

# POLYPHONIC DOCUMENTARY

## Research, Production and Development

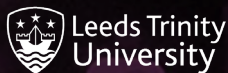
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## Acknowledgements

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## About SIGN

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The Screen Industries Growth Network (SIGN) is a unique, business-facing initiative supporting the TV, film and games industries in Yorkshire and the Humber. SIGN aims to make this region the UK's centre for digital creativity, and a model of diverse and inclusive activity. In order to do this, SIGN connects companies, support agencies and universities through a programme of training, business development, research and evaluation.

SIGN is a £6.4M project, starting in Summer 2020, and funded by Research England, the University of York, and its partners. The University of York leads the initiative, working with Screen Yorkshire and eight other Yorkshire universities. An extensive network of collaboration ensures that SIGN is equipped to deliver maximum impact across the region.

Report published, 2023.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report gives an overview on ‘Polyphonic Documentary’<sup>1</sup> a research project convened by Aston and Odorico which is part of the wider i-Docs initiative<sup>2</sup>. The aim of the project is to explore, across theory and practice, the potential of interactive documentary to generate interdisciplinary dialogue and exchange in a context of climate change and increasing polarization. The project has attracted a hundred participants from within the i-Docs community across multiple continents. We have held a number of on-line meetings to discuss theoretical ideas linked to readings related to the topic and we have convened two rounds of practical interventions.

The SIGN funding allowed us to conclude our first round of practical interventions and progress to the next stage of our work together, which was to explore themes and issues raised through a further round of small and focused practice-led projects. We gathered film clips from those members of the polyphonic community who chose to participate, and we collated them into a series of interventions using the interactive software tools (industry-standard), Korsakow ([www.korsakow.tv](http://www.korsakow.tv)) and Stornaway ([www.stornaway.io](http://www.stornaway.io)).

The aim of this practice-led approach is to stimulate further discussion and debate to help develop practical skills, at a time when we believe that we urgently need to decolonise our received understandings of narrative and story. We believe that the non-linear and multiperspectival properties of tools like Korsakow and Stornaway offer much potential for questioning the dominance of dramatic narrative structures within mainstream media. Starting with Bakhtin’s theories on polyphony, we are interrogating this from different cultural perspectives as well as through the lens of quantum thinking.

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1. [polyphonicdocumentary.com](http://polyphonicdocumentary.com)  
2. [i-docs.org](http://i-docs.org)

# INTRODUCTION AND THEORY

Besides identifying ‘polyphony’ as a specific (and alternative) form of documentary filmmaking in the field of film and media theory and practice - our project’s aim is that a systematic study of polyphony through the use of interactive documentary tools could help to stimulate dialogue and multi-perspectival understanding around conflicting ideologies, polarization and key issues of the day, including global crises such as the climate emergency. As a way of being in the world that we deem to be increasingly necessary for our survival in the 21st century, we believe that our project does its bit towards enabling multi-perspectival thinking within an interdisciplinary context.

Whilst also acknowledging and working with polyphony’s origins as a musical construct, we use Bakhtin (1895–1975) as a starting point for our theoretical framework. Increasingly recognized as one of the major literary theorists of the twentieth century, he defined polyphony within the novel as “a plurality of unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Bakhtin 1984; 6)<sup>3</sup>, as a creative approach and method based on the concept of plurality and on a multitude of perspectives. Bakhtin’s aspiration was for these voices is to be in equal dialogue with the author and with each other, so that every voice is (and feels) included. Building on this, we position polyphony as a cognitive and creative engagement of a plurality of voices that converge together towards a common objective led by a dialogical process. We are interrogating Bakhtin’s ideas to examine their relevance to contemporary documentary practice, with particular reference to digital new media and to non-linear interactive forms.

Examples of the questions that we are asking about Bakhtin’s work within the project are as follows: How do his ideas about the polyphonic novel as a single authored, fixed construct fit with current debates about co-creation and emergence? Do his ideas open up ways to break down binaries and open up multiperspectival thinking? How do they link to contemporary thought around cross-cultural approaches to narrative and story, quantum theory, relationality and uncertainty? In what contexts might these ideas be helpful and how can insights gained from this work be best applied within industry-based contexts? How, for example, might this be a means through which to open-up new forms of expression and approaches to narrative and story which can help the industry to be more inclusive and more diverse?

This emphasis on multiple perspectives, as well as multiple voices, is key to the way in which we are thinking about polyphony within the documentary field

3. Bakhtin’s book: ‘Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics’, was originally published in 1929 in Leningrad under the title ‘Problems of Dostoevsky’s Creative Art’ but was re-published with significant additions under the new title in 1963 in Moscow. The book was first translated into English in 1973 by R. William Rotsel but this version is now out of print. Caryl Emerson’s 1984 translation is the version used in our project.

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in this project. The idea is to explore how interactive documentary as a method can help to encourage engagement with different points of view and stimulate dialogue around the conflicting attitudes, values and approaches around which society is organised and constructed. For Bakhtin, this could be achieved by putting characters into dialogue with each other and with the author within the fixed structure of the written novel. Polyphony in this context is the opposite of monologism, in which the characters are there to serve the point of view of the author or director, ultimately creating a unity of perspectives as opposed to dialogue between perspectives.

We are not saying that monologism is necessarily a negative thing, more that the two offer different strategies which serve different purposes. It should also be noted that these ideas have already been applied in a few instances to the fixed structure of uni-sequential documentary film as consumed in a cinema, on television or indeed on the internet<sup>4</sup>. In terms of polyphony and interactive documentary, however, the assemblage and juxtapositional aspects of multiple windows on a computer screen bring new possibilities for polyphony and dialogism. It is these possibilities, along with the more multilayered and open-ended database structures which computers can afford, that we are currently exploring through this project. Given our belief that the role of authorship (whether individual or collective) within these evolving polyphonic forms continues to be a key consideration, we very much consider Bakhtin's thoughts on this to be of ongoing relevance.

Bakhtin expanded on this idea of the polyphonic novel by linking dialogism to three main pillars: heteroglossia, carnival and aesthetics. These are three concepts at the basis of our theoretical and practical models.

- **Heteroglossia** involves allowing the characters to speak in their own vernacular without them becoming subservient to a dominant discourse. In this sense, the author relinquishes control at key points to let the characters in the novel speak for themselves. However, everything that the characters say and do is there to serve the author's overarching exploration of an idea, albeit from a variety of different perspectives. This is important because it gives the author agency in putting the polyphonic novel in the service of promoting dialogue around ideas and concepts of their choosing.
- **Carnival** involves the creation of an alternative, festive and positive social space, characterised by freedom, equality, dialogue and abundance. During carnival, rank and class is abolished and everyone is seen as equal. Bakhtin saw the carnival as being based on the spirit of laughter, creating a space for shared understanding in which conflicting and discordant points of view can co-exist in a constructive way. So the whole approach with our project is to try to make it carnivalesque, fun, creative, playful and as non-hierarchical as possible.
- **Aesthetics**, Bakhtin's focus was on the aesthetics of the creative process as a whole - on the activity of the author who creates and not on the object. He was concerned with how humans give form to their experiences and how they shape them into an object. Bakhtin's approach to aesthetics within literary criticism, which he started writing about in the late 1920s, was well ahead of its time. It was based not only on classic categories such as the aesthetic object or the aesthetic values (truth, beauty etc.) but also on the relations between humans in space and time -

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4. Michael Chanan and Lee Salter's documentary film "Secret City" (2012) about the influence of the Corporation of London over British economic policy is a good example of this.

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our relationships with other persons, objects, events in the world and nature. He helped to shape an understanding of aesthetics as an activity with which humans engage in order to shape perception and experience. This fed into further work which in turn had an influence on what is now commonly called the 'relational turn'.

As previously mentioned, Bakhtin is our starting point which has led us to incorporate other theoretical approaches as well. For example, in order to move away from the extremism that dramatic narrative so often promotes, we have been looking at Foucault's work on heterotopias (Foucault 1984), at more rhizomatic structures and to Deleuze and Guattari's work on ethico-aesthetic kindness towards the other (Guattari 1995). Ethico-aesthetic kindness is a mindset and approach that is defined by an inherent openness towards the future, that does not prefigure in advance how life is or should be. Furthermore, our latest theoretical approach introduced into the project is metamodernism, as articulated here in a recent publication on the project:

"Whilst the work that we are doing is constantly evolving, the whole point being to see how it might shift our understanding

of narrative possibilities, metamodernism does seem to be a key concept that is framing this process. Metamodernism's resistance to binary oppositions and replacement theories mean that this way of thinking can break from looking at indigenous knowledge, modernism and post-modernism as a linear progression. It also opens up a multi-civilisational approach in which Western Universalism, for example, can be brought into dialogue with other cultural traditions, such as Indian Dharma, without the one needing to reject or subsume the other. The spatial and non-linear, as opposed to sequential and linear, configurations that are possible with interactive documentary have the potential to facilitate the development of new understandings of complexity and ambiguity, and to make these seem less threatening in these uncertain times." (Aston 2022, 16).

Metamodernism, with its principles of mutability, complexity, oscillation, relationality and felt experience helps us to identify a more complete theoretical model which can bring insights from Bakhtin's three pillars into a contemporary polyphonic documentary context. The below diagram illustrates how we have begun to do this.

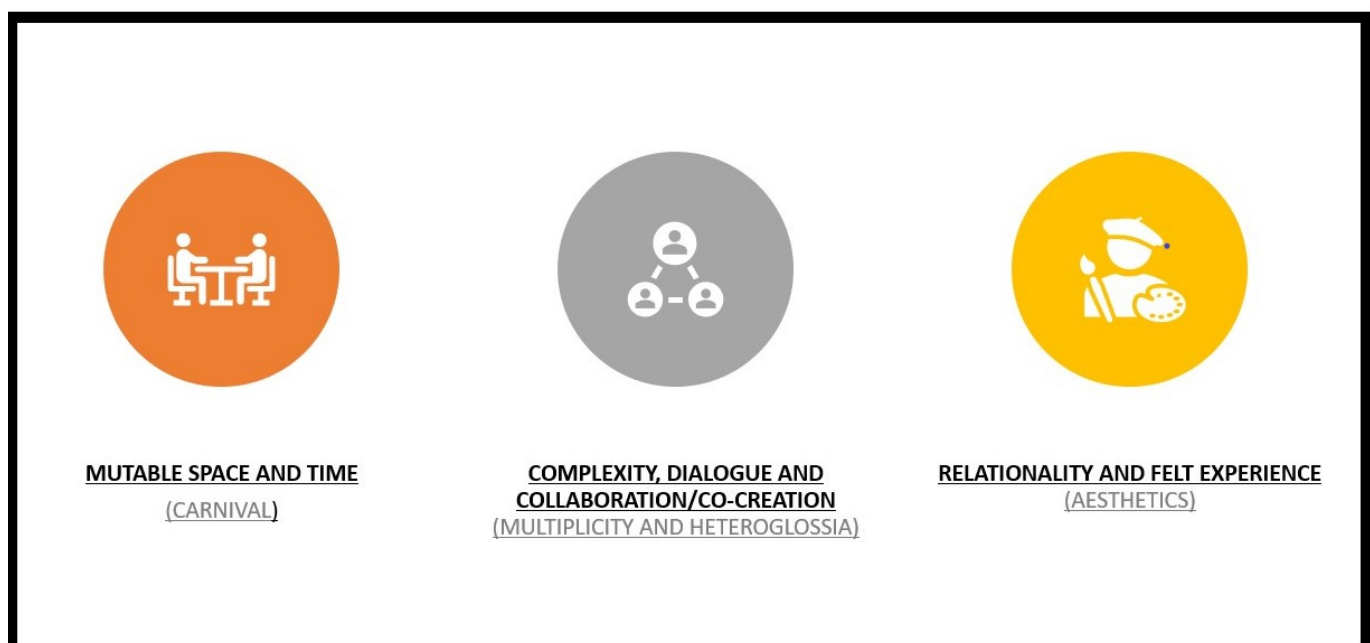


Image: Polyphonic model (Aston and Odorico, 2023).

# RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The core vision of our Polyphonic Documentary Project is to foster a co-creative and democratic environment, where Aston and Odorico assume the role of orchestrators, while striving to ensure inclusivity and active participation from all involved.

To actualise this approach, we established a Polyphonic Documentary channel, on the social media app Discord. This channel serves as a hub for exchanging ideas, sharing ongoing projects, and engaging in broader readings related to our endeavor. Additionally, we have organised and run regular meetings via Zoom to facilitate dynamic discussions and collaborations. Currently, our Discord channel boasts an impressive community of approximately one hundred participants. Within this community, we have curated specific channels dedicated to general discussions, explorations of tools and practices, and an engaging reading group dedicated to the development of the theoretical model. Our participants are scholars, media practitioners and members of the screen industry, many of whom have been active in the i-Docs community for a number of years. They come from more than twenty different countries across Europe, Asia, Australasia and the Americas.

Our ‘practice’ journey began in June 2021 with the theme, “What does polyphony mean to you?”. We invited contributors to participate by submitting between three to five clips, each no longer than 30 seconds, captured using simple mobile phones or low-tech devices. These clips served as individual responses to the polyphony theme, adding depth and richness to the collective narrative we were building. The majority of these recordings were captured using our mobile phones. Our primary goal was not to create meticulously polished media products, but rather to initiate interventions that would spark meaningful discussions within our collaborative community. These initial interventions served as stepping stones, providing us with valuable insights that would pave the way for subsequent interventions, each building upon the knowledge and experiences gained from the collective exploration and reflection. Around 30 contributors took part in this first round of

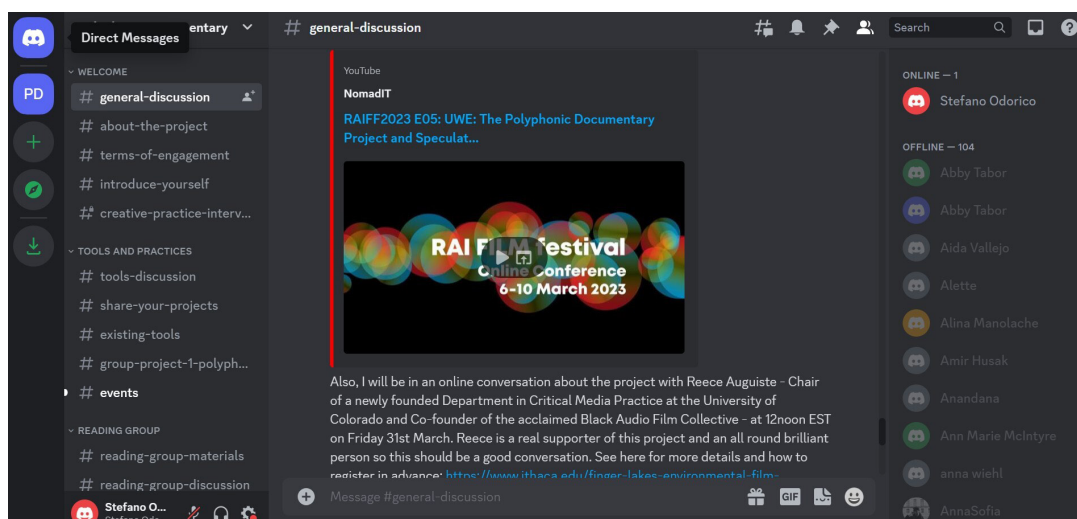


Image: Community on Discord.



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practical interventions.

We posted the results on our project website<sup>5</sup> with some accompanying analysis and reflections in March and June 2022. We then invited all of the contributors to a follow up meeting on Zoom to discuss the outcome and decide what theme to develop next. The funding from the Screen Industries Growth Network (SIGN) enabled us to conclude this first series of interventions and to launch a new theme of “extreme heat” (selected in collaboration with the community) drawing inspiration from last summer’s (2022) record-breaking heat and the intense ideological polarization prevalent in society. With the theme set, we gathered more submitted clips and collated them into an online repository. To ensure ethical practices, we obtained consent forms from all contributors, granting us permission to remix and utilize their content within the group. This second theme also attracted around 30 contributors who, like for the first iteration, submitted between three to five clips each (30 seconds max).

Encouraging participants to form smaller groups, we tasked them with working together, engaging with the materials in

diverse and imaginative ways. We ran regular meetings, engaging participants through Discord and, as the summer months turned to September, we organised two workshops, providing a conducive environment for individuals to experiment with the cutting-edge tools and methodologies that we had developed. The workshops were facilitated by Ru Howe and Florian Talhofer, who introduced the group to the tools they have been developing: Stornaway and Korsakow respectively. Each tool offers its own unique approach to the creative process. Stornaway excels in branched narratives, while Korsakow is algorithmically driven and truly non-linear.

The beauty of this initiative lies in its diversity of outcomes. Each subgroup responded uniquely to the same set of materials. Some embraced the clips as catalysts for transformative and relational thinking, freeing themselves from the constraints of conventional logic to explore new ideas and possibilities. Others adopted a more curated approach, crafting poetic and visually striking pieces that resonated with emotional depth.

In the spirit of true polyphony, Florian Thalhofer also captured the essence of

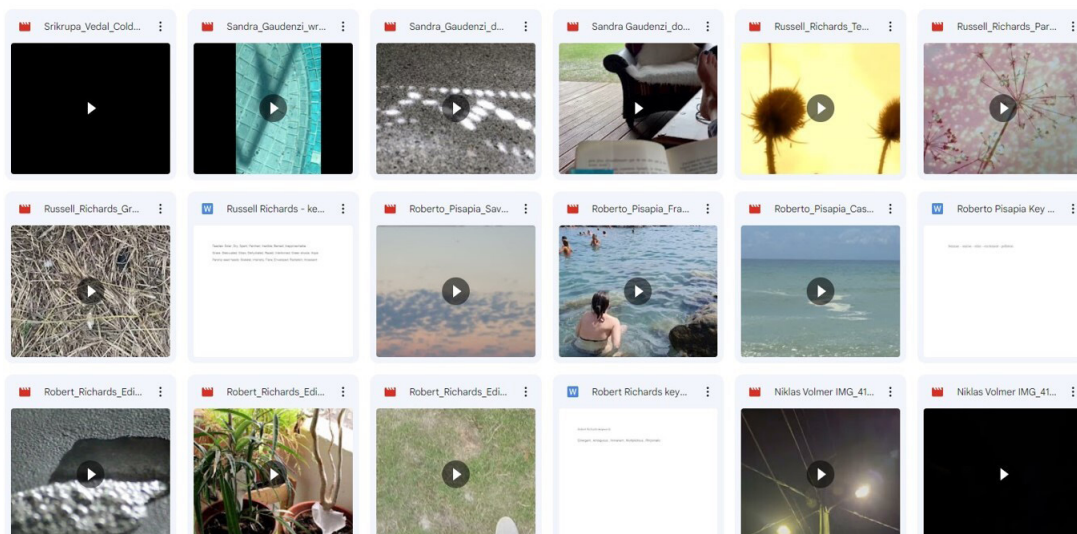


Image: Repository of clips from participants.

5. [polyphonicdocumentary.com](https://polyphonicdocumentary.com)

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our research conversations on Zoom, transforming them into a Korsakow project called *polymeet*<sup>6</sup>. This dialogic approach added another layer of interest, weaving together the different approaches and perspectives that emerged throughout the co-creative process.

Indeed, our exploration of polyphonic form as a modality of knowing and doing has been an engaging and enlightening journey. As with any collaborative endeavor, challenges have arisen. Navigating the intricate interplay of various voices and visions demands sensitivity and openness. Balancing individual agency with collective cohesion presents an ongoing task, ensuring that all participants feel empowered to contribute authentically and that the collective output remains harmonious.

The co-creative process also raises questions about how different perspectives can be integrated effectively, given their unique takes on the subject matter. Striving for inclusivity and equitable representation amid diverse viewpoints demands careful navigation. However, it is within these challenges that the true power of polyphony shines through, as the collective intelligence and creative synergy generated propel us towards innovative solutions and profound insights.

In conclusion, our exploration of polyphony as a co-creative process has opened up new avenues of understanding and artistic expression. As we continue on this dynamic path, we remain committed to embracing the complexities and challenges, recognizing them as essential elements that enrich the fabric of our collaborative endeavor. Through this polyphonic journey, we aim to cultivate a deeper sense of collective wisdom and mutual appreciation, showcasing the transformative potential of collaboration and creativity in shaping a more enlightened and interconnected world.



Image: *Musings on Heat* by Karen Boswall (2023).

The research methodology for this project is collaborative and practice-led, involving an action-based iterative process of planning, doing, reviewing and concluding. Furthermore, from a more practical and developmental perspective, we believe that by exploring alternative narrative approaches achievable through polyphony, and by bringing these two authoring tools into dialogue within our project (Stornaway and Korsakow), we also aim to contribute to the knowledge base, skillsets, and tools available to the screen industries.

6. <http://polymeet.korsakow.tv/>

# PROJECT'S OUTPUTS AND DISSEMINATION

- The project is fully accessible through its website: <https://polyphonicdocumentary.com/>
- We have created a number of practical prototypes which we are currently in the process of publishing on the website.
- The project's findings supported by SIGN have been presented at three major conferences: Interactive Film and Media Conference (June 2023): <https://journals.library.torontomu.ca/index.php/InteractiveFilmMedia/IFM2023>; Digital Storytelling Conference (June 2023): <https://www.montgomerycollege.edu/events/digital-storytelling-conference-2023/index.html>; RAI Film festival 2023 Online Conference: <https://raifilm.org.uk/online-conference-visual-anthropology-and-speculative-futures/><sup>7</sup>
- We also delivered a face-to-face to face workshop at the RAI Film Festival 2023 in Bristol: <https://festival.raifilm.org.uk/page/experiments-in-polyphonic-documentary/>
- We delivered a lecture for the virtual lecture series II of the project: DiD – Das Dokumentarische im Digitalen, coordinated by Dr. Anna Wiehl (University of Bayreuth): <https://did.avinus.org/videos-of-the-virtual-lecture-series-ii/><sup>8</sup>
- We delivered a keynote: “Multiperspectival Thinking: Polyphonic Documentary as a Method for Co-creation”, for the ‘Film & Screen Media Research Seminar Series’, University College Cork, Ireland. <https://www.ucc.ie/en/fmt/film/news/dr-stefano-odorico---multiperspectival-thinking-polyphonic-documentary-as-a-method-for-co-creation-film--screen-media-research-seminar-series-mon-10-oct-400-pm.html>
- We have created an interactive project that captures the essence of our research conversations on Zoom (created by Florian Thalhofer): <http://polymeet.korsakow.tv/>
- We have published two articles on the project: Aston, Judith (2022). “Interactive Documentary: Re-setting the Field,” *Interactive Film and Media Journal*, v.2, n°4 (Fall): 7-18; Aston, Judith and Stefano Odorico. ‘INTERACTIVE DOCUMENTARY. Its History and Future as a Polyphonic Form.’ In *Interactive Documentary Decolonizing Practice-Based Research*, edited by Kathleen M. Ryan, David Staton (New York: Routledge, March 2022)

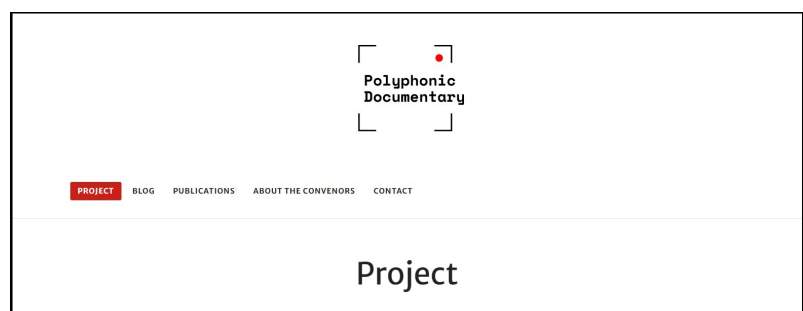


Image: The project website: <https://polyphonicdocumentary.com/>

7. The recording of this presentation is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnbF3vL0Lls&t=2s>

8. The recording of this lecture is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLZMQTMHBKA>

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- The project also mentioned in the preface that we were invited to write for an edited collection: *Constructions of the Real: Intersections of Documentary-Based Film Practice and Theory* (Artwork Scholarship: International Perspectives in Education), by Christine Rogers, Kim Munro, Liz Burke, Catherine Gough-Brady, Intellect Books (2023).

# CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on our research and on our collaborative practice, it feels urgent for us to put digital interactive tools into the service of generating new modes for co-creating collective, non-anthropocentric and sustainable approaches to navigating the future. We believe that key to this is making shifts within ourselves that prioritise equity and justice and challenge our own biases in a decolonizing context. These tools enable us to engage with complexity and uncertainty, creating narratives that are not dominated by causality and closure.

In essence, what our tools and processes enable is an ability to embrace uncertainty which is not rooted in fear or tension but is instead founded upon a relational way of thinking. By embracing uncertainty, we foster an environment conducive to creativity, innovation, and resilience. It is precisely this open-minded, dialogic and dynamic approach that holds the potential to shape a brighter future in the face of formidable challenges.

It is important to stress that we are not claiming that interactive tools and processes are the only means through which this can be achieved. We fully acknowledge that we are building upon prior endeavours within the documentary tradition to work with polyphony (eg. Nichols 2005, Chu 2007, Zimmermann 2020) and that there are other means beyond what we are doing through which these ideas can continue to be developed. Part of our future trajectory will be to extend what we have achieved thus far into a wider consideration of possibilities beyond that of Korsakow and Stornaway.

Our journey from the inception of the project, to 'extreme heat', to its present stage of reflecting on what we have learnt exemplifies the power of collective effort and a forward-thinking mindset. As we move forwards, we remain committed

to nurturing this narrative of uncertainty and advocating for its intrinsic value, knowing that it will pave the way for a more sustainable and adaptive world in these times of complexity and change.

We also believe that in this project, as described above, we are genuinely co-creating. We are, however, keen in the next phase of the project to apply what we are learning to wider community-based contexts. What relevance do these ideas have outside of the interactive documentary community? How can we start to think about them as a basis or a method for participatory practice with other communities?

We look forward to the next phase of this project, and aim to apply what we learnt this year, thanks to the support of SIGN, to wider projects and interdisciplinary collaborations.

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