

# TICONTRE

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TEORIA TESTO TRADUZIONE

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## TICONTRE. TEORIA TESTO TRADUZIONE

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*con il contributo dell'Area dipartimentale in Studi Linguistici, Filologici e Letterari  
Dipartimento di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università degli studi di Trento*

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## ‘HYBRID PRACTICES’ BETWEEN ART, SCHOLARLY WRITING AND DOCUMENTARY – THE DIGITAL FUTURE OF THE ESSAY?

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This contribution explores in how far emerging interactive configurations can be regarded as isomorphisms of essayistic writing in the digital. The framework of thought is based on considerations on essayistic writing (Montaigne, Benjamin, Adorno), ‘new media’ (Manovich) as well as digital storytelling, remediation (Bolter and Grusin) and practices of ‘interactive factuals’ (Miles). All this feeds into a transdisciplinary understanding of interactive digitext and serves as a point of departure for a discussion of database documentary as a possible ‘digital future’ of the essay. Questions in this context arise with regard to the transformation of conventions and techniques of ‘traditional essayistic writing’, narrative and rhetorical principles into digital non-fiction. In how far do the specific characteristics of digital environments such as non-linearity, interactivity and plurivocality affect notions of authorship and argument? Are there unique features of digital essays that afford new forms of addressing the reader? And what forms of hybridization can be identified? To illustrate the argument, *Public Secrets* will be analysed. Important issues will be the concept of interface as argument, the notion of the author as ‘context-provider’ and critical reflections on the conditions of insight and knowledge in procedural, interactive media environments.

Questo contributo indaga fino a che punto le emergenti configurazioni interattive possono essere considerate come isomorfismi della scrittura saggistica nell’ambito del digitale. La cornice teorica del lavoro si basa su considerazioni riguardanti la scrittura saggistica (Montaigne, Benjamin, Adorno), i “nuovi media” (Manovich), nonché lo storytelling digitale, la rimediazione (Bolter and Grusin) e la pratica dei “fatti interattivi” (Miles). Tutto ciò alimenta una comprensione transdisciplinare del digitext interattivo e funge da punto di partenza per un esame del database documentario come possibile “futuro digitale” del saggio. Ciò suscita degli interrogativi riguardo alla trasformazione delle convenzioni e delle tecniche della “tradizionale scrittura saggistica” e dei principi della narrativa e della retorica all’interno della non-fiction digitale. Fino a che punto le caratteristiche specifiche dei mezzi digitali, come l’assenza di linearità, l’interattività e la plurivocalità influenzano i concetti di autorialità e discorso? È un effetto esclusivo dei saggi digitali sviluppare nuovi modi di rivolgersi al lettore? E quali tipi di ibridazione possono essere individuati? Per mostrare e spiegare questo dibattito, si considererà *Public Secrets*. Un particolare rilievo sarà attribuito all’idea di interfaccia come discorso, alla nozione di autore come ‘context-provider’ e alle riflessioni critiche sulle modalità di conoscenza e approfondimento all’interno dei contesti mediatici interattivi.

### I SOME PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS: INTERACTIVE FACTUALS – THE DIGITAL FUTURE OF THE ESSAY?

Within the context of ‘new media’ and ‘digital media culture’, ‘new’ genres, practices and configurations<sup>1</sup> keep emerging and various forms of so-called computational non-fiction and factual digitexts are developing. The spectrum is widespread – reaching from largely information-orientated digital archives to poetic considerations, from

<sup>1</sup> Despite minor differences, the concepts of (interactive) assemblage coined by Deleuze and Guattari and the concept of configuration employed by Law and Latour will be used synonymously in this article. The understanding of both concepts is based on the specificity of assemblage versus configuration, the former being intended as «a combinatory system [...] enabl[ing] the production of affect via complex forms of media practice.» (Deleuze and Guattari quoted in MATT SOAR, *Making (with) the Korsakow System: Database Documentaries as Articulation and Assemblage*, in *New Documentary Ecologies*, ed. by KATE NASH, CRAIG HIGHT, and CATHERINE SUMMERHAYES, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 246-279, p. 268)

interactive documentary to self-reflexive considerations on the epistemology and ontology of hypertext, from new media art, artistic research to experimental forms of scholarly writing and philosophical inquiry. What unites the field is the fact that most of these configurations are hybridizations of various media practices and that they combine digital interactive media and principles of factual ‘narration’. As such, they potentially enable the ‘author’ to think through issues in alternative ways, they invite the user-interactor to assume an active role within processes in which tracks of thoughts are explored, and they often comprise a participatory component which affords collaborative practices.

This contribution explores in how far recent interactive hybrid configurations can be regarded as continuations of different variations of essayistic writing in the digital and in how far one can detect intersections with practices that are (more or less) genuine of ‘new media’.

In 1989, Kauffmann states that it is an open question whether «paradigms of knowledge and their forms of presentation will change in response to cybernetic technology»,<sup>2</sup> and she continues, referring to Lyotard’s reflections in *The Postmodern Condition*, that «the essay as a form [...] will follow the pragmatics of postmodern science, practicing avant-garde experimentation in its search for new rules, new statements, and creative instabilities».<sup>3</sup> Almost three decades later, it is time to find – at least preliminary – answers to these ‘open questions’.

Key aspects in this context are, among others, how rhetoric and principles of essayistic writing operate in digital non-fiction. In how far do the specific characteristics of digital environments such as non-linearity, interactivity and participation affect notions of authorship and argument? In how far are there parallels between the Benjaminian ‘mosaic’ and the ‘fragmentary’ nature of essayistic writing and spatial montage versus interface design? How can digital environments contribute to productively exploiting the tension of the essay’s oscillation between objectivism and subjectivism? In how far do ephemeral textual manifestations of thinking present a form of «unmethodological methodology»?<sup>4</sup> And how can one as a researcher of digital media and as a literary scholar describe hybridizations between rhetoric, aesthetics and ethics, criticism and art, introspection, self-reflexivity and socio-cultural criticism of ideology that manifest themselves in many projects?

These issues necessitates a transdisciplinary approach: considerations concerning the essay (among others by Montaigne, Adorno and Benjamin) will need to be transferred to practices of factual discourses in ‘new media’ with their specific affordances, as outlined by Manovich<sup>5</sup> and in terms of remediation – a figure of thought developed by Bolter and Grusin.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> LANE KAUFFMANN, *The Skewed Path: Essaying the Unmethodological Method*, in *Essays on the essay. Redefining the Genre*, ed. by ALEXANDER J. BUTRYM, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1989, pp. 221-240, p. 236.

<sup>3</sup> FRANÇOIS LYOTARD, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> KAUFFMANN, *The Skewed Path: Essaying the Unmethodological Method*, cit., p. 235.

<sup>5</sup> See LEV MANOVICH, *The language of new media*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> See JAY DAVID BOLTER and RICHARD A. GRUSIN, *Remediation*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 2002.

As these reflections shall not remain purely theoretical, the analysis of a paradigmatic example of factual ‘essayistic’ practices will serve as a test stone for our considerations: *Public Secrets*<sup>7</sup> presents such a «*hybrid practice*»<sup>8</sup> in which art, documentary practices, factual storytelling, research, criticism and activism fuse – always trying to render plurivocal complexity graspable for the user-interactor in a procedural exploration. In its hybrid nature, the database project – insofar as our hypothesis purports to explain – can be regarded as a ‘laboratory of thought’ – a space for literary and scholar experiments and a space to think through issues in associative and yet creatively productive and meaningful ways. Hence, one essential question will be in how far database documentaries such as *Public Secrets* open a space for self-interrogation – i.e. a virtual forum to try out different modes of presenting fragments of discourses, of argument, of hypertextual or digitextual, potentially ‘essayistic’ ‘writing’ and (inter-)active reading.

## 2 FORMLESS FORM, UNMETHODOLOGICAL METHOD: PARALLELS BETWEEN ESSAYISTIC WRITING AND PRACTICES OF DIGITAL ‘INTERACTIVE FACTUALS’

In academic writing, it is *bon usage* to start a scholarly article by setting the field and defining the subject of interest. This essay on the prospective digital future of the essay, however, sets off from a stance that in some way emulates the features of its subject: it *probes* into the subject matter. One of the reasons for it is that not only the essay but also the second component of these considerations – interactive factuals – evade clear-cut taxonomic typology and classifications. As Holdheim pointedly claims, «[t]he essay is less a genre than quite deliberately an antigenre»,<sup>9</sup> and it is equally difficult to define forms of ‘computational non-fiction’, ‘interactive documentary’ or ‘database factual’: both the essay and factual digital discourses (which is a less ideologically charged term for ‘documentary’) are experimental, continually evolving and emerging out of the ‘zeitgeist’ – and yet there is *some* stability – a stability that finds its ways in new design in new media-cultural environment.

With regard to the essay, this most prominently features in the fact that the essay always conveys an experimental investigation of some matter of concern. Etymologically, the term ‘essay’ derives from the late Latin word *exagium* which means ‘to balance’ – a term that was later integrated into the English (as well as French) vocabulary in the forms ‘to essay’ – i.e. to try, to fathom the limits of thought and perception, affective relatedness and cognitive ‘knowledge’ – and ‘*essayer*’. This idea of trying, approaching and testing ideas in the light of concrete experiences is certainly a core feature of the essay: it does not only imply subjectivity and self-reflexive introspection and hence builds a bridge between ‘the world’ and the reasoning self – two aspects that will be discussed in detail

7 SHARON DANIEL, *Public Secrets*, 2008, <http://vectors.usc.edu/issues/4/publicsecrets/>.

8 SHARON DANIEL, *Hybrid Practices*, in «Cinema Journal», XLVIII/2 (2008), pp. 154-159, p. 154.

9 WOLFGANG W. HOLDHEIM, *The Essay as Knowledge in Progress*, in *The Hermeneutic mode. Essays on time in literature and literary theory*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984, pp. 19-32, p. 20.

in their digital ‘actualization’; it also entails a sort of ‘formlessness of form’<sup>10</sup> as well as a kind of ‘unmethodological method’, as delineated by American deconstructivists with their renewed interest in creative criticism’.<sup>11</sup> As Kauffmann states, on the one hand, the essay is

‘unmethodological’ insofar as it draws on the unregulated faculties and energies of art; on the other hand, the essay is methodological insofar as it bends to the more prosaic chores of humanistic knowledge – not only discovery but interpretation, commentary, synthesis.<sup>12</sup>

As such, the broad spectrum of the rhetorical practices of essayism and their textual manifestations which at first sight appears to be a problem brings about an enormous advantage: in fact, it is exactly due to this formlessness of form that the essaying subject is enabled to speak *beyond* him- or herself. It means stimulating an «extra-disciplinary mode of *thought*»<sup>13</sup> (not so much of *writing*); and it invites a transcending of conventional genre-specific boundaries.

This leads to the second concept which stands in the focus of this essay on the possible digital future of the essay: interactive factials as non-fictional database configurations. And again, it is difficult to methodologically and theoretically approach the related practices and their (digi-)textual manifestations. One problem hereby stems from the terminological compound ‘factual’ or ‘non-fictional’, because there hardly exists a straightforward relation between ‘reality’ and its mediatized representation. The problem of defining factual discourses in their relation to truth, ‘reality’ and the mediatization of ‘reality’ is even more severe in emerging non-fictional practices in *digital* media cultures. In this context, there seems to be a shift away from the conventional belief in representation and linearly unfolding argument towards practices that are exploiting digital media’s specific affordances: procedurality and experientiality, interactivity and participation, non-linearity and spatial montage. Aligned with this paradigm shift, emerging interactive factials are questioning their own ontological and epistemological status – as does the self-reflexive essay with its delicate balance between objectivity and subjectivity.

### 3 THE AFFORDANCES OF ‘NEW MEDIA’ – INTERACTIVITY, INTERACTION AND PARTICIPATION

Before fathoming the potential digital future of the essay in the form of interactive factials, one needs to address an important issue: the concept of ‘newness’ with regard to

<sup>10</sup> ALEXANDER J. BUTRYM, *Essays on the Essay – An Introduction*, in *Essays on the essay. Redefining the Genre*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1989, pp. 1-10, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> See for example GEOFFREY HARTMAN, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980.

<sup>12</sup> KAUFFMANN, *The Skewed Path: Essaying the Unmethodological Method*, cit.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

so-called ‘new media’ which constitute the sociocultural ecology<sup>14</sup> of emerging essayistic practices.

In fact, speaking of ‘old’ media vs. ‘new’ media would account for a trivial approach to the effects of media change: it would be based on a linear, cause-and-effect logic, a teleological vision of our world, accompanied by an underlying technological determinism.<sup>15</sup>

An alternative to mono-causal conceptualizations based on the assumption of deterministic forces consists in looking at specific *affordances* of so-called ‘new’ media and their role in emerging factual discourses in digital culture. This includes contextualizing them in their relation to other media phenomena, practices and genres instead of focusing on *distinct* features of *distinct* ‘innovations’; and – as this stance nonetheless acknowledges that so-called ‘changes’ in the media ecological nexus are profoundly affecting scholarly and literary practices – it suggests thinking of ‘new’ media rather in terms of *remediations of practices of mediatization* than through an over-simplifying rhetoric of ‘newness’. Hence, our attention shall be directed to affordances that are *more prominent* in ‘new’ than in ‘old’ media.

If one sets up terms which delineate assumedly specific affordances of ‘new’ media, this collection would be quite broad and items on it will be diverse: Marie-Laure Ryan, for instance, stresses that ‘new’ media (most often referred to as ‘*digital*’ media in her writings) are «interactive», «participatory and reactive», «fluid» and «sensory rich» (which points towards hypermediacy and hybrid practices).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, she puts emphasis on their ‘networking capabilities’ and ‘modularity’ (i.e. the fact that they are composed of many autonomous objects). Lev Manovich’s list of ‘Principles of New Media’ reads similarly: he reduces all principles of ‘new media’ to five: «numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability and cultural transcoding». <sup>17</sup> And to refer to a third major ‘new media’ scholar: Jane H. Murray characterizes ‘new media’ as «spatial», «procedural», «participatory» and «encyclopaedic». <sup>18</sup> Consequently, in Murray’s concept, ‘interactivity’ is the combination of a medium’s procedurality and the option it offers for participation.

Though terminological wording might differ according to the approach adopted, one aspect appears to be more or less explicit in all definitions given so far: what seems to be decisive when speaking of ‘new’ media assemblages is their potential for ‘the Interactive’. This ‘Interactive’ feature can take on different forms with different consequences for the overall conception of the then ‘interactive’ assemblage. Still, speaking of ‘the Interactive’ in a reflected manner is a challenging task: as McMillan pointedly states, «in-

14 See JON DOVEY, *Documentary Ecosystems: Collaboration and Exploitation*, in *New Documentary Ecologies*, ed. by KATE NASH, CRAIG HIGHT, and CATHERINE SUMMERHAYES, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 11-30, p. 11.

15 See SARAH KEMBER and JOANNA ZYLINSKA, *Life after new media. Mediation as a vital process*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 2012, p. 5.

16 MARIE-LAURE RYAN, *Beyond Myth and Metaphor. Narrative in Digital Media*, in «Poetics Today», XXIII (2002), pp. 581-609, pp. 581ss.

17 MANOVICH, *The language of new media*, cit., p. 44.

18 JANET H. MURRAY, *Inventing the medium. Principles of interaction design as a cultural practice*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 2012, p. 51.

teractivity means different things to different people in different contexts. [...] We know it when we see it, but what is it?»<sup>19</sup> With regard to our field of interest – the exploration of the digital future of the essay in terms of interactive factials – a transdisciplinary conceptualization offers a chance of differentiating among different qualities and levels of ‘the Interactive’. Moreover, this approach takes into account the *procedural*ity, the *experiential* as well as *transformative* potential of interactive factials – with all the epistemological and ontological implications.

Coming from a user-centric point of departure, we suggest differentiating between three, multi-faceted dimensions of ‘the Interactive’: interactivity ‘in the narrow sense’ with a small ‘i’, interaction and participation. *Interactivity* can be described as feedback-loops between ‘man and machine’ – in our context a computational system. *Interaction*, in contrast, comprises *interpersonal* exchange, thus bearing a social dimension. Often, it is characterized by the role-change of ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’ – or, in the terminology of literary studies, author and reader-respondent. In environments that emphasize interactional exchange between agents, such communicational processes are more important than the representational function – an aspect that is most prominent in dialogical genres. *Participation*, as the third form of ‘the Interactive’, bears a *creative* as well as a *socio-political* dimension which feeds into a socio-cultural and socio-political ‘mission’. Hence, the concept of participation is not too far away from neither ‘committed documentary’ and from what Kauffmann describes as the «Socratic mission» of the essay: «the critical discussion of culture in the public sphere».<sup>20</sup>

#### 4 THE LANGUAGE OF ‘NEW MEDIA’ – THE DATABASE AS A ‘CULTURAL FORM’

This brings us to the second central concept in the field of new media cultures: the database. One of the hypotheses Manovich formulates in *The Language of New Media* (1999) is that in digital media, engaging (or interacting) with databases has become the dominant mode of creative, artistic and scientific practices. The database as a cultural form differs significantly from other forms of representation: the decisive paradigm of experience is non-linearity: «[Databases] don’t have a beginning or an end, in fact, they don’t have any development, thematically, formally or otherwise, which would organise their elements into a sequence».<sup>21</sup>

While in writing and reading linearity is formative for the affective and cognitive reaction to texts, in ‘new’ media spatial montage is the predominant form of mediatization. Manovich therefore argues for the distinction between two types of montage:

The first technique is temporal montage: separate realities form consecutive moments in time. The second technique is montage within a shot [or image]. It is

19 SALLY MCMILLAN, *Exploring Models of Interactivity from Multiple Research Traditions. User, Documents and Systems*, in *Handbook of new media*, ed. by LEAH A. LIEVROUW, London, Sage, 2006, pp. 205-229, p. 205.

20 KAUFFMANN, *The Skewed Path: Essaying the Unmethodological Method*, cit., p. 234.

21 MANOVICH, *The language of new media*, cit., p. 80.



the opposite of the first: separate realities form consecutive parts of a *single image*.

Consequently, spatial montage implies a fragmentation of ‘one image’ into many smaller items which are presented simultaneously. As the parallelization of database facts and Benjamin’s notion of fragmentation will show, this discursive mode is more than a merely aesthetic matter. In fact, database, interface design and spatial montage represent a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world as the ‘granularity’ of the material – i.e. the different voices and their statements – is not forced into one monolithic text; rather, ‘granularity’ remains discernable in the ‘final’ database configuration.

## 5 ENTERING PUBLIC SECRETS – SETTING OFF FOR THE EXPLORATION OF A PARADIGMATIC INTERACTIVE CASE OF ESSAYISM IN NEW MEDIA

*Below I suggest exploring a paradigmatic case of presumably interactive, essayistic practices in new media: the interactive, participatory, factual database project Public Secrets by Sharon Daniel. The core of the online-based configuration consists of an audio archive of over five hundred statements about justice and detention in a complex interlinked database. At this point, it is important to note that Sharon Daniel, the ‘producer’ as well as ‘authoring instance’ (or rather context-provider as we will see), is not only a professor in the film and digital media but also a new media artist, a documentary maker and an activist involved with the US-American anti-prison organization Justice Now. Thus, bringing together first-person reflections of about 20 creatively participating inmates of one of the largest female correctional facility in the US cannot be detached from her political commitment and her mission to create ‘hybrid’ pieces which have an impact on the social sphere. Hence, throughout the production process, she encouraged the ‘subject participants’ who co-authored this database to put forward their personal reflections on detention, shame, dignity, justice, equal opportunities and – on a more abstract level – what to be a human being means. These themes are interwoven with records of Daniel’s own experience with these women – i.e. they are drawn from their actual interaction and brought into a virtual dialogue with passages from legal and political texts and works by Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, Angela Davis and others. The project does not only negotiate relationships between public institutions and private life, it also thematizes in a plurivocal, interactive way the linkages between official authorities, ideologies, discrimination, violence, gender, race and everyday life.*

The oxymoron in the title – ‘public secrets’ – alludes to the underlying figure of thought of such configuration: Daniel approaches her topic in the form of an *aporia* – «an irresolvable internal *contradiction*, between power and knowledge, between information and denial, between the masks of politics and the goals of an open society».<sup>22</sup> This conceptualization of the prison system recurs in the structure of the configuration:

<sup>22</sup> DANIEL, *Hybrid Practices*, cit., p. 157.

each of the three main branches of argument of *Public Secrets* is structured as an *aporia*: ‘inside/outside’, ‘bare-life/human-life’, and ‘public secret/utopia’.

After a short audio introduction to the context of production (and its textual transcription by Daniel *herself*) which addresses issues of access to the imprisoned women, the exploration of the database documentary sets off with a screen that reflects the first of these *aporias*. The screen is horizontally split – the lower half standing for life ‘inside’, the upper half standing for life ‘outside’. This divide is built through blocks which present short quotes (see fig. 10, p. 252).

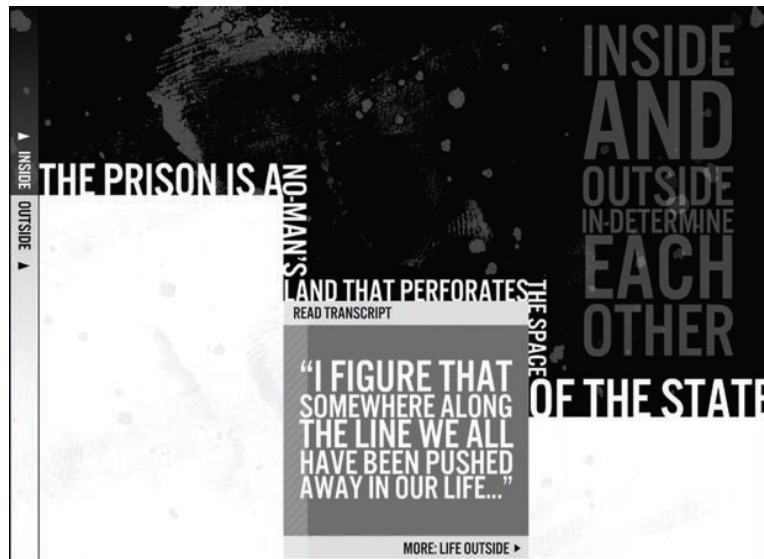


Figure 10: Screenshot from *Public Secrets – aporia* as basic figure of thought and structural element of interface design.

When the user-interactor rolls over these fields, s/he triggers the corresponding audio clip, and by clicking on the quote, a new screen view is opened; selecting e.g. a clip on the ‘inside’-half of the *aporia* screen view leads to a new page where the corresponding clip can be listened to and read in a transcript. After each clip, the user-interactor can decide whether s/he wants to return to the main topic (the *aporia* page), whether s/he wants to see thematically related statements – i.e. more audio testimonies related to life inside prisons or whether s/he prefers to ‘read more from’ the person s/he has just listened to.

This additional material, which shares the same context or potentially further explores a topical thread, can be accessed in two different modes: either as an array of themes which then form a sort of ephemeral plurivocal digitext (see fig. 11, p. 253); or as a rhizomatic visualization, displaying connections and inviting associations between elements and tracks of thought (see fig. 12, p. 254).

Despite the minimalist interface, the user-interactor can explore multiple themes and threads elaborated in clusters of narrative and theoretical texts – which are again complexly related (see fig. 12, p. 254); one learns about different dimensions of the ‘space



Figure 11: Screenshot from *Public Secrets* – topical array of themes connected to ‘public secret/utopia’ forming an ephemeral plurivocal text; mosaic interface design, built of tiles of quotes forming an ephemeral fragmented digitext.

of the prison’ – not only in terms of its physical closeness as a micro-cosmos of personal fates, but also in terms of the economic, political and ideological facets involved, which go beyond the individual women’s stories: *Public Secrets* poses the question of how the space of the prison affects the space ‘outside’.

In the following analysis, important issues are among others the question as to how far the database presents an ‘essayistic space’ – a kind of laboratory of thought and, as such, an alternative to linear argument. Important aspects are hereby the idea of the interface as argument, the notion of the author as ‘context-provider’ instead of authoritative authoring instance, as well as critical reflections on the conditions of insight and knowledge in procedural media environments. These reflections will serve to fathom the potential for interactive factials as a possible continuation of essayism in the realm of the digital. Answers shall be provided to what extent *Public Secrets* remediates traditional concepts of essayistic writing (and thinking), in how far it expands those and in how far it transcends the argumentative scope of other hypertext projects due to the specific interface and interaction design and the subjectively autobiographically ‘framed’ layout of the otherwise participatory project.

### 5.1 DATABASE LOGIC AND THE INTERFACE AS ARGUMENT – NON-LINEARITY, SPATIAL MONTAGE AND MOSAIC FRAGMENTATION

As already delineated, the concept of database «as a cultural form»<sup>23</sup> is certainly a key aspect if one tries to approach *Public Secrets* in terms of an analysis of the potential

<sup>23</sup> LEV MANOVICH, *Database as Symbolic Form*, in «Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies», v (1999), pp. 80-99, p. 85.



Figure 12: Screenshot from *Public Secrets* displaying relations between topics and agents.

digital future of essayistic practices in new media culture. Starting from the concept of the database, however, does not only lead to an analysis of the *content* of the database – i.e. the interlinked material it consists of; equally important as what the database consists of is the design of the *interface* through which the user-interactor can interact with the items of the database.

As the notion of interface design already suggests, we are dealing here with aesthetics – the *aesthetics* of the database and its being *sensually* accessible and ‘surfable’. Navigation, however, is far from being merely a pragmatic issue; rather, it is the expression of socio-cultural assumptions and therefore affects the experience it affords. In this regard, *Public Secrets* differs from many other hypertextual projects which are based on textual fragments only – and it differs from merely pragmatically structured databases in which the user interface only serves as a functional surface for data retrieval, in that, for Daniel, «[d]ata on its own has no meaning».<sup>24</sup> Data – here in form of subjective audio statements – need to be contextualized so as to take on additional meaning; this is achieved in *Public Secrets* through the specific dynamic spatial montage.

The decisive role of ‘interface as argument’ is even more important if one takes into consideration the non-linear nature of the interactive database. Consequently, ‘junks’ of argument – in the case of *Public Secrets* the single audio-clips and textual excerpts – are meaningless without some sort of context and co-text. In new media configurations, one way to provide such contextualizing ‘frameworks’ is by rendering information accessible through a graphic, textual and/or audio-visual ‘surface’ structure – the interface.

In *Public Secrets*, the database consists of a heterogeneous collection of material, which is already remarkable as most other participatory database projects, dealing with

<sup>24</sup> SHARON DANIEL, *The Database: An Aesthetics of Dignity*, in *Database aesthetics. Art in the age of information overflow*, ed. by VIKTORIJA VESNA BULAJIĆ, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007, pp. 142-182, p. 142.

similar topics focus on one kind of source – most often the voices of the participating subjects as, for instance, in *Serial*.<sup>25</sup> In *Public Secrets*, in contrast, the roughly 500 audio clips – i.e. the first-person testimonies and reflections by inmates of the Central California Women’s Facility – are brought into a virtual dialogue with records of Daniel’s own experience when collaborating as an activist with the women, as well as with passages from juridical texts and other, more general, considerations of legal, political and social nature by theorists and various philosophers, social sciences scholars, activists, artists and literary critics.

The main discursive ‘work’, however, is not accomplished in the rather short statements presenting various aspects related with the general topics (and interrelated among each other); in fact, it is through the interface that various potential lines of argument are unfolded. This, again, sets *Public Secrets* apart from *plurilinear* but still linear assemblages. Most obvious in this regard is certainly a comparison with the thematically related configuration *Prison Valley*,<sup>26</sup> in which the interface design is much more concrete, featuring, for example, the room the main protagonist (and the user’s alter ego) rents and which serves as her/his headquarters for the exploration of the topic (see fig. 13, p. 255).



Figure 13: Screenshot from *Prison Valley*. The motel room that serves the user’s avatar as headquarters for her/his further exploration of the so-called Prison Valley and which contrasts in the concreteness of its spatiality with the rather minimalistic interface and interaction design of *Public Secrets*.

In contrast to *Prison Valley*, *Public Secrets* relies on three rather stylized minimalistically designed paradigms of representation: the opening screen of each branch of the *aporia* presents a screen which is horizontally split into irregular ‘steps’ formed by three blocks of quotes (see fig. 10, p. 252); the second view displays a larger number of cells with quotes (see fig. 11, p. 253); and the third mode of display shows relations between different

<sup>25</sup> See JESSICA WEISBERG, *Serial*, 2014-2018, <https://serialpodcast.org/>.

<sup>26</sup> See DAVID DUNFRESNE and PHILIPPE BRAULT, *Prison Valley*, 2009, <http://prisonvalley.arte.tv/?lang=fr>.

statements, persons, sources of texts etc. (see fig. 12, p. 254). The basic figure of thought, *the aporia*, and the paradox of the dynamic interdependencies of the two seemingly unreconcilable sides of the same coin, become most apparent in the entering screen view of each of the ‘branches’. The contrast between the two areas – one black, one white – not only symbolizes the opposition of positions; it also alludes to the idea formulated among others in gestalt theory that both sides – the black area, standing for life ‘inside’, and the white one, standing for life ‘outside’ – are inseparable from each other, as is the case with illustrations based on the principles of the interrelatedness of figure and ground, of the part and the whole. This reflects Daniel’s assumption that life ‘inside’ – despite its separation, its exclusion and suspension in public awareness – deeply affects life ‘outside’, especially notions of democracy, human rights and what ‘being human’ really means. In this regard, the minimalism of design potentially develops a much more impressive impact on the user-interactor than the rather game-like set-out of *Prison Valley* and it draws the user-interactor’s attention towards really listening to the audio statements and not only to collecting new items which then are only superficially perceived.

The interdependency between only seemingly distinct spheres of life, ‘outside’ and ‘inside’, also becomes evident in the second kind of interface design: graphically, the main ‘surface’ of the database which provides user-interaction with a larger number of audio recordings consists of rectangular cells with a quote or an array of key words of the statement the field connects to. These cells of quotes are displayed in constantly shifting constellations, organized by topic, theory or speaking subject, thus forming a mosaic digitext – in the literal sense with the ‘tiles’ of quotes linking to short statements, reflections and observations. What is remarkable in this context is that all textual excerpts in this screen view are treated equally, regardless of their source. Statements are not ‘weighed’: e.g., personal reflections by one of the detained women are positioned on one level with a quote by Jameson; a socio-psychological text is juxtaposed with a prison officer’s thoughts; or a passage from Benjamin’s writings enters into a dialogue with recent judicial material. Consisting of a collage of complexly related quotes, each screen view constitutes a kind of fluid plurivocal digitext which calls for a procedural, performative act of exploration or ‘reading’.

At the same time, in its fragmentation *Public Secrets* presents a spatial montage of juxtaposed quotes, a «field of coherence and contradiction».<sup>27</sup> This paradox can be regarded as a remediation of Adorno’s antinomian method and his concept of discontinuity when delineating essential features of his essayistic practices. Referring back to Benjamin’s concept of the essayistic mosaics, displaying little or no «uninterrupted purposeful structure»,<sup>28</sup> Adorno claims that «discontinuity is essential to the essay».<sup>29</sup> Still, discontinuity and ruptures are only *relative*: what the essay lacks in logically, linearly unfolding argument and discursive precision, it makes up in *aesthetic* stringency – in the case of *Public Secrets* the sophisticated interface design. Though it would be quite daring to name Benjamin or Adorno as direct literary predecessors of the digital multi-media

27 DANIEL, *The Database: An Aesthetics of Dignity*, cit., p. 151.

28 WALTER BENJAMIN, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by JOHN OSBORNE, London, New Left Books, 1977, p. 27.

29 THEODOR W. ADORNO, *The Actuality of Philosophy*, in «Telos», III (1977), pp. 132-133, p. 163.

essay, similarities are nonetheless significant. The essay does not present arguments in a «foolproof deductive sequence»;<sup>30</sup> rather, its «arguments interweave as in a carpet»,<sup>31</sup> as Adorno puts it: the essay «establishes internal cross-connections [and] it co-ordinates elements, rather than subordinating them».<sup>32</sup>

In *Public Secrets*, fragmentation and mosaic digitextuality manifest themselves in the various threads of the interwoven textuality; however, as a complex medial configuration, *Public Secrets* goes beyond the mere juxtaposition of different perspectives and experiences. The combination of personal testimonies by the participants, Daniel's own reflections, philosophical considerations and the legal texts shows that only the network of micro-narrations – i.e. of fragments or splinters of 'Truth' – can allow for some glimpses of 'the Whole', which is evasive all the same. In this sense, the 'formlessness of form'<sup>33</sup> which is characteristic of essayism opens up a field for Daniel to experiment with different formal realizations and as many modes of navigating the material, which again afford different user experience.

Moreover, as in Adorno's embracement for the fragmentary nature as a founding principle of human perception and thought, the interface design of *Public Secrets*, which gives access to short 'glimpses' of insight, visualizes the philosophical stance that one can never fully grasp 'the whole' or achieve some 'universal truth' – or, in Adorno's words:

For the mind [Geist] is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality.<sup>34</sup>

As such, *Public Secrets* resonates with Benjamin's «non-acquisitive ideal for philosophy».<sup>35</sup> Benjamin claims that the «discontinuous treatise» or «esoteric essay»<sup>36</sup> can be compared to a mosaic – and that this mosaic presents the proper form of *alternative* philosophy. Instead of linearly unfolding an argument, Benjamin believes in the associative and affective power of digression and meandering tracks of thought:

the absence of an uninterrupted purposeful structure is its [the essayistic text's, N.d.A.] primary characteristic. [...] The value of fragments of thought is all the greater the less direct their relationship to the underlying idea.<sup>37</sup>

Subsequently, Benjamin's experiments in his essayistic writing employing surrealist montage to see cultural phenomena in a sudden «profane illumination»,<sup>38</sup> to embrace the fragmentary nature of Life and the Human Condition can be regarded as inspiration for Daniel's *Public Secrets* and her way of thinking through material and putting forward

<sup>30</sup> KAUFFMANN, *The Skewed Path: Essaying the Unmethodological Method*, cit., p. 229.

<sup>31</sup> THEODOR W. ADORNO, *The Essay as Form*, in «New German Critique», xxxii (1984), pp. 151-171, p. 160.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>33</sup> BUTRYM, *Essays on the Essay – An Introduction*, cit., p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> ADORNO, *The Actuality of Philosophy*, cit., pp. 132-133.

<sup>35</sup> KAUFFMANN, *The Skewed Path: Essaying the Unmethodological Method*, cit., p. 227.

<sup>36</sup> BENJAMIN, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, cit., p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-30.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

an argument through interface design and spatial montage. And, in fact, Daniel refers to Benjamin in several of her academic writings and names his probing into essayistic writing as one of her sources for *Public Secrets* – not only with regard to concrete quotes, which also feature in *Public Secrets*, but also vis-à-vis the German philosopher's way of thinking and writing in a more general way.<sup>39</sup>

## 5.2 PLURIVOCALITY, OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN ESSAYISTIC DIGITEXTUALITY

The mosaic nature of *Public Secrets* is closely related to a second key feature of many interactive database factuials: plurivocality, which often goes hand in hand with some form of collaborative working on a participatory project. However, at this point, a further aspect needs to be discussed, namely the role of a very specific kind of participation in form of first person statements and testimonials. In this context the question arises of how to find a balance between subjectivity and objectivity in essayistic practices; and the striving for an equilibrium between the specific and the universal moves towards a similar direction, and so does in its ultimate consequence the search for insights into and at least glimpses at the evasive 'Truth' as an epistemological ideal. In this regard, *Public Secrets* in its striving to balance private and public, personal and universal differs from comparable plurivocal, plurilinear, participatory projects which do not critically address their ontology and epistemology on a meta-level of reflection.

For Montaigne, essayistic practices are grounded in the humanistic idea that knowledge can only be achieved through the investigation of the self in its manifold relations; hence, essaying means probing into the constituency of the 'I' and the 'Thought'. However, as Recchio states,

all writing from the perspective of the writer is problematic; it begins in the uncertainty inherent in the writer's situation. [...] There is the subjective consciousness of the writer and there is everything 'out there', a 'seemingly objective world'.<sup>40</sup>

To bridge the gap between the self and the world, Montaigne suggests that subject and object must become *one* in the process of essayistic writing. Accordingly, he begins his collection of essays with the words:

This book was written in good faith, reader. It warns you from the outset that in it I have set myself no goal but a domestic and a private one. Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book.<sup>41</sup>

For Montaigne, the act of writing is an affirmative action, transforming subjective experiences, different perspectives and uncertainties into a fundamental quality of the essay form. However, the subjective stance Montaigne assumes does not only bridge the

<sup>39</sup> DANIEL, *Hybrid Practices*, cit.

<sup>40</sup> THOMAS RECCHIO, *A Dialogic Approach to the Essay*, in *Essays on the essay. Redefining the Genre*, ed. by ALEXANDER J. BUTRYM, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1989, pp. 271-288, p. 272.

<sup>41</sup> MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. by DONALD M. FRAME, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1965, p. 2.



gap between the subject and the object; it also establishes an open, transparent and hence truthful relation between the author and the reader.

In this regard, *Public Secrets* can be seen to resonate with Montaigne's ideal of essaying as an exploration of the self and the other: due to the entanglement of the specific affordances of networked digital media with a transparently performed self-reflection and self-presentation in a (virtual) media community, Daniel tries to bridge the discrepancies that surface with regard to the heterogeneity of the material in *Public Secrets*. In the prologue and epigraph of the multimedia piece, Daniel 'frames' the participants' voices and the textual passages from other sources as well as her own reflections with a highly subjective account of her experience when entering one of the prisons. Thus, in contrast to many other plurivocal pieces, she makes clear right from the outset which status the different voices will have in it – and what might be problematic regarding their distinctiveness and individuality on the one hand and their 'equal value' to that of other textual fragments on the other hand. In this regard, emerging essayistic practices bear a resemblance with Adorno's concept of essayism. Though the individual self is still the origin of experience, as in Montaigne's essays, the *function* of subjectivity is a different one: unlike in Montaigne's self-centred approach, Adorno believes that it is through «the liquidation of opinion or standpoint including the form from which it begins *The Skewed Path*»<sup>42</sup> that the gap between subject and object, knowing and speculation can be transcended. As Kauffmann observes, «self-restraint [...] is at once epistemologically and rhetorically motivated [...] so that the subject may experience the object without dominating it».<sup>43</sup>

Both Montaigne's endorsement of subjectivism and Adorno's belief in the congenial equality of the essayist-author, co-authoring participants and readers can be found in at least two different ways in *Public Secrets*, which are all related to the concept of plurivocality.

As already hinted at, the complexity of human condition is rendered experiential in the multitude of voices – including Daniel's own experience. In these sequences, Daniel explicitly points out *her* reflections, these being based on *her* personal experiences. These, however, are only *one* perspective out of many. As such, *Public Secrets* stands in the tradition of subjectivism with regard to the endorsement of uncertainty and a deconstructivist skepticism towards universal, objective knowledge.

Secondly, the database essay's endorsement of both subjectivity and – at the same time – the transcendence of individual, singular mono-perspectives is grounded in the participatory component of the configuration. This brings along a shift with regard to the concept of authorship. In her production notes on *Public Secrets* and her theoretical texts, Daniel describes her role as 'context-provider' – not 'content-provider': «A context-provider does not speak for others, but 'induces' others to speak for themselves by providing both the means, or tools, and the context where they can speak and be heard».<sup>44</sup> Again, Daniel describes her stance of 'context-provision' as being inspired by

42 ADORNO, *The Actuality of Philosophy*, cit., p. 166.

43 KAUFFMANN, *The Skewed Path: Essaying the Unmethodological Method*, cit., p. 231.

44 DANIEL, *Hybrid Practices*, cit., p. 154.

Benjamin. In his essay *The Author as Producer*<sup>45</sup> (2003 [1934]), Benjamin distinguishes between the ‘informative’ and the ‘operative author’ (artist). Where the first primarily functions as a sort of omniscient authorial-authoritarian instance, standing ‘outside’, or even ‘above’, the text, the latter is part of the complex medial configuration.

Though Daniel writes that she was at first reluctant to include her own perspective, «feeling uncomfortable about producing a kind of self-reflexive, anecdotal essay»,<sup>46</sup> she was also convinced that her position could never be neutral. «In theory or in practice, that would be an impossible place».<sup>47</sup> Therefore, she overtly included her own perspective – even though in a deeply self-reflexive and explicit way as *one* perspective out of *many*. This deliberately self-reflexive stance, again, sets *Public Secrets* apart from many other plurivocal digital configurations which, however, do not overtly address the tension which might arise in the context of participatory cultures and plurivocal textures on the one hand and authored and perspectivalised, never unbiased databases on the other hand.

### 5.3 PROCEDURALITY AND EXPERIENTIALITY IN INTERACTIVE FACTUALS – ESSAYING AS A MODE OF BEING

The specific affordances of digital factuals – namely, the concepts of participation and interaction between different agents – disclose another characteristic of ‘new media cultures’: procedurality and interactive experientiality.

One specificity in digital media ecologies consists in the fact that the *process* of essaying does not exclusively originate from the author or context-provider. Interactivity enables the user-interactor to explore in a self-directed way the arguments or reflections of a database, to argue herself/himself, to actualize a complex interwoven digitextual network of polyvocal threads of thought and thus to tentatively ‘write’ an ephemeral text. As such, hypertext essays and especially their extreme realizations in audio-visual interaction design can be regarded as a form of Barthes’s writerly texts.<sup>48</sup>

The user-interactor’s grappling with the various fragmentary miniatures of philosophical reflections, subjective testimonies and recollections becomes a «distillation and translation»<sup>49</sup> of the essaying ‘author’s’ involvement. In this sense, the configuration re-mediates Daniel’s experiences when curiously digging deeper into the various facets of the socio-philosophical *aporia* of public secrets. Daniel compares this procedural editing of various transitory ‘story-lines’ by the user-interactor to an open-ended expedition with an uncertain outcome:

I collect a significant amount of direct testimony from a «site» and then I design an interface structured in a manner that will circumscribe this «site» of

45 WALTER BENJAMIN, *The Author as Producer*, in *Understanding Brecht*, London, Verso, 2003, pp. 85-103, p. 85.

46 SHARON DANIEL, *Collaborative Systems – Redefining Public Art*, in *Context providers*, ed. by MARGOT LOVEJOY, CHRISTIANE PAUL, and VIKTORIJA VESNA BULAJIĆ, Bristol, tellect, 2011, pp. 5-83, p. 81.

47 *Ibid.*

48 See ROLAND BARTHES, *S/Z*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1976.

49 SHARON DANIEL, *On politics and aesthetics: A case study of ‘Public Secrets’ and ‘Blood Sugar’*, in «Studies in Documentary Film», II (2012), pp. 215-227, p. 215.

socio-economic and political experience as articulated by the participants. Rather than building a single road across that site to get from point A to point B (or the beginning of an argument to its resolution), the database design maps out an extensive territory – say, 100 square miles – and the interface sets the viewer down within the boundaries of this territory – allowing her to find her own way – to navigate a difficult terrain, to become immersed in it, and, thus, potentially to have a transformative experience. The interface and information design constitute a form of «argument» (as writing does for a scholar), and *a user's navigation becomes a path of «inquiry»* [...]. Together, argument and inquiry are intended to challenge the viewer's assumptions and destroy her complacency.<sup>50</sup>

Potentially, the combination of an elaborate interaction design by the context-provider of the interactive factual subtly outlines an argument and the self-directed re-staging of the processes of inquiry. Moreover, the user-interactor's engagement with the material, her/his openness to «retrieve the unexpected»,<sup>51</sup> as s/he can only *guess* what lies beneath the next quote, results in a sort of contingency and openness of the textual web.

This finally brings us back to the point of departure of our essayistic enquiry on the essay as an evolving cultural practice: the etymological origin of the 'essay' as a literary form, which «evokes trying, experimenting: what seems to be primary is less the subject matter than the *activity* of the *inquiring* mind»<sup>52</sup> in which «occasionality remains an earmark of the genre» and «understanding comes about, is tested, and progresses».<sup>53</sup> As such, the essay in the form of interactive factual database-originating digitexts is – in this regard – not only a continuation of the essayistic endeavour; rather, one might consider essayistic database digitexts as a drive to move beyond 'the essay's boundaries' – as the oscillation of essayistic practices between thinking, writing, participating, interacting, clicking and linking the subject and the object of the database environment. 'Essaying in the digital' can thus be regarded as a dialogue between paradigms which are diametrically opposed on two levels: the essay's rootedness in individual, maybe even idiosyncratic subjectivity and the objectivity that comes along with interactive *factuals*, as well as the self-reflexive, self-questioning, tentative quest for knowledge and at the same time the annihilation of a state of total, universal insight into the complexities of being.

As Montaigne states, the *quest* for knowledge, the «pleasure of the chase»<sup>54</sup> is essential to essaying. And, as Kauffmann observes, referring back to Adorno's analogies which emphasize the essay's networked aesthetic texture and transitions, one can only conclude «that the rhetorical function of essaying is not merely to transmit the essayist's *thoughts* but to convey the *feeling* of their movement and thereby to induce an experi-

50 SHARON DANIEL, *Argument, query and Political Narrative: Navigating an Aesthetics of Database Documentary*, in *Database – Narrative – Archive. Seven interactive essays on digital nonlinear storytelling*, ed. by MATT SOAR and MONIKA GAGNON, 2014, <http://dnaanthology.com/anvc/dna/case-study-public-secrets-and-blood-sugar>.

51 ADRIAN MILES, *12 Statements for Archival Flatness*, in *Performing Digital: Multiple Perspectives on a Living Archive*, ed. by DAVID CARLIN and LAURENE VAUGHAN, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014.

52 HOLDHEIM, *The Essay as Knowledge in Progress*, cit., p. 20 (emphasis by the author).

53 *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

54 KAUFFMANN, *The Skewed Path: Essaying the Unmethodological Method*, cit., p. 229.

ence of thought in the reader».<sup>55</sup>

## 6 EMBRACING HYBRIDITY – THE DATABASE AS ESSAYISTIC ‘LABORATORY OF THOUGHT’?

Summarizing these thoughts on parallels between ‘traditional’ essayistic practices and emerging practices in the form of interactive participatory database factuals, one can conclude that *Public Secrets* qualifies as an essayistic space for autonomous essaying, a «zone of indetermination»<sup>56</sup> – thus taking the notion of essaying probing and tentative fathoming literally: *Public Secrets* opens a space in which ‘unmethodological methodology’ and ‘formless form’ can be realized. Situated at the intersection of art, research, philosophy, theory and activism, documentary and self-reflection, this assemblage is certainly outstanding in the context of digital documentary; and yet, in its consistent and elaborated layout of argument and interface, interaction design and participatory outset, it illustrates the specific potential of interactive factuals to transfer essayistic thinking and writing into the digital.

As seen when delineating in how far interface design forms plurivocal and multi-linear ‘lines’ of argument, the question of how audio-visual and textual material can be accessed is not so much a pragmatic issue in terms of the ‘functionality’ or ‘usability’ of the configuration; it is rather a question of cognitive, affective and *ethical* relations – of rendering, for instance, the fragmentary and still complex, interrelated nature of human existence graspable. In this understanding, Daniel pursues a very specific goal with her work – one which sets it apart from other plurivocal interactive artefacts. Rather than only designing a project, she aims at webbing a network of relations which is carrying an ‘ethical charge’ beyond the actual textual manifestation. As Hight rightly observes, within this «environment of expanding ephemera, [such configurations] retain [their] significance as a discourse and series of practices which ‘make sense’ of digital materials which are aligned with reality, which carry the ‘ethical charge’ of the real».<sup>57</sup>

If one tries to parallelize this specific feature of database configuration and the characteristic of the essay as a *probing* (anti-)genre, it is mainly the dynamic, always subjective and perspectivized *conditio humana* that is rendered experiential in glimpses of insight and affective response. This procedural logic, which Miles describes as the process of «click – think – link»<sup>58</sup> (and then, again, think – click – link), manifests itself in the form of the interaction design. As such, interactive works can potentially become spaces for self-interrogation – a self-reflection of the essaying author, the participating co-authoring subjects (i.e. the female prisoners in the case of *Public Secrets*) and

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> ADRIAN MILES, *Click, Think, Link: Interval and Affective Narrative, Database – Narrative – Archive. Seven interactive essays on digital nonlinear storytelling*, ed. by MATT SOAR and MONIKA GAGNON, 2014, <http://www.dnaanthology.com/anvc/dna/click-think-link-interval-and-affective-narrative>.

<sup>57</sup> CRAIG HIGHT and RAMASWAMI HARINDRANATH, *Documentary as sense-making*, in «Studies in Documentary Film», VIII (2014), pp. 177-178, p. 177.

<sup>58</sup> MILES, *Click, Think, Link: Interval and Affective Narrative, Database – Narrative – Archive*, cit.

the reader/user-interactor. In such environments, an argument can be *experientially* unfolded and linked to interrelated positions and arguments – and in this sense pushing the borders of ‘traditional’ essayistic texts further: the granularity of the different elements of thought as well as the different voices are maintained throughout the whole life-cycle of the digital text. Balancing objectivity and subjectivity, managing complexity, fragmentation, uncertainty and contingency, embracing plurivocality in the form of interaction, interactivity and participation, experientially probing into developing non-linearly unfolding ideas and experiments of thought, the factual database configuration qualifies as the potential expansion of the concept of essaying in ‘new media’ cultures.

Therefore, coming back to the very initial thoughts regarding the essay as a discursive cultural practice that challenges conventional taxonomies and attempts of definition in its formless form and unmethodical methodology in combination with the old question of what is new in ‘new media’, one can state that all the uncertainties which have been encountered in this essay on the essay’s potential digital future shall not be seen as a drawback but as an opportunity: rather, the fluidity of this genre invites experimentations of various forms, methods and practices; it breaks with disciplinary boundaries and encourages hybridizations of art and activism, scholarly writing and first person account, intimate testimony and general knowledge; it stimulates thinking through complex matters in unconventional ways; and it opens spaces which can be regarded as ‘laboratories of thought’.

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### PAROLE CHIAVE

Interactive documentary; digitext; digital media; interface; non-linearity; plurivocality; authorship; non-fiction; essay; hybridization.

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