ Developed in the post-historical time when the exploitation of available materials became a significant operation of contemporary art, these films represent individual investigations of different social and cultural topics, conducted via most available tools of our digital world. In short, desktop documentaries are “[c]harting the multitude of the Internet through the desktop interface,”⁹ acknowledging “the internet’s role not only as a boundless repository of information but as a primary experience of reality.”¹⁰

Genre-wise, the desktop documentary is mostly similar to *essay film*. For decades, essay film has been a truly hybrid filmmaking mode – a “centaur”, as Phillip Lopate calls it¹¹ – on the threshold between several film genres and registers, exploring the personal, idiosyncratic viewpoint of its author, while unconventionally combining and confronting spoken or subtitled commentary with moving images and pictures.¹² While desktop documentaries continue the cinematic lineage inaugurated with essay film, they also utilize a technique notably explored in *found footage*¹³ filmmaking: appropriation, modification, and recontextualization of existing audiovisual materials. However, found footage generally assumes the employment of only one type of material – namely, film or celluloid – whereas computer-based desktop documentaries use diverse digital objects (video clips, audio recordings, photographs, texts) as well as digital software (programs and applications).

⁷ Wanda Strauven, “The Screenic Image: Between Verticality and Horizontality, Viewing and Touching, Displaying and Playing,” in *Screens: From Materiality to Spectatorship: A Historical and Theoretical Reassessment*, ed. Dominique Chateau and José Moure (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 151.

⁸ Catherine Grant, “On Desktop Documentary (or, Kevin B. Lee Goes Meta!),” *Film Studies For Free*, last modified April 6, 2015, <https://filmstudiesforfree.blogspot.com/2015/04/on-desktop-documentary-or-kevin-b-lee.html>, acc. February 15, 2019.

⁹ Emile Zile, “Mining the Cloud,” last modified May 23, 2016, <https://emilezile.com/tag/www>, acc. February 15, 2019.

¹⁰ Kevin B. Lee, “Transformers: The Premake (A Desktop Documentary),” *Vimeo*, last modified May 5, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/94101046>, acc. February 15, 2019.

¹¹ Phillip Lopate, “In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film,” *The Threepenny Review* 48 (Winter 1992): 19–22.

¹² However, in his text “Video essay: The essay film – some thoughts of discontent” (2013), Kevin B. Lee questions whether the explicit voiceover comment is necessary for essay film. See footnote no. 25.

¹³ For an introduction into the found footage filmmaking, see for example: William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York City: Anthology Film Archives, 1993).

Desktop documentary filmmaking thus corresponds to the widespread artistic practice of *postproduction* – a concept introduced by Nicolas Bourriaud signifying a new state of affairs in the art world when all texts of culture are already available, and the artist chooses, selects, and intervenes on existing materials rather than produces artworks *ex nihilo*.¹⁴ This practice was initiated more than a century ago, with Duchamp's ready-mades, which acknowledged everyday objects and commercial products as possible artistic materials and, potentially, finished artworks;¹⁵ however, now instead of physical objects, heterogeneous digital data are exploited. When it comes to the art of filmmaking, common phases of the traditional film production process such as scriptwriting, direction, and editing have been replaced with the broad practice of postproduction. One no longer needs to utilize camera and its lenses, since – hypothetically – all of the images (static as well as moving images) are available in the Internet environment, ready to be appropriated and manipulated. Desktop documentaries, exclusively produced on the computer, strategically and tactically explore this all-pervasiveness of the Internet and unstoppable, inflationary circulation of digital data. The following comparative table sums up key technological distinctiveness of the desktop documentary format in opposition to essay film:

Analog essay film	Digital desktop documentary
production	postproduction
filmed footage	found footage
filming objects or referents	appropriating digital data
camera	screen capture
classical montage, editing	digital software operations
movie theater or television	computer monitor or mobile screen

In comparison to commercial and art-house film cinematography, which is strongly anchored in the art of painting and photography, desktop documentaries radically reduce cinematic aesthetic features to their mere formal and technical, non-aestheticized appearance. What is shown on the screen literally resembles those digital multitasking activities we commonly perform and experience in everyday life, both in professional work and leisure, but now deeply questioning our notion of realism and problematizing the role of representation in contemporary art. In doing so, desktop documentaries not only acknowledge and embrace the advantages of the computer and digital technologies but also their distinctive technical limitations, transforming them into particular *digital and data aesthetics*: for instance, a reproduction issue, malfunction commonly known as *glitch*, is deliberately generated and randomly

¹⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2005).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

distributed throughout the films.¹⁶ But what is particularly shocking and outrageous is the fact that these films only simulate the interactive user experience, for, in effect, nothing is interactive, given that the audio-video files are merely reproduced in their original form¹⁷ – being a *simulacrum of computer interface*. As a consequence, desktop documentaries challenge and undermine one of the most widespread myths of today – namely, the *myth of interactivity*, critically deconstructed by Manovich in his earlier theoretical writings.¹⁸

Of course, there are different uses, or different types, of desktop documentaries, ranging from informative fan-made reviews of popular and mass content to highly experimental digital forms.¹⁹ What distinguishes the latter mode of desktop documentaries from other types of standard digital video essays is not their *anti-representational* approach (common in abstract avant-garde cinema) but rather *hyper-representational* bewilderment (paradigmatic for present-day multiscreen multitasking).

In order to illustrate previous theses, I will analyze two experimental films of the two representative desktop documentarists: Kevin B. Lee and Louis Henderson.

Case study: desktop documentaries of Kevin B. Lee and Louis Henderson

The first image is that of a word processor (Apple's TextEdit) where the very title of the film is being typed (we can hear the sound of typing fingers). After the program closes itself we are confronted with a computer desktop (even personal data are visible, like a folder named "Farocki"). The mouse cursor chooses a browser from the toolbar and opens it. The user types "YouTube.com", searches for the fourth sequel of the *Transformers* movie franchise, and opens the trailer in a new window.

These are the opening scenes of Kevin B. Lee's desktop documentary *Transformers: The Premake* (2014). Taking as its primary referent *Transformers*, a recent Hollywood blockbuster, Lee's 25 minutes short film "turns 355 YouTube videos into a critical investigation of the global big-budget film industry, amateur video making, and the political economy of images."²⁰ Using many of the *Transformers 4* behind-the-scenes materials, at the time when the latter movie was still not finished, and transposing them in a new, critical context, Kevin B. Lee created a highly deconstructive video essay of today – and officially introduced the genre of desktop documentary.

¹⁶ Of course, computer based aesthetics and imagery already found their place in the earlier experimental film and video work: for example, during the last decades of his filmmaking practice, Chris Marker started to examine and employ computer graphics and multiscreen interactivity, whereas Harun Farocki similarly incorporated video games images and iconography into his found footage videos.

¹⁷ Strauven, "The Screenic Image..." 152.

¹⁸ Lev Manovich, *The Language of the New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 55–61.

¹⁹ For the different types of video essays, see: Veronika Pelle, "A new genre in art education: The power of video essays," <http://www.managing-art.eu/uploads/media/article/0001/01/8677431e-c629899a5320471388e0b07204f2674f.pdf>, 3–6, acc. February 12, 2019.

²⁰ Lee, "Transformers: The Premake (A Desktop Documentary)."

On the formal level, the use of multiple, overlapping screens and screen-within-a-screen technique in *Transformers: The Premake* inevitably induces confusion during the viewing of the film. It is especially emphasized in one of the final scenes featuring an intense sequence of explosions – paradigmatic for Hollywood blockbuster aesthetics – followed by an abundance of small browser windows which cover the screen surface as if a computer bug has occurred. As in the famous Fredric Jameson's explanation of the novelty of postmodern culture and postmodernist art, all of the screens should be perceived *simultaneously*²¹ – which is, obviously, a rationally impossible endeavor; as a result, Lee's film operates not only as a video essay explicit in its arguments but also on the level of pure audiovisual affect. Nevertheless, *Transformers: The Premake* includes several political references such as the following: the film depicts the first spectator filmed commercial, tackling the current invisible mode of exploitation called “fan labor;”²² it uses the footage of video interviews made with small salesmen from mainland China, in which they express their opinion about the filming of *Transformers 4* in their city and its possible long-term effect on tourism of the region; it shows how the bankrupted city of Detroit is now being exploited as a filming location of big-budget movie productions.

It must be stressed that the important audiovisual *content* of Lee's film is not only preexisting footage related to the production of *Transformers*, but also *visual footprints* of a present-day users' digital activities: the process of writing a comment of a YouTube clip is represented; a video watched online is fast-forwarded; at a certain moment, the screen is minimized and in the digital act of breaking the fourth wall we could see the editing software (Adobe Premiere Pro), etc. This is essentially a voyeuristic practice for the screen mediated, 21st century: we watch what the eyes of the author/filmmaker observe – though, what they see is already represented on a screen (within a screen). Because of this strategy, *Transformers: The Premake* and other desktop documentaries could be considered truly contemporary *metafilms*, i.e. films, or videos, which self-reflectively comment upon their own production process – a process which, in this case, *performatively* unfolds before our very eyes.

Similar to Kevin B. Lee's film, Louis Henderson's 15-minute desktop documentary *All That Is Solid* (2014) starts with computer operations performed in real-time. In Google Translate software, which completely covers the screen, the following poetic words – constituting a possible desktop documentary manifesto – are simultaneously translated from English into French: “This is a film that takes place, in between a hard place, a hard drive, and an imaginary, a soft space – the cloud that holds my data, and in the soft grey matter, contained within the head.”²³

²¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 31.

²² Abigail De Kosnik, “Interrogating ‘Free’ Fan Labor,” *Spreadable Media*, <https://spreadablemedia.org/essays/kosnik/#.XGkphNQrKHs>, acc. February 16, 2019.

²³ Louis Henderson, “All That Is Solid – Trailer,” *Vimeo*, last modified August 5, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/102666180>, acc. February 15, 2019.

In comparison to Lee's *Transformers*, Henderson's film is more openly and radically political, explicitly exploring post- and neocolonial issues in the context of the digital era. While showing what is nowadays done with obsolete computers disposed on the coast of West Africa, the author sketches a fragmentary map of the history of colonization of that particular region: he navigates through the Wikipedia article "Colony of the Gold Coast", reproduces an instructional video "I will speak English", available on "Colonial Film" website, and examines the text "How to Access The E-commerce Gold Mine Of Africa." In Henderson's film, the imagery of modern physical exploitation is juxtaposed to the optimistic discourse of technological and IT progress. We can hear Steve Jobs' quote on, firstly, the advent of a PC as an all-encompassing digital hub and, secondly, on the cloud technology as an immense worldwide repository. The issues of digital storage and file usages are directly addressed through the monologue, spoken off-screen, that starts with a question: "Where is the Microsoft cloud?" Using the technique of parallel montage and double superimposition, Henderson confronts the supposed transcendence of Cloud technology against the immanence of physical, manual labor, showing the non-extinguishable necessity of material, *solid* objects. Many times throughout the film, a conceptual relation between traditional mining and archeological exploration of the Internet is established, as in one of the later scenes, shown from the first person point of view, which simulates passing through an abstract, virtual 3D world and through a mine. Typical of desktop documentaries aesthetics, the film abounds with diverse digital materials, but is also permeated with occasional theoretical references: for instance, one incompletely shown quote from the text of Hito Steyerl "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" (first published in *e-flux* in 2013) says "slowly turning the world into a multi-layered motherboard",²⁴ while discarded computer motherboards are represented. The film ends with a series of low-resolution pixels and visual glitches (some of them expanding across the whole screen), blinking for some time, finally accompanied by the title.

With *All That Is Solid* Henderson managed to create a relevant synthesis of socially engaged topic and radical formal experiment, showing us how both 'content' and 'form' of a video essay could be treated equally politically. In such a way, both Lee's and Henderson's film demonstrate the possibility of desktop filmmaking as a genuine *critical* practice which intervenes in the general body of knowledge.

Conclusion

Wholly conceived in the post-media environment – wherein analog media was replaced with universal digital interface and camera was discarded in favor of data appropriation – desktop documentaries represent a new mode of postproduction practice, in Bourriaud's sense of the word. Since their source is based upon preexisting

²⁴ Hito Steyerl, "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" in *circulacionismo / circulationism* (México, D.F.: MUAC, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2014), 34.

materials, they always explicitly establish intertextual, or hypertextual, relations with other films and videos as well as heterogeneous texts of culture, producing a complex interdiscursive network of information and knowledge, as previous analysis has shown. In the process, each desktop documentary necessarily makes a general comment, i.e. *metacommentary*, on the hybrid medium it uses. Consequently, these films, as was the case with Kevin B. Lee, are potent enough to synthesize two traditionally opposed and separated modes, or registers: namely, the position of film critic and the position of filmmaker.²⁵ As a new – *updated* – version of the essay film, desktop documentaries tackle the role of cinema and video art in the world of today and question the possible function of aesthetics in the dominance of post-media – which is a question always tightly related to politics.

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²⁵ Kevin B. Lee, “Video essay: The essay film – some thoughts of discontent,” BFI, last modified May 22, 2017, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/deep-focus/video-essay-essay-film-some-thoughts/>, acc. February 15, 2019.

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