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Thirty Speculations Toward a Polyphonic Model for New Media Documentary

Patricia R. Zimmermann

1. A polyphonic model for new media documentary moves from the one to the many on all levels: concept, distribution, exhibition, iterations, interfaces, issues, people, platforms, skills, technologies.

2. Polyphony derives from Baroque music: it designates the layering of melodies to produce new sounds and new relationships. New media documentary moves from the monophonic of one voice and one argument toward the polyphonic of many voices, many strategies, many technologies, many interfaces, and many iterations. Like Baroque musical forms, polyphonic new media strategies are generative.

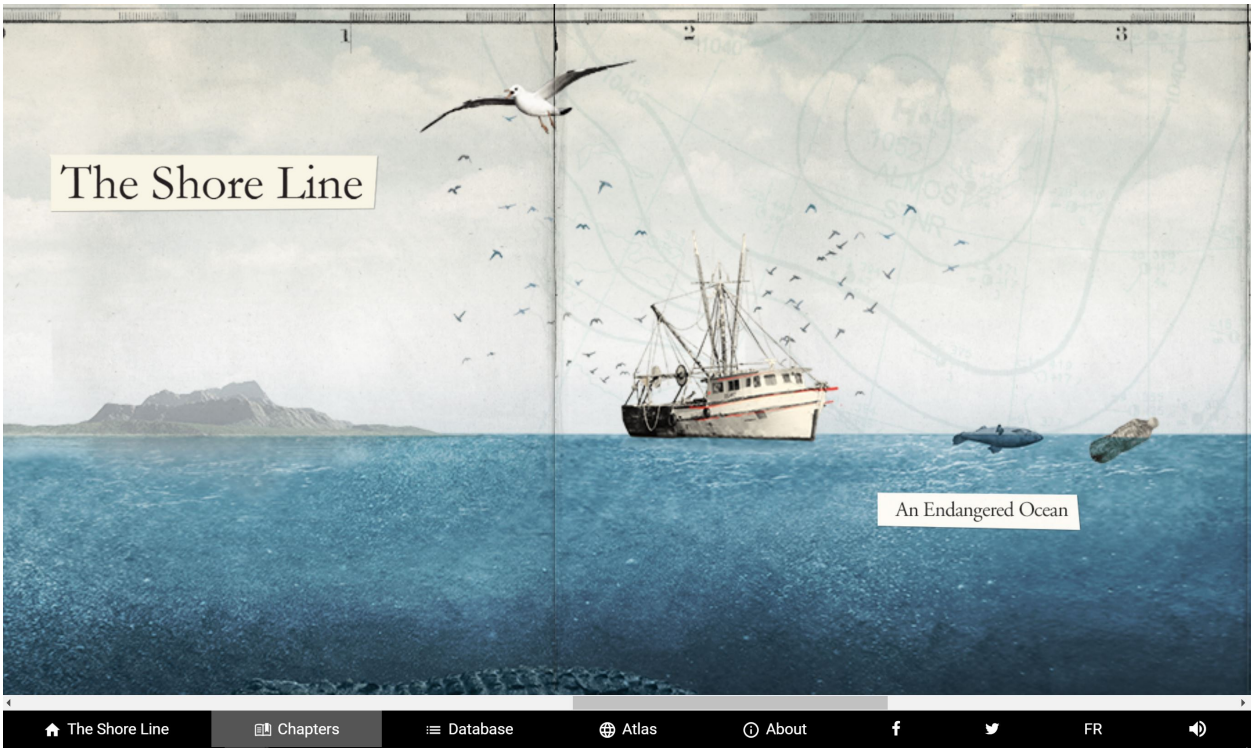


Figure 1: *The Shore Line*. Written, produced and directed by Liz Miller. theshorelineproject.org. Screenshot.

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3. Baroque-era polyphonic musical forms feature several rhythms and voices, each retaining its own beat and melody as they combine contrapuntally to build new structures out of multiplicity. Through consonance and dissonance, polyphony creates order out of diversity. Polyphony is an *ars combinatoria*—the art of combining different elements. Many voices with their own independent melodies combine in different ways.

4. Polyphonic new media practices shift documentary from the temporal figured as events unfolding in chronological order to the spatial where engagements, experiences, ideas, participation, practices, technologies, and voices craft a spatial mesh.

5. Polyphonic new media practices move from linear causality as an explanatory model toward the invention of new architectures for knowledge and experience, and new mosaic forms that gather together and combine the disparate and disconnected.

6. Polyphonic new media strategies reject the singular author, the unique voice, the final interpretation. Instead, these works operate as technologies, systems, and practices to bring together many voices that open up space for complex ideas and participatory exchanges to develop in unexpected ways through convenings.

7. Polyphonic new media practices are place-based. Place is a location in the material world that serves as a nodal point for people, relations, nature, and the built environment to mark space as specific and complex.

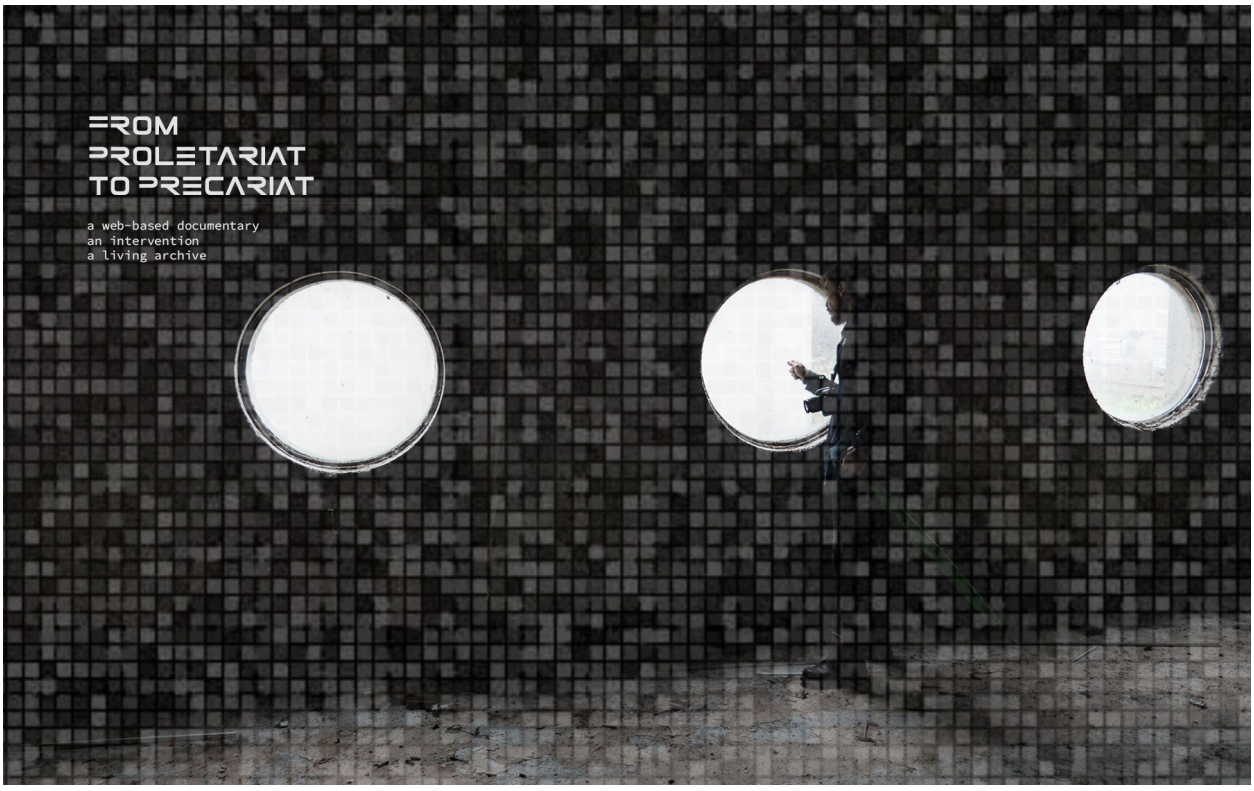


Figure 2: *From Proletariat to Precariat*. Produced and directed by Amir Husak. Prototype.

8. Rather than a vertical or linear practice that is controlled by the author or deductive argument, polyphonic new media documentary constitutes a horizontal and distributed practice.

9. Polyphonic strategies for new media documentary combine heterogeneous communities and practices. These strategies unfold and materialise collaborations across communities, ideas, institutions, people, and positions.

10. Polyphonic new media documentary strategies replace explanatory structures of continuity with architectures of contiguities. The relationships between what is side by side, juxtaposed, layered, or in relation brings forth new ways of knowing and understanding that are always unresolved and in process.

11. Polyphonic new media strategies, displace all unities, working to release repressed heterogeneities. This polyphonic practice gathers together a heterogeneity of commitments, exhibition strategies, ideas, interfaces, participatory modes, people, positions, skills, and technologies to facilitate the open space of convenings. Polyphonic new media tactics create assemblages of difference.

12. Polyphonic new media practices are placed-based projects. Place is defined in these practices as a space in the material world inflected by movement between the built and natural environment, between people and histories, between ideas and practices. These projects locate their practice in small places, in order to discover and then to open up heterogeneities and transnational flows. These practices generate a commons, even if ephemeral, by insisting on creating open space.

13. Polyphony is a useful theoretical construct to understand the significant shifts in new media practices from a single authorial vision to a multiplicity of voices that come together to generate and activate new understandings of subjects or events.

14. New media documentary steers away from a single unified viewpoint. Instead, it composes and activates a polyphony of voices and viewpoints not always in consonance. Together, these voices can articulate and unravel complex political and social issues.

15. A polyphonic model counters singular voices with choral multiplicity. It dismantles the unified linear three-act and genre-derived structures embedded in some feature-length documentaries and most mass cultural forms. Polyphonic new media projects avoid causal and explanatory recountings to create architectures for layered multiple temporalities that unlock new ways to consider complex interconnected social and political issues.

16. While long-form analogue documentaries often organise their investigations around deductive analysis or a causal structure, polyphonic new media projects enact and embody ways to structure heterogeneity and displace unities. These projects open up investigations and explorations rather than closing them down.



Figure 3: *Planet Galata*. Directed by Florian Thalhofer and Berke Baş. planetgalata.com. Screenshot.

17. Polyphonic new media projects scale down contentious issues to the experiences and voices of specific people and communities affected by external economic, political, social, and environmental upheavals. They resist monumental and grandiose narrative representations. Instead, they present a mosaic-structured counternarrative located in small, localised spaces featuring silenced, obscured, distorted, or marginalised voices.

18. A polyphonic new media practice materialises collaborations between nonprofessionals and professional media makers. This process breaks down production hierarchies by enacting a more horizontal structure where differences in experience, knowledge, skills, and viewpoints are leveraged and mobilised.

19. Polyphonic new media practices develop alternative production, distribution, and exhibition strategies to excavate and expose the complexities of the unknown, and to generate new open spaces for convening, dialogue, debate, and exploration.

20. Polyphonic new media strategies continue historical and literary movements away from narratives of the powerful toward microhistories told from below. They feature multiple voices of everyday people sharing their individual stories within the larger contexts of political and social traumas and environmental and economic challenges. Rather than recounting these historical movements of officials, policies, or politics, this strategy unpacks how these large conflicts inscribe themselves in small ways into everyday people's bodies and psyches. A polyphonic strategy works against nationalist narratives.

21. Poststructuralist and postcolonial historiographers argue for polyphony as a strategy to turn away from causality, linearity, and unity, those elements often linked to hegemonic power that minimises difference. Polyphonic new media practices counter those models, expanding the number and range of experiences, histories, relations, stories, technologies, and voices. These new histories and practices are polyvocal, operating in differentiated, heterogeneous, and hybrid structures. Voices function simultaneously as both subjects and agents.

22. A polyphonic new media practice breaks a single event, issue, or place into pieces, and then builds interpretation through a mosaic of arranged and contrasting fragments, meshes, pathways, and routes.

23. As they open to multiplicity, polyphonic new media practices instantiate a heterotopia, a place where many different ideas, practices, sites, spaces, and voices that appear to be incompatible are juxtaposed. These systems feature openings that make them penetrable and accessible, but sometimes have closings that inhibit flows.

24. In place of the linear sequencing of analogue documentary, polyphonic new media practices enable a plurality of contexts and spaces. This displaces binaries such as the division between the public and private sphere or the nation state and citizens in a collage structure that embraces disjunctures, heterogeneity, plurality, the proliferation of different starting places, and dialogue.

25. Polyphonic new media practices institute a polyvocal historiography, a structure that takes into account conjunctures, displacements, and ruptures, and focuses on contested realms. It engages new forms of thinking through the historical as a system of colligation, contiguity, and synchrony.



Figure 4: *Undoing Time/S.O.S.* Directed by Sharon Daniel. www.sharondaniel.net. Screenshot.

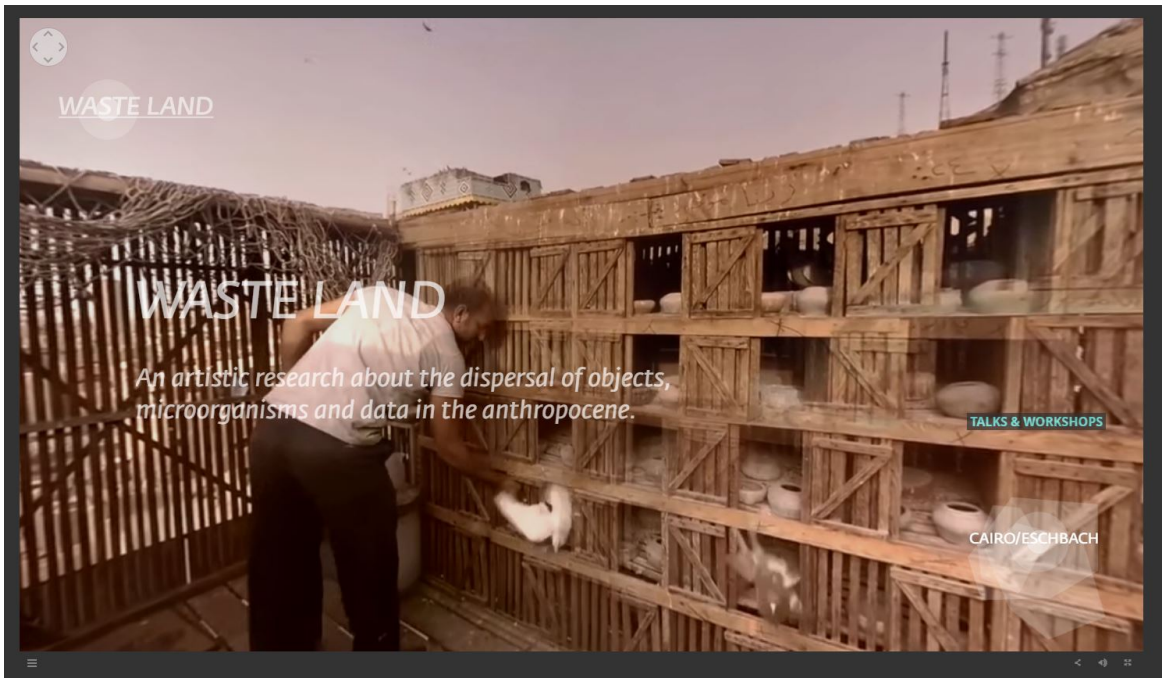


Figure 5: *Wasteland*. A project by Daniel Fetzner and Martin Dornberg. moe.lab.mi.hs-offenburg.de/waste. Screenshot.

26. Polyphonic new media practices share concepts of contestation, contiguity, heterogeneity, independence of voices, and multiplicity. The practices, strategies, and structures dismantle monumental national master narratives and instead configure an open multivocal mosaic generated from the dialogic.

27. Polyphonic new media practices work to create open space. They marshal dialogic configurations, multiple pasts, new contextualisations, and polyvocalities. The creation of a utopian arena is not a given: power permeates in asymmetrical and conflicting ways that projects must address.

28. Polyphonic new media practices represent and constitute acts of radical historiography. They marshal a series of appropriations, contestations, modifications, negotiations, resistances, and ruptures characterised by shifts and instabilities that generate new ways of thinking and being in the world.

29. Polyphonic new media practices conceptualise and organise multiplicity through mosaic structures that augment the possibilities for the dialogic as an ongoing and iterative process.

30. Polyphonic new media strategies propel and release dialogues that privilege context over text. They engage different levels of creative abilities, participation, and viewpoints in dynamic iterative relationships. They circulate and reorganise scattered media remnants across different platforms and within different communities. They layer and connect disparate elements and voices within an endlessly reinvented collaborative storytelling design. They create a more nuanced, empathetic, and shared construct to reimagine how we might understand the world and how new epistemologies can unleash new politics.

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Patricia R. Zimmermann is professor of Screen Studies at Ithaca College USA. Her books include *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (1995); *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies* (2000); *Thinking Through Digital Media: Transnational Environments and Locative Places* (2015, with Dale Hudson); *Open Spaces: Openings, Closings, and Thresholds of Independent Public Media* (2016). She coauthored *The Flaherty: Decades in the Cause of Independent Film* (2017) with Scott MacDonald and *Open Space New Media Documentary: A Toolkit for Theory and Practice* (2018) with Helen De Michiel. She coedited *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories* (2008).