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Enacting Polyphony: An Interview with Florian Thalhofer

Florian Thalhofer, Judith Aston, and Stefano Odorico

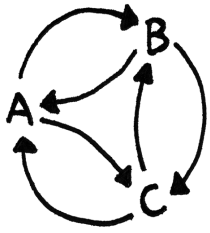
Florian Thalhofer is a documentary filmmaker and the inventor of Korsakow, a software to create a new form of film and a principle to create a new kind of story. Florian's system allows video makers to create nonlinear and interactive films and to tell stories through a number of links generated by keywords. Thalhofer's Korsakow films include Planet Galata *and* The Other Fun Stuff. *Starting from a SNU (Smallest Narrative Units, as he calls them) his film are polyphonic representations of our world. Florian gave a keynote at the first i-Docs Symposium in 2011, and has been an active and deeply committed member of the i-Docs community ever since.*

ASTON: In your *i-Docs 2016* talk, you explained how the dominant tropes of Hollywood filmmaking encourage us to see the world in terms of conflict, of winners and losers, and of individual heroic endeavour. Could you expand on this please and say how you think i-docs could help us to create a different approach/response to storytelling that might help us to respect difference without letting it divide us?

THALHOFER: Stories function best when they are spectacular. This is especially true of linear narration. In my talk at *i-Docs 2016* I explained how film became spectacular and developed a strong tendency to exaggerate and show things in black and white. Linearity leads to exaggeration and this produces a distorted view of reality. There is, however, another systematic problem that also skews the view. The organising principle of film is simple: one thing after the other. A leads to B, B leads to C, and so on. Because film is so popular, it has shaped the minds of billions of people, who are now thinking according to this principle.



Nature sometimes, but not often, works like this. Most frequently, things don't *cause* each other, they *influence* each other.



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The advantage of linear storytelling is that it can make complex things simpler. But this simplicity has a price, as linear stories are by nature relatively far from being true.

Linear thinking is not wrong per se; it is just not always right. There are many problems that cannot be solved with linear thinking. There are many things that cannot be told in a linear way. We need to be aware of that, and practice thinking in different ways.

Linear stories, by nature of the format, come to a conclusion. Every (linear) story has a last sentence. And so linear stories have a strong tendency to develop a "truth". Truth is a bullshit concept and should be avoided by any means, when trying to achieve a better understanding of reality. If someone happens to know the "truth", that person naturally feels superior to people that don't know it. Therefore, in the linear world of the truth, there is a hierarchy, and anyone who sees things differently is considered to be worth less. If you imagine a society where every member is aware that there are different ways to look at things and that there is not only one "true" way, this awareness would create a tolerant society. The more awareness of that kind you have in a society, the more tolerant it is.

Humans are becoming more tolerant. It might be a bit hard to see at the moment, because we currently seem to be experiencing a backlash with, among other things, Donald Trump being president of the United States. However, the overall tendency is clearly going in that direction. The speed at which humans become more tolerant, open minded and aware of their surroundings has accelerated dramatically since the invention of the tool of scientific thinking three hundred years ago. Since humans have come into existence, they have been developing a more and more complex understanding of the world, which has led to more and more tolerant societies. From what we know, the first human tribes lived in small groups together. They were in constant and deadly fights with other groups. Obviously for early humans it was easier to see differences between humans than it is today. Over time, humans have learnt that everyone profits if they are more tolerant, which is a prerequisite for collaboration. We are not in an ideal tolerant society yet, and it might take hundreds if not thousands of years more, but this is clearly the direction in which humankind is heading. And I might add that, if humankind for whatever reason abandons that path, it is very likely to not survive. Either we human apes learn to work together, or we will fail.

The way we tell stories is at the centre of this. Humans have developed and are still developing new or improved techniques to express the world around them, to more adequately express the complexity of the world, which enables them to understand the complexity of the world better and better. There is a huge difference between what you can express in images or words. For most of human history images were very costly to produce. Words were cheaper. That seems to have changed; now, almost everyone not only can produce images but also communicate images at almost no costs. This is currently leading to a wave of visual expression and visual thinking. The use of images changed, and this changed the way we tell stories. Another dramatic change in the way we tell stories is the technical possibility (through computers and computer networks) to create narrations that are not linear and fixed. These flexible stories are an improvement when it comes to describing a flexible world.

ODORICO: You often touch on the issue of reality in documentary storytelling. In your piece "How to Create Reality" you say that "reality is not truth" (a topic widely debated in documentary studies). Can you please expand on this, linking it to Korsakow software and documentary storytelling?

THALHOFER: This is a thought experiment: If something is "the truth", than that "truth" is independent of time. It is now thirty-six minutes past three in the afternoon. This is true—now. In one minute, it will be false. So, what is "true" can change; but "truth" is always the same—it will always be the truth, and it has always been the truth. But is there anything that has always been and will always be? Time itself maybe? But for what we know now, if we go back in time, close to the Big Bang, there was a point before it when there was no space and also no time. It might be a bit hard to imagine, but that is what we now understand.

I think it is very, very unlikely that there is "truth" out there, somewhere. Some people claim that they have found truth, but this is obviously just fantasy. People who believe that fall into the trap of believing their stories. So, if there is no truth, what is all that stuff around us? The things that we can touch and feel, smell and see? Well, this is reality. It is what we agree on collectively. An example is a house. Most humans agree on the concept of houses. We point at a house with our finger, say "house" and other human beings see the same thing. This is *our* shared reality. An ant however might not agree on the concept of house, being perhaps unable to distinguish between a house and a rock.

Humans came up with the ability to invent reality, which is a very powerful skill. Money, for example. What is money? Money is what we agree on; it can be exchanged for bread or most other physical things. Money is an abstract concept and it can come in many shapes. Rocks, shells, silver, or paper, or digital currencies. What makes it real, is when people agree on it—agreement makes it part of reality.

"Money" was in fact one of the topics that I examined using Korsakow. I collected information, bits and pieces about money. Had I made a linear film, I would have organised the material in a linear way, using the timeline of a film. I would have played around until I found a meaningful order. When you have found a meaningful order in a film, the film creates its truth. The film tells you a story of how money works. As a filmmaker, you are happy at that point, and you move on to the next topic. But there is not just one meaningful order; there are many. And Korsakow helps to identify them. With Korsakow, you find many meaningful ways to look at a topic. Often these views contradict each other. This does not make an easy explanation, but it does create an awareness that is closer to reality.

ASTON: I like the idea of using storytelling as a tool to shape and explore reality, as opposed to representing or constructing reality. Could you explain how tools like Korsakow might help to facilitate this process?

THALHOFER: Any tool works in a bidirectional way. A person uses a tool to shape reality, but the tool also shapes the person. People at one point started to use stones as tools. That shaped the things that the people shaped with their stones, but even more important for us now is that it shaped the people that used the stones. It shaped the way they saw the world around them. For every tool it is like this. We are using computers and the internet as a tool. And by using this powerful tool, we change.

Once I bought a motorcycle. And the motorcycle changed me. It changed the way I experienced the world, it made certain connections between my braincells grow, the connections that I now use for making sense of the world. I think that I am a different person than I would be without a motorcycle.

Storytelling is also a tool. You use it to express your thoughts, and at the same time it

alters your thinking. Exploring things, learning things, that all modifies the brain by growing new synapses, the paths on which your thoughts then walk. So, exploring alters your thoughts and alters you as a person. Exploring reality is nothing less than becoming altered.

ASTON: It has been said that a true revolution begins in the mind, in the imagination. How might tools like Korsakow facilitate this process?

THALHOFER: Using Korsakow is an exercise that teaches a different way of understanding and thinking. It is different from the linear way that we practice so much with linear narrations. Humans are developing increasingly complex societies, and this is only possible with better and better skills to understand multiple perspectives. Korsakow is a tool that trains those skills. I am convinced that Korsakow is a tool that trains the skills that are needed to imagine an advanced reality. We need to see this future first in our imagination, before we can go there, before we can make it our shared reality.

ODORICO: This issue of *Alphaville* deals with the concept of polyphony. I was wondering if you could tell us how Korsakow works in term of "forcing" the user to explore and use different angles in order to tell a story.

THALHOFER: In Korsakow, people are not forced to walk the only available path that the author of a story created for them. This is because in Korsakow authors don't create paths; instead, they create connections that become active while visitors are viewing the narration. In Korsakow there is no such thing as a straightforward story. (With straightforward story I mean a narration that is always told in the same order; it might be nonchronological, jump between different viewpoints, but *always in the same order*).

To be told a straightforward or linear story gives people comfort, because it simplifies the messiness of the world and provides them with the illusion that they know all they need to know. People who want that will not be happy with Korsakow. Korsakow is for people who doubt the story. Not like, for example, the people that follow Donald Trump who might also claim that they doubt the story, but in fact are happy to replace one story with another one. Korsakow is for people who understand that story is an artificial construction, and who are willing to question it on those terms in order to engage with complexity.

ASTON: I don't feel that you have sufficiently dealt with this argument here. I am thinking, for example, of novelist Chimamanda Adichie's points in her talk "The Danger of a Single Story". My colleagues in filmmaking are constantly saying that film doesn't have to be linear, nor does it necessarily have to be based on story. You are talking about mainstream dramatic film, not about the wider possibilities. My colleagues would say that you could potentially watch four films on the same topic with four completely different perspectives on it and that we don't view things in isolation. Also, that a film certainly *can* deal with multiple points of view. The point here is that Korsakow can do more of it and all within the same text. In order to take on mainstream film, Korsakow also needs to become mainstream—it should be taught in schools! So, what's the difference between a YouTube channel, which can curate a collection of short films on a common theme but with different perspectives on a theme, and a Korsakow project? You need to spell it out further, in my view, and perhaps acknowledge both approaches.

THALHOFER: Chimamanda Adichie describes in her TED talk that stories can be misleading, and she argues that it's important to tell stories from multiple perspectives. I could

not agree more with her. Chimamanda Adichie does not know Korsakow, so she wants more stories.

The Korsakow idea, instead, is to expand the scope of storytelling to combine many different viewpoints in one piece. You don't need to watch four films to understand that there are four different angles, but watch one Korsakow and understand that there are a thousand!

Yes, there are films that create a more open contemplation about a topic and are not necessarily a story. I agree. But what is the proportion of open filmic works in relation to all films that influence the thinking of society? One out of a hundred, maybe? And why are these films so few? My guess is that films are really, really good when it comes to dramatic storytelling. That the natural form of film is this type of story. You can use film differently, but it is against the grain of film, it is difficult, and it takes a true master to succeed. When your colleagues say film does not have to be linear, they mean chronological, or making just one argument. I agree, but technically a film is always linear. One frame after the other. One image glued to the other. Done once and forever. I cannot imagine that the technicality of this format does not have an influence on the content.

I wish Korsakow would become mainstream. Actually, I am convinced that it will. Maybe not Korsakow, but something like it. It will just take more time than I had imagined fifteen years ago. Maybe it will take another hundred years, I don't know. But I can see it already happening. YouTube does in fact work in a similar way to Korsakow. It is basically a Korsakow by accident or a messy Korsakow. It is a system that is not designed to allow authors to create Korsakow films, but a system that turns the films of many authors into a (messy) Korsakow. I am sure that YouTube is having more influence than TV or film on the way the next generation will think. People learn to look at the world from multiple angles, and by using the Internet they get better and better at it. At the moment, many people seem to be confused by the multitude of viewpoints. I think this is because they have not yet learned the techniques to deal with multiple viewpoints. Most people use the technique they learned with linear stories and apply it to their dealing with multiple viewpoints. But this is not how to deal with a multitude of viewpoints in a meaningful way. People need to learn to take a viewpoint as an inspiration and not as an explanation.

ASTON: As you know, Korsakow is a hugely powerful tool, but also one which many people still find hard to understand and work with. What in your mind is the single most important thing that needs to be done to help open people's minds to the power of these tools?

THALHOFER: For the software: a better and more intuitive interface. The concept of the interface of Korsakow is basically the same as in the year 2000, when I wrote the first version. There is so much more knowledge available now on how to create interfaces. The interface of Korsakow is quite abstract, which is a shame, because the structure of Korsakow is actually very natural.

ODORICO: I was wondering, as a conclusion for this interview, if you could tell us a few words about the beginning of Korsakow (I know that this is a huge topic, but it would be good to understand how ideas in the field of i-docs generate and progress). How did everything start? And what was the main aim of the project back then? Furthermore, how did things change over the years, especially in relation to developments in storytelling forms and in our society in general?

THALHOFER: By coincidence, I became fascinated with storytelling at the same time as I became fascinated with computers. So, I applied the logic of computers to storytelling. I did not organise my material on a timeline, like you would do in a film, but I used the possibilities of a computer to create multiple, meaningful connections. I programmed the computer to calculate these connections, based on simple rules that I created. I wrote some software to create a nonlinear, interactive film about alcohol (not alcoholism!). The film was called *Das Korsakow Syndrom*. Later the tool that I had written became Korsakow, a piece of software that is now used all around the world.

The power of the new approach—which was impossible before using computers—was to create flexible, nonlinear narrations, where the author tells without being forced to tell an oversimplified story. To my surprise, the trend, even within i-docs, became to create linear-leaning narrations with preconceived paths (Aston). Maybe this was because the authors were socialised in a linear world, and wanted to keep full control over their narration. To me, this felt like using the new technology against its grain. For several years, linear interactive pieces were celebrated as the way to go. The more linear they were, the closer to film they became, and most people like film! Makers of i-docs tried to be strong in the areas where linear film is strong: constructing exciting, engaging, seductive, extreme stories. But this is not the strength of computer-based narration. Even more unfortunately, modern media producers still don't focus on the strength of the new medium and the weaknesses of linear film.

In my opinion, the strength of computer-based narration is that it could actually be freeing the author from telling *any* kind of story. Computer-based narration can celebrate complexity and create awareness of the multi-dimensional nature of reality in ways that might in fact be transcending our obsession with story. Whatever the case, computer-based narration can definitely help us to better understand how things influence, as opposed to cause, each other—which is central to our understanding and acceptance of complexity.

I am convinced that this is the direction towards a more tolerant world in which things will continue to move, in spite of the current backlash against it.

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