The Youth Climate Report
ARTIST STATEMENT

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> "Nonfiction relies on the idea of an authentic relation to the world. As a consequence documentary makers and audiences want the work to be 'truthful'. This is most simply realised through decisions about what to film, what to keep, what order to edit these into and who's voice appears when, and with what visuals. However, in multilinear online documentary each of these things (and all) can change." [1]

As Adrian Miles suggests in the above quote, the very rules of engagement in documentary film production, distribution and consumption are changing with contemporary advances in theory and practice in the digital domain and, in particular, with the multilinear documentary. My multilinear project – the *Youth Climate Report* – attempts to present a database documentary that recognizes the implicit and explicit narratives that form the structure of such a project in order to best serve the user which, as I will explain later, represents a very specific audience.

In his article *Database as a Symbolic Form*, new media theorist Lev Manovich argues that there are two dimensions at play in a database documentary that take the place of a traditional narrative in a linear documentary: the syntagmatic and the paradymatic. [2] The former

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[1] Miles, Adrian. "Authenticity and Multilinear Documentary". *The Consilience Lab*. Web. Accessed August 27, 2015. Melbourne: RMIT University, 2014. Link: http://vogmae.net.au/thehonours/2011/11/nonfiction-authenticity-and-the-multilinear/

[2] Manovich, Lev. "Database as a Symbolic Form", *Millennium Film Journal*. Web. Accessed November 19, 2016. New York: No. 34, 1999. Link: http://www.mfjonline.org/journalPages/MFJ34/Manovich_Database_FrameSet.html

are the elements or fragments of the projects, i.e., the film units. These represent an explicit narrative. The latter represents the user's imagined processing of these images. This is the implicit narrative. Paul Barthes explains this relationship best in his book *The Elements of Semiology*: "The units which have something in common are associated in theory and thus form groups within which various relationships can be found." [3]

I have created a project of global climate research comprised of two hundred and fifty film "units' and while each unit is a stand-alone "mini-documentary" produced by a student, collectively, shared themes (renewable energy projects, extreme weather events, adaptation and mitigation projects) form groups that implicitly reveal new data based on their various relationships to each other.

Another element of this implicit narrative is the data discovered through spatial analysis. Grouping the content of the videos by region can expose a cause of a climate trend that individual analysis may not reveal. The same implicit narrative can be derived from the explicit grouping of the films on a temporal basis. This is not a consideration for the project at this time since all the represented videos are within a year of each other in production, but in time, comparative data resulting from temporal analysis, especially within the same region, will eventually emerge.

This is in line with Marsha Kinder's argument that users of database documentary projects discover "stories and outcomes through a combination of design, choice and chance." [4] The UN policymakers who use my project as a resource will often employ a *design* of selection, such as grouping the videos in Antarctica to analyze climate data in a polar region. They will

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[3] Barthes, Roland. *The Elements of Semiology.* New York: Hill and Wang, 1968. 58.
[4] Kinder, Marsha. "Designing a Database Cinema", *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary After Film*, eds Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003. 353.

make *choices*, often based on videos that represent research in their home countries. And by *chance*, they will discover found data revealed "between the lines" after applying spatial and temporal relational analyses.

This specific design architecture was conceived in collaboration with two divisions of the United Nations: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) for whom I have worked as a documentary filmmaker for their COP climate conferences since 2009. Following the presentation of two polar science documentaries I produced for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) – *The Antarctica Challenge: A Global Warning* (2009) and *The Polar Explorer* (2010) – delegates and negotiators attending these policy-making conferences began to request stylistic refinements to my documentary filmmaking process in order to serve their needs better. My projects, therefore, became less commercial and more educational as they took on the role of a data delivery system for this specific audience.

The *Youth Climate Report* concept emerged in 2011 when the Communications department of the UNFCCC expressed their desire to see more video reports of climate research worldwide than I was previously providing. Not being able to travel the world myself to shoot these reports, I put a call out through social media to the global youth community to participate as franchise filmmakers. Providing direction and guidance through a series of checklists provided on the website *youthclimatereport.org*, [5] international student reporters were submitting videos with a relatively uniformed look. I compiled the strongest entries in the form of a 45-minute feature film to present at the UN conferences from 2011 to 2015.

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[5] Interview Direction: http://youthclimatereport.org/help/interview-tips/, Film Direction: http://youthclimatereport.org/help/camera-tips/, Editing Direction: http://youthclimatereport.org/help/video-editing-tips/

This worked well for a couple of years, but delegates found it difficult to find time to attend screenings during the conference and often wanted data on a specific climate issue or a geographic region. I therefore expanded the *Youth Climate Report* project in the multilinear format that was recently introduced at the climate summit in Marrakech, Morocco, COP22. Within this architecture, I built meta-data components of supplemental information that delegates had also wanted to see: longitude and latitude coordinates of where the research or climate event was taking place; a current, 360-degree photo of the area; links to extended information on the researcher and/or their research, institution or organization; the name of the country and the year of production of the video report.

Now that this unique digital documentary ecology was created, it needed to be populated and be sustainable. In partnership with the UNFCCC and UNEP's film production arm, Television for the Environment, we launched the *Global Video Youth Competition*, basically serving as a call for submissions with a prize of trips to Morocco for the filmmakers of two winning entries. This curation strategy mobilized the more substantial power of the UN's Communications department and social media and brought in one hundred and eighty-one video reports which I uploaded to the GIS map. I also researched related meta data and added those elements to each corresponding map pin.

It should be noted here that the opportunity to work with the United Nations dates back to 1972 when UNEP was formed at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, more commonly known as the Stockholm Conference. It was here when a specific mandate was established for UNEP to provide "an education programme designed to create the awareness which individuals should have of environmental issues" and that "(t)his programme will use

traditional and contemporary mass media of communication…" [6] Without expressly identifying

film, and written in the days well before the common use of the Internet and other digital media,

this mandate opened the doors for documentary film projects to participate in providing data

related to environmental issues to policymakers and the public at large through UNEP. In her

book, *Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the 21st Century*, Helen Hughes

argues that this UN mandate was particularly influential in the rise of the eco-doc:

> "For the environmental documentary the significance of this meeting (the Stockholm
> Conference) lies not only in the institutional developments but also in the
> rationalization and expansion of environmental assessment…It is this monitoring
> that has created a visible and legible data and insights that inform global discussions
> on the environment. It becomes particularly prominent in documentary films on
> climate change in the twenty-first century." [7]

My own eco-docs of 2009 and 2010 were the first commercial documentary films to be

used by UNEP to inform policy at a UN conference (Copenhagen, 2009; Cancun, 2010) and

paved the way for "contemporary mass media" advancements in the digital documentary

resulting in the *Youth Climate Report* map project in use today. The software used to build this

project is an experimental program developed by Google, still in beta mode, called *Fusion*. It

continues to evolve, but as of this writing, there are certain limitations inherent in its current state

that prevent such things as content searches and linking to live feeds. In fact, there are only three

video sources acceptable at the moment: YouTube, Vimeo or Google Maps. While the rapid

development of new emerging technologies continues to re-define the digital documentary,

shortcomings such as this can often hinder a project's goals.

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[6] "Recommendation 97, Part 1 (a)", *Educational, Informational, Social and Cultural Aspects of Environmental Issues*, Recommendations of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment: United Nations Environment Programme, 1972. Accessed November 22, 2016. Link:
http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=97&ArticleID=1511

[7] Hughes, Helen. *Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the 21st Century*. Bristol (UK): Intellect, 2014. 26.

In his book, *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich indicates an inherent flaw intrinsically attached to contemporary documentary production and related specifically to the constantly evolving new media technologies and the digital domain in which they exist:

> Creating a stable new language (in digital film) is…subverted by the constant introduction of new techniques over time…Every year, every month, new effects find their way into new media works, displacing previously prominent ones and destabilizing any stable expectations that viewers have begun to form. [8]

While the art form continues to evolve, the audience struggles in trying to keep up with an ever-changing set of parameters of engagement. Sometimes, as in the case of *Fusion*, even the technology has difficulty keeping up with itself. In the second edition of *New Challenges for Documentary*, Alan Rosenthal and John Corner express this struggle in their introduction:

> The non-linear, interactive properties of the web create possibilities for documentary work at the same time as they are an obstacle to the kind of public 'confrontation' of viewer with topic that many documentarists have sought. In this confrontation, it is often quite important that viewers do not have too many options immediately available for negotiating their route through the material, that they just have to 'look and listen', so to speak. [9]

The concept of "too many options" is at the heart of the multilinear, database documentary. Supporting media such as additional video, weblinks and pictures, may provide an enhanced presentation of data related to the documentary's subject matter, but engaging in them may interrupt the traditional experience of simply "looking at and listening to" a linear documentary. Too often in a multilinear project, all media is presented simultaneously, demanding choices that could disrupt the flow of traditional audience engagement. For the *Youth Climate Report* project, the elements of this potential interruption have been requested as the specific audience in this case is using the database documentary as a resource, not simply an

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[8] Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001. 243.
[9] Rosenthal, Alan and Corner, John. "Introduction", *New Challenges for Documentary* (Second Edition). Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005. 5.

educational or entertainment-based film. Consequently, I have made a point of separating the interruptive meta-data from the content of the films so they can be accessed without the need of stopping and starting the video reports. In other words, the videos can be watched uninterrupted while the support material can be accessed before or after the screening. With an average run-time of approximately four minutes per video, the entire "look and listen" audience engagement of the traditional documentary can be easily achieved with the requested additional information available at other times, much like "bonus material" on a commercially released DVD.

In Adrian Miles' comprehensive article on Kursakow, an online software designed to create multilinear documentary film projects, he concludes that "a Korsakow film for documentary offers 'a risky account, meaning that it can easily fail – it does fail most of the time – since it can put aside neither the complete artificiality of the enterprise nor its claim to accuracy and truthfulness'." [10]

As a result, I have structured the *Youth Climate Report* multilinear documentary project to reduce, if not eliminate, the interruptive nature and its "artificial" interface inherent in multilinear documentary projects like those created in Kursakow. I have done this by having the same theme – climate science research presented by researchers interviewed by students – for each of the films represented on a GIS interactive map of the world. Each film is a stand-alone "mini-documentary" addressing new climate research findings, while collectively, the multilinear project offers videos that remain "on topic" differing only in geographical location. The basic structure of student-as-reporter and scientist-as-subject discussing new climate research is consistent throughout the various videos comprising the project, even if the styles of shooting may vary from video to video.

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[10] Miles, Adrian. "Materialism and interactive documentary: sketch notes", *Studies in Documentary Film*, 2014. 8:3, 205-220, DOI: 10.1080/17503280.2014.958894

One of the developers of Kursakow, Matt Soar, describes his program as "an exercise in interactive spatial montage". [11] Building on this idea, my own project is placed on an interactive map wherein spatial analysis can also provide additional information, as previously referenced.

In Patricia Aufderheide's paper delivered at the 2015 Visible Evidence conference in Toronto, she describes a strategy for engaging an audience emotionally. The strategy represents the "dimensions of impact" any documentary film project needs to have in order to achieve social change, should that be its goal. The process was created in 2009 by the Fledgling Fund, a U.S.-based foundation that funds social justice documentaries, and has been used by scholars studying documentary impact ever since. It begins with a *compelling story*. That will lead to *awareness* of the film's issue and if presented successfully, will lead to *audience engagement*. This, in turn, leads to a *stronger movement* and, ultimately *social change*. [12]

In my own work for the UN, I have found that the "stronger movement" dimension of this formula is not necessary. As the filmed reports are simply explanations of research, there is no emotional appeal being made by the interview subject or the filmmaker. The *Youth Climate Report* project is more in line with a library of educational films produced in the expository mode. While still addressing the "social issue" of global climate change, these projects do not take on the emotional engagement tactic that social issue documentaries often employ to influence their audiences.

The reason for this particular approach with my specific audience of change-makers is articulated quite well by Kirsten Ostherr in her essay *Animating Informatics: Scientific Discovery*

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[11] Soar, Matt. "Making (with) the Kursakow System", *New Documentary Ecologies: Emerging Platforms, Practices and Discourses.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 138.

[12] Aufderheide, Patricia. *Conversations About Impact in Documentary: Beyond Fear and Loathing*. Paper presented at the Visible Evidence Conference, Toronto, August 20, 2015.

through Documentary Film. There exists a "dispassionate" element to the representation of scientific data in documentary film allowing for an increased level of perceived "truth-telling" and not requiring the same degree of emotional engagement that social issue documentaries require.

> By viewing scientific images as powerful rhetorical expressions that participate in the techniques and goals of the documentary tradition, we may begin to mobilize their persuasive power to enable a fuller understanding. [13]

It was this "fuller understanding" that was the greatest appeal of the GIS map version of the *Youth Climate Report* film project. It was never intended to replace written reports of scientific research, but rather, to enhance them. The visual medium in both its micro (film units) and macro (interactive map) manifestations provides an additional context of comprehension for those tasked with negotiating and writing environmental policy, many of whom do not share the same level of scientific education or experience that the authors of the texts have.

At a press conference at COP22 in Marrakech on Wednesday, November 9, 2016, I presented the project to the international media and outlined its three primary goals:

- To provide a visual data delivery system of new climate research from around the world to the delegates and negotiators attending the COP conferences;

- To provide a voice for youth around the world so they may be heard at the COP conferences;

- To provide a voice to the global scientific community so their latest research will reach the environmental policymakers of the United Nations. [14]

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[13] Ostherr, Kirsten. "Animating Informatics: Scientific Discovery through Documentary Film", A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015. 280, 295.

[14] Terry, Mark. "The Youth Climate Report Geographic Information System Map – COP22", *UNFCCC Press Conference*. Marrakech, Morocco: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, November 9, 2016.

The next day, the UNFCCC held its own press conference announcing its partner programs for education, training and public awareness under Article 6. It was announced that the *Youth Climate Report* project has been officially adopted as an Article 6 partner program and its use is recommended by the UNFCCC, UNEP and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for conference delegates, negotiators, policy-writers and international governments as a data delivery system in implementing the mandates of the Paris Accord with respect to writing government recommendations and policy creation. The press release and press conference can be found on this website under the tab labelled "Press Room".

Going forward, the *Youth Climate Report* project will continue to be populated with new video reports of climate research as a "living documentary" film project and as new advances emerge in both the technology of *Fusion* and the theories and practices of digital documentary, this self-sustainable, multilinear documentary communications tool will continue to evolve to better serve the international policymakers of the United Nations and the global communities they serve.

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