

I'M SORRY I DON'T HAVE A STORY

AN ESSAY INVOLVING INTERACTIVE DOCUMENTARY, BRISTOL AND HYPERTEXT

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Abstract: This essay provides an introductory analysis of Alisa Lebow's interactive documentary *Filming Revolution*. It approaches the work from the point of view of new media, rather than documentary, arguing that the work adopts an important non-narrative form as a way to describe revolution, and to prevent the foreclosure that story enforces. This essay is experimental to the extent that it tries (with mixed fortune) to introduce the essayistic into scholarly writing, and, perhaps, tries to find room for some of the qualities of the essay film in a personal academic practice.

Keywords: interactive documentary, speculative realism.

1 By Way of an Introduction

I don't know **what this is**, which is a strange place from which to begin. This is unsettling, for as an academic I am trained and acculturated to displaying a certainty of manner — a certainty that many of my students and conference colleagues would attest I have down pat.

It begins from Bristol. It begins from **Alisa Lebow's** presentation in Bristol at the 2016 i-Docs conference about her interactive documentary *Filming Revolution*. It begins from what I was reading¹ during my thirty hours of travel between Melbourne and Bristol. It begins from the question that gnawed and nagged at me after Alisa's keynote in Bristol. It begins in my **body**.

¹ This is only a list.

Adrian J. Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013.

Arnau Gifreu, 'The Interactive Multimedia Documentary as a Discourse on Interactive Non-Fiction: For a Proposal of the Definition and Categorisation of the Emerging Genre,' *Hipertext*, 9, 2011, <https://www.upf.edu/hipertextnet/en/numero-9/interactive-multimedia.html>

Bruno Latour, 'From Multiculturalism to Multinaturalism: What Rules of Method for the New Socio-Scientific Experiments?,' *Nature and Culture*, 6, 1, 2011, 1–17.

Cristiano Storni, 'Notes on ANT for Designers: Ontological, Methodological and Epistemological Turn in Collaborative Design,' *CoDesign*, 11, 3–4, 2015, 166–178.

Not much of an introduction, is it? This writing reintroduces hypertext as a material way of making and performing knowledge and proposes it as a valuable precursor to interactive documentary and what I am describing as computational nonfiction.² What I say here about hypertext, *Filming Revolution* as an interactive documentary, and story, are a prolegomena toward what computational nonfiction might be as a broader field that might encompass computers, technodigital practice, and networks.

Oh, it was originally written as **hypertext** using Storyspace, and translating it into something more linear and sequential sees its **looping rhythms, redundancies, and recursiveness** become clumsy stutterings and repetitions.

2 Filming Revolution

Filming Revolution is a web based interactive documentary that describes itself as a “meta-documentary”.³ It is a documentary about documentary film makers in Cairo who did, or did not, film the Egyptian revolution.

Filming Revolution begins with a splash screen (Figure 1) that invites me to “start browsing the **archive**”. I begin.

The first thing I notice, because I want to know more, is that this is a bespoke project. No, **not bespoke**, that has too many connotations of the exclusive and expensively made to order. This is something different for, in the credits, under the ‘About’ menu, I see Alisa Lebow listed as “Creator/Director/Producer/Writer”. That’s a handful, I think, and there she is again as “Sound Recordist/Additional Camera”, and, like an offer on a late-night shopping channel, she appears yet again doing “Video Editing/Transcoding”. That is a lot to do, and I know that you do all this not from a monomaniacal need for control, but because there’s not much money. Less bespoke then, more a making do, befitting of a work that is “to begin to make sense of what it means to film in times of revolution”.⁴

Filming Revolution uses an interactive node-link diagram (Figure 2) that makes use of filters and coloured keys to provide what I characterise as indifferent access to all of its media, at once. In other words, *Filming Revolution* offers a **continuous visual field of named dot points** that includes all of its themes, people, and projects. This visual field is large enough to flow outside of the edges of my browser and, in a manner I don’t quite understand, is circular so that repeated dragging of the field of view left, right, up, or down, much like circumnavigating a globe, returns me to my beginning. Mousing over any of its nodal dots (which might name a theme, person, or project) triggers visual links (Figure 3) connecting related media. Clicking on any node locks the links in place (Figure 4). For people and project nodes an image is often attached and there may be an outline providing information about who that person is or what a project is about. The only confusion I experienced in navigating the work was in trying to select these attached images, which it seems are not links. To drill down into related media and its field notes (Figure 5) I needed to follow the links that are rendered as small coloured blocks that appear under a name or a description. No coloured blocks, no linked media.

Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, University Of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, University Of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*, First Edition, The MIT Press, 2006.

Karen Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,’ *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28, 3, 2003, 801–31.

Levi R. Bryant, *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Silke Panse, ‘The Work of the Documentary Protagonist,’ *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*, Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow, eds, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015, 155–175.

Tommaso Venturini, ‘Diving in Magma: How to Explore Controversies with Actor-Network Theory,’ *Public Understanding of Science*, 19, 3, 2010, 258–273.

² “Computational nonfiction” is a term I am using a place holder to describe an expanded idea of nonfiction, factual narrative, and computers. It would include interactive documentary, but broadens it beyond documentary to include any nonfiction work that engages explicitly with computational processes.

³ Alisa Lebow, ‘**Filming Revolution: About**,’ *Filming Revolution: A Meta-Documentary About Filmmaking in Egypt Since the Revolution*, 2016.

⁴ Ibid.



A. Miles, I'm Sorry I Don't Have A Story



Figure 3. Links visible between nodes in *Filming Revolution*. (Used with permission).

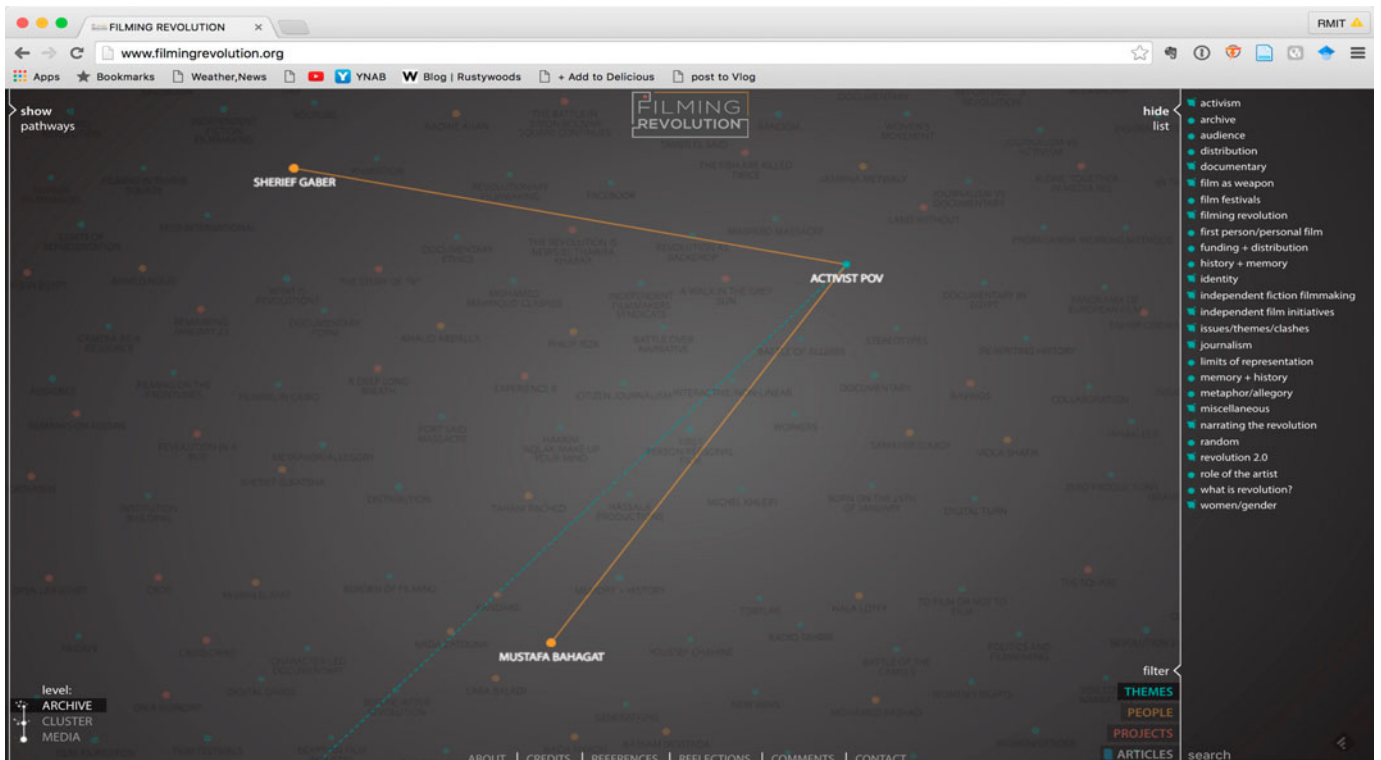


Figure 4. Links locked in place between related nodes in *Filming Revolution*. (Used with permission).

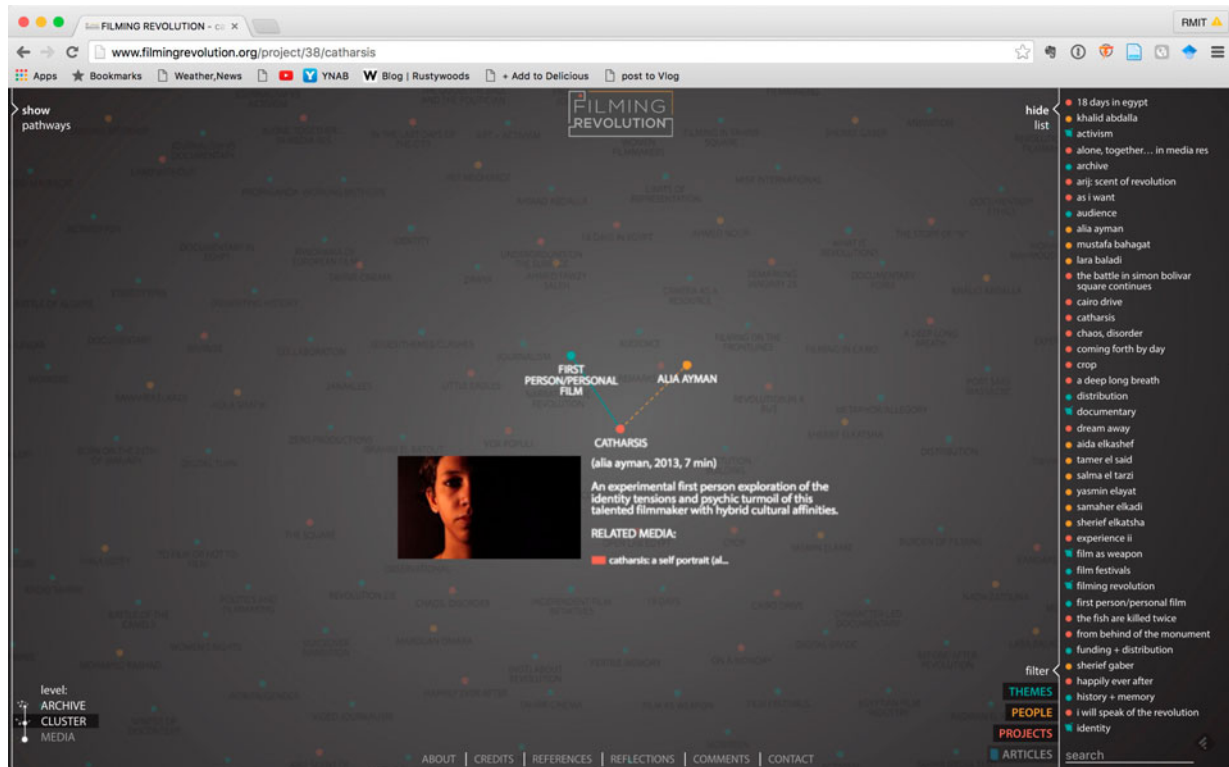


Figure 5. Related media and field notes that attached to a node in *Filming Revolution*. (Used with permission).

3 Not bespoke

Bespoke as a description of *Filming Revolution* requires caution. In interactive documentary, it is currently common to describe production as a 'bespoke' making, largely because of the influence of the sophisticated multidisciplinary teams assembled for landmark interactive documentary projects such as the National Film Board of Canada's *High Rise*,⁵ Arte TV's *Prison Valley*,⁶ and the BBC's VR documentary *Easter Rising*.⁷ The use of bespoke as an inclusive catch all risks making it appear that the only distinction that matters for interactive documentary is between purchasing and customising an existing platform, or making a platform from scratch. **Bespoke** used in this way is lazy and at risk of becoming the habitual phrase that obscures the real differences between the custom handmade and the cobbling together of off the shelf and ready to hand bits and bobs.

I am very conscious of this as I write these sentences **overlooking Bristol's 'floating harbour'**. Bristol has the cadences of a working river and is a riparian city that folds itself amongst its waterways. These accommodations of landscape to city and city to landscape — a lane here, a bridge there — lends itself to a making do. This is, after all, the city that gave us **Banksy** and the difference between using a stencil and spray can and the 'professional' industrial media making of outdoor advertising is one that matters. Banksy's stencils, for example, rely upon their micro-geographies for context and significance, whereas advertising translates demographics into an imposition upon geography. *Filming Revolution* expresses a similar material pragmatism that has to listen to what is because it has not the will, power, force, desire, or luxuriousness of time and individuation that bespoke requires.

5 Katerina Cizek, '*Highrise*,' *National Film Board of Canada*, 2009.

6 David Dufresne and Phillipe Brault, '*Prison Valley*,' *Arte TV*, 2010.

7 BBC, '*Easter Rising: Voice of a Rebel*,' 2016.

4 Archives

Filming Revolution describes itself as an archive. This is problematic. As an interactive documentary *Filming Revolution* adopts a node-link structure (Figure 2) that describes particular sorts of salience or relevance between its parts. This is in distinction to the flatness of the archive and brings *Filming Revolution* closer to a curated collection or exhibition. Archives as a pile of things are marked by their epistemological flatness, and while an archive commonly has mechanisms to make paths amongst these piles the archive, ideally and scrupulously, avoids canonical classificatory decisions about what things and classifications matter most.⁸ For example, in an archive of births and deaths there will be dates, physical locations attached to births, places of residence, and the certificate itself. There will commonly be lists of family names, familial relationships, serial numbers, and signatures, but none is afforded any greater priority than another within the archive.

An alternative archival version of *Filming Revolution* would be an inelegant database with a front end that most likely provided Boolean search queries. However, *Filming Revolution*, unlike the archive, by its promiscuous display of all of its content and themes, offers itself as a curated, or **curatorial, ontograph**. For documentary practice and computational nonfiction this is a much more interesting proposition than that offered by an archival database.

5 Affective Tension

Alisa begins her talk and courses through the ways her interactive documentary *Filming Revolution* is not a story, does not use story, and is not interested in being a story. She tells of how many of her interviewees also insisted on the illegitimacy of story as an accounting of the Egyptian Revolution. For Lebow, and her collaborators, the revolution is an event (or events) in train, that remains unfinished and unresolved, and story in its promise of an account, description, explanation, and even closure was something inimical to the risk, experience, and irresolute infinitude of revolution.

I bridle, bristle, and feel an affective tension swarming through me. This criticism of story by Lebow falls neatly alongside much of what I had argued before a small group at Visible Evidence in Toronto in 2015, and will be in **my talk** here at i-Docs in two days.

I bridle, with my rising resentment asking to find fault, error, some way to differentiate, separate, divide me from her.

I recognise the resentment as something simpler, and uglier. Ressentiment. Why isn't there in passing, just a glance, please, something, about me? Why doesn't she know me? (I suppose I should ask what narcissistic anxiety this might be?)

I hear "stories emerge, but not as an organising principle", "vectoral relations", "bring ideas into relation", "no hierarchy", "Joyce's chaosmos". I recognise a Latourian cartography⁹ or Bogostian **flat ontology**¹⁰ in *Filming Revolution* with its node-link dot cloud of media (Figure 3) offering not a viewing but opportunities to explore through the event of my use.

My tension gives way to something else, a rising excitement of seeing and hearing interesting work, good ideas, compelling argument. That here is material to be worked with, built upon, a gesture that shifts me from seeking a criticism toward a conviviality.¹¹ A building upon and with where critical theory shifts toward an

⁸ Adrian Miles, '12 Statements for Archival Flatness,' *Performing Digital: Multiple Perspectives on a Living Archive*, Laurene Vaughan and David Carlin, eds, Ashgate Publishing, 2015, 39–50.

⁹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹⁰ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, University Of Minnesota Press, 2012.

¹¹ Alisa Lebow <alisa@alislebow.net>

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Hi Adrian,

This was a delight to read/engage with/circumnavigate—I opened it in ibook for the full effect.

encounter with ideas that is more interested and fascinated with what these ideas (and **Filming Revolution**) do, than what they might mean.

6 Not Story, Then?

As **Alisa** talks about **Filming Revolution**, and what it was to travel to Egypt to interview Egyptian documentarians, she returns, elegantly and with insistence, to the inadequacy of story. Her respondents regarded the Egyptian revolution as an unfinished problem with an eventfulness in the kernel of revolution that exceeds the tidiness of what story can do. These respondents were adamant, according to Lebow, that story risked simplification and making too neat something that was intrinsically messy, ambiguous, dangerous, and multiplicitous. Simply, story was not sought, wanted, or even welcomed.

As Alisa talks I scribble notes, asides, and prompts. Corraling **my rising anxiety then excitement** into the **question that this writing circles**.

Alisa noted how her interviewees resisted and resented those who told stories about their revolution because stories were too simple, closed, finished, and complete. That stories looked backward to what was, whereas revolution, as an unfinished and ongoing future to become, needed to remain open, unfinished, incomplete, and speculative. All the while **hedging, almost apologising** that she wasn't criticising story per se, just that *Filming Revolution* was not a story.

In response **Filming Revolution** uses a node-link structure (Figure 3) to enable relations that are vectors of movement between its bits of media. There is little structural or functional distinction as to whether these bits are people, interviews, notes, works, themes, projects, or ideas. This produces a visual and architectural **flatness** that literally avoids the peaks and valleys of narrative, and is closer to the list than it is to story or even database. Some in the audience **thought otherwise**, insisting that story was not only present in *Filming Revolution*, but inevitable.

Are you going to publish it anywhere? Are there journals that can accommodate this form? How about [In]Transition? I know they're mostly focused on video essays but maybe they'd be interested in this? It's surely worth asking them.

I had some thoughts and comments, in case you're still able/willing to make changes. I hope you don't mind. For me it's about being in dialogue with people who I can think aloud with, comrades in the struggle, as it were, so please pardon the intrusion, if it is experienced as such.

I loved going back and forth between your hyperlinks, loved the personal, almost embodied, account, thoroughly enjoyed your probing honesty mixed with acute and informed observation.

I'm only sorry that I didn't know your work previously, and I know too well that feeling of resentment. Shameful as it is to admit. I particularly liked the embodied/body section. Such a great aspect to include and a testament to the power of this form, that can accommodate it.

I also learned a lot in the process and scoured your bibliography with excitement. I have much to catch up on.

I'm interested in your problematization of my use of the term archive. I only really learned that it was a data base and in some form, an archive, when I started showing earlier versions around and the people most attracted to the project for their own purposes were all, almost without exception, people who were sitting on a mountain of archival material that they wanted or needed to bring alive in some way. I'm curious, though, that in your parsing of the term, you suggest that an archive is flat while FR is not, due to its node-link structure. Yet I had thought that you had described FR precisely as 'flat'.

I like the aside about 'bespoke' vs 'making do' even if it, in some sense, your description makes the project sounds as if it barely works and its interface is 'flat and indifferent'. I understand that you mean 'flat ontology' but as a description, I'm afraid it falls, well, flat.

Also, can a curated collection not also be an archive? I felt that I did my best (albeit not entirely successfully) to avoid canonical classificatory decisions (as much as any archive does) and hierarchies as well. But in the current literature about archive—most of which derives from Derrida's Archive Fever, there is a much more expanded notion of an archive than what you describe. Does an archive need to be inelegant to qualify as such? I don't believe so.

However, I've not read Bogost, and I'm intrigued by the notion of curatorial ontographies.

I so loved the bit about interpretive labor. Ingenious to bring in Graeber on this point. One does feel like a minority position within a dominant and dominating discursive field, absolutely. And yet, the caveats were not all about cowering in the face of power. I do actually love a good story and in general am not hostile to it. Not per se anyway. I merely try to carve out some space to do otherwise, and even that seems to rile some people. I actually don't think I'm wrong about documentary history having a story resistant strain—I think that is why, for instance, so many had trouble identifying it as 'film'. And in the past two decades linear documentary found its story telling potential affirmed at the box office, so I believe interactive doc has taken a page from that triumphal songsheet.

Alisa Lebow

Reader in Film Studies

University of Sussex, www.alisalebow.net

7 The Question

Several weeks after returning from Bristol and the **i-Docs conference** I presented an early version of this essay to colleagues. I realised then that what I describe here as this essay's '**question**' was missing.

This question was the problem and concern that had underwritten this essay and was what **emerged, affectively**, while sitting in a cinema by Bristol's harbour listening to the questions and answers after **Alisa Lebow's** keynote about **Filming Revolution**.

The question that pushed and prodded me so rudely has two facets. One emerged retrospectively and is about the caution and timidity when we **critique story**. This question, which easily slides into the normal patois and comfort of academic writing, happened of its own accord.

The second facet, however, is muddier and much murkier. This facet has been this essay's strange attractor and provocateur but seemed to have been avoided, written around but never to. This facet arose in the **frustration, shyness, and surprise** I felt as I watched Alisa's audience divide itself into what I want to think of as three groups.

One group could be characterised as being in accord with her points, more or less comfortable with Lebow's claims about **Filming Revolution** and its relation to **story**. This is where I found myself.

A second group fell somewhere between curiosity and indifference, perhaps not sure about what mattered for them (or to others), or why, but happy to tag along.

A final group were confident and able to voice their disquiet and disagreement with Lebow's claim that **Filming Revolution** was not a story. This view argued strongly for a **constructivist and linguistic approach** to knowledge, experience, and the world. This group asked questions that troubled me.

Why?

Well, as Latour argues, again and again, your informants or respondents in your research are expert and the role of the researcher is to first listen to this expertise to let your explanations (if there are any) accord with this. Now, while as a sociologist the target of Latour's methodological criticisms are different to mine, I take his position as requiring an ethical regard toward people (and things) that begins from the premise that their matters of concern and understandings are real, and must be taken seriously. Theory's role then is not to colonise their explanations with its own. (This is part of my attraction to speculative realism, and my interest in computational nonfiction, as the agency of making and understanding extends beyond simply assembling miniature story machines to remake the world in our own image.)

To **return to that room in Bristol** and the defence of story after Lebow's talk. It could be that as a documentary scholar she is mistaken about what she claims. It could be that **Filming Revolution** is a story, or stories, and it could also be that her claims about what story does, and that *Filming Revolution* as an effort to try something other than story, is also wrong. It could also be that her respondents, those Egyptian documentary filmmakers interviewed, are also similarly mistaken.

However, this list of mistaken people should make us pause and consider seriously what each of these claims for story requires in relation to documentary, respondents, story, and the world. (It is also an example of academic hubris that evidences a dangerous over-reaching.) While Lebow is a well published scholar in documentary we can of course disagree with her, and offer evidence in counter arguments. We could do the same about **Filming Revolution** and demonstrate how it is a story, or stories. (That we can make stories about, or from, the media in *Filming Revolution* is not the same thing as saying it is a story. I can make a story about the eucalyptus tree I can see outside my window, but it is absurd to then say that that tree is a story. This confuses story with ontology.)

However, the next step is not so simple, or reasonable. This step involves questioning the experience of revolution made by the people interviewed for *Filming Revolution*. These interviewees insisted that **story is not what is needed**, appropriate, or even ethical in the midst of their revolution. Now, it is one thing to say that Lebow is wrong, and it isn't very different to argue that she is in error about *Filming Revolution*, and that it is not an **ontographic documentary**. It is however a very different thing to sit in a room in a conference in Bristol and argue that the people who lived this revolution, that their testimony, understanding, and experience of their own lived world, is wrong. Very simply (it is not complicated at all) the intellectual and ethical vacuity of a claim like this needs to be named and known.

Theoretically we cannot make this claim without also dismissing the role and importance of the documentary's participants and witnesses. This is, as Latour insistently reminds us, a parody of academic expertise as it means we believe and insist that our own theoretical models offer a better account of these people's experience and testimony than their own. Remembering that we were not in Cairo, did not participate, and have not experienced a revolution of this nature, ever. What is necessary, theoretically, to insist that they are wrong, that they, the interviewees, don't really know what they are talking about and that we, as documentary scholars, do? We call this, in other contexts, colonialism.

If you accept that these claims for story is over reaching then it is difficult to see why these arguments do not also logically ascend back up the tree from interviewees, to work, to speaker. For if we are over stretching when we say that these filmmakers who are suffering and living through a revolution do not know their own experience and understanding, what grounds do we have to also say that *Filming Revolution* is only **story**? In other words, if you accept the premise that these interviewees do know what they are talking about, it follows (since this is one of their claims) that story as a patterned, teleological container, is a problem ethically, politically, and discursively — and that there are other ways.

In trying to recognise, describe, and do, these other ways computational nonfiction wants to deflect or at least parry with the **human as an inevitable centre** or measure of documentary.

8 Alisa Lebow

This is quoted, verbatim, from Lebow's bio that I found on the *Filming Revolution* site:

Alisa Lebow is a filmmaker/film scholar based in London. Lebow is originally from NY and has lived and taught in Istanbul, Bristol and London. She is currently a Reader in Film Studies at University of Sussex, teaching modules such as 'Film and Revolution' and 'First Person Film'. Her research is generally concerned with issues related to documentary film, recently to do with questions of "the political" in documentary. Her article "The Unwar Film" (A Companion to Contemporary Documentary, Wiley-Blackwell, 2015: 454–474) creates a taxonomy of the contemporary war documentary, arguing for a cinematic mode that can undo the logic of militarism that other documentaries wittingly or unwittingly uphold. Her article "Shooting with Intent: Framing Conflict" (Killer Images, Wallflower Press, 2012: 41–61) explores the relationship between the documentary camera and the gun. She has written extensively on first person filmmaking, as well as writing on the works of Chantal Akerman, Kutlug Ataman, and Eleanor Antin. Her books include *The Cinema of Me* (Wallflower, 2012) and *First Person Jewish* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008). She is also the co-editor of *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary* with Alexandra Juhasz (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015). Lebow's film work includes *For the Record: The World Tribunal on Iraq* (2007), *Treyf* (1998, co-directed with Cynthia Madansky) and *Outlaw* (1994). The *Filming Revolution* website combines Lebow's scholarly and practical work, and is her first foray into interactive media. *Filming Revolution* was funded by the Leverhulme Trust and supported by the School of Media, Film, and Music, University of Sussex.¹²

The introduction to her **talk at i-Docs in Bristol** was considerably shorter. She has a **website** too.

¹² Alisa Lebow, 'Alisa Lebow Bio,' *Filming Revolution: Reflections*, 2016.

9 An Archaeology of Computational Nonfiction

9.1 Is

This was written as a **hypertext**. That strikes me as an odd sentence to write in 2016 since hypertext is now, well, the Web. The sort of noun that is as universal as Coca Cola. Yet before the Web hypertext once heralded a writing and reading practice that promised the possibility and optimism of radical change and difference. Today, instead, hypertext has acquiesced to the protocological infrastructure of the Web and has seen that first unruly truculence of hypertext, the sort of hypertext I started to write academically over twenty years ago, neutered and domesticated.

I am trying to return to this unruly hypertext again.

So, twenty years on, it is an odd thing to have to say that I am writing this essay as a hypertext. Hypertext, as a writing and reading practice, celebrated multilinear structures and variable linked relations between its nodes, along the way interrogating the certainty of academic writing and its pithy teleological arrow of introduction, argument, and resolute conclusion. Hypertext also recognised the autonomous materiality of its links and their agency, an agency that has been overlooked and largely erased by the friction free usability of information architecture, interaction design and the **single, mute, href attribute**.

For a brief time I wrote and argued for a **hypertextual academic writing practice**. I believed then, as I still do now, that knowledge is more readily to hand, amenable, and realised in writing systems that encourage asides, explanation, contradiction, connection, and contrast. Hypertextual writing allows a non-totalising and anti-teleological practice where links, whether endorsing affinity or disagreement, arise in the very activity of writing to create structure and pattern as something that emerges in the event of, or in, writing. These are also the simple preconditions for any computational nonfiction.

Hypertextual writing is a **performative thinking in situ**. It tends to contours, not lines, and I would keep this in mind as you read this essay.

9.2 Storyspace

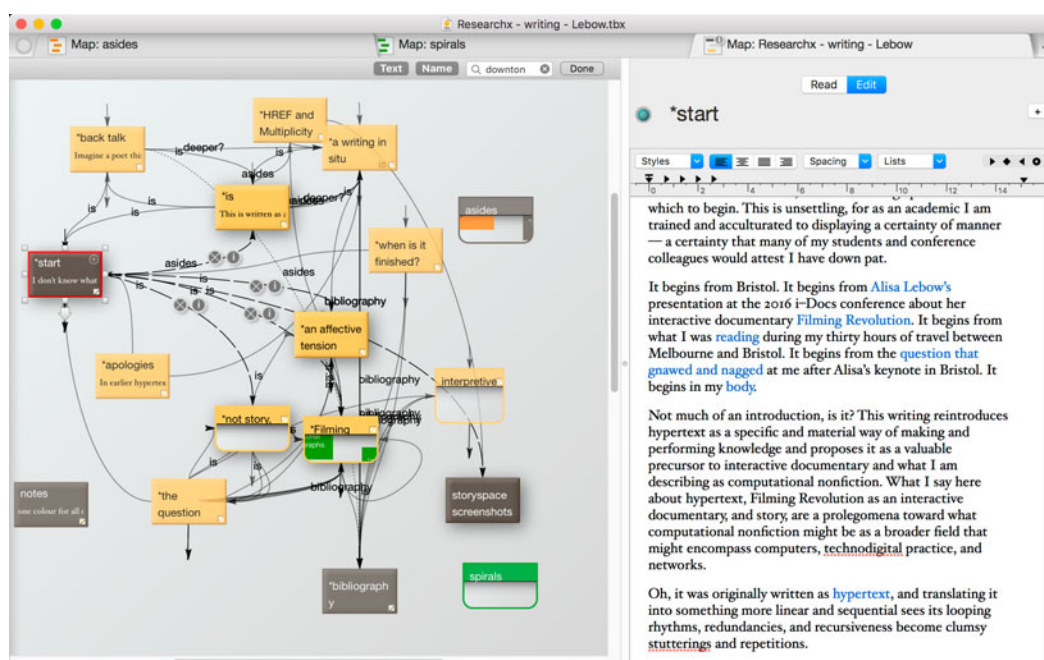


Figure 6. The beginnings of this essay as it was written as a hypertext in Storyspace.

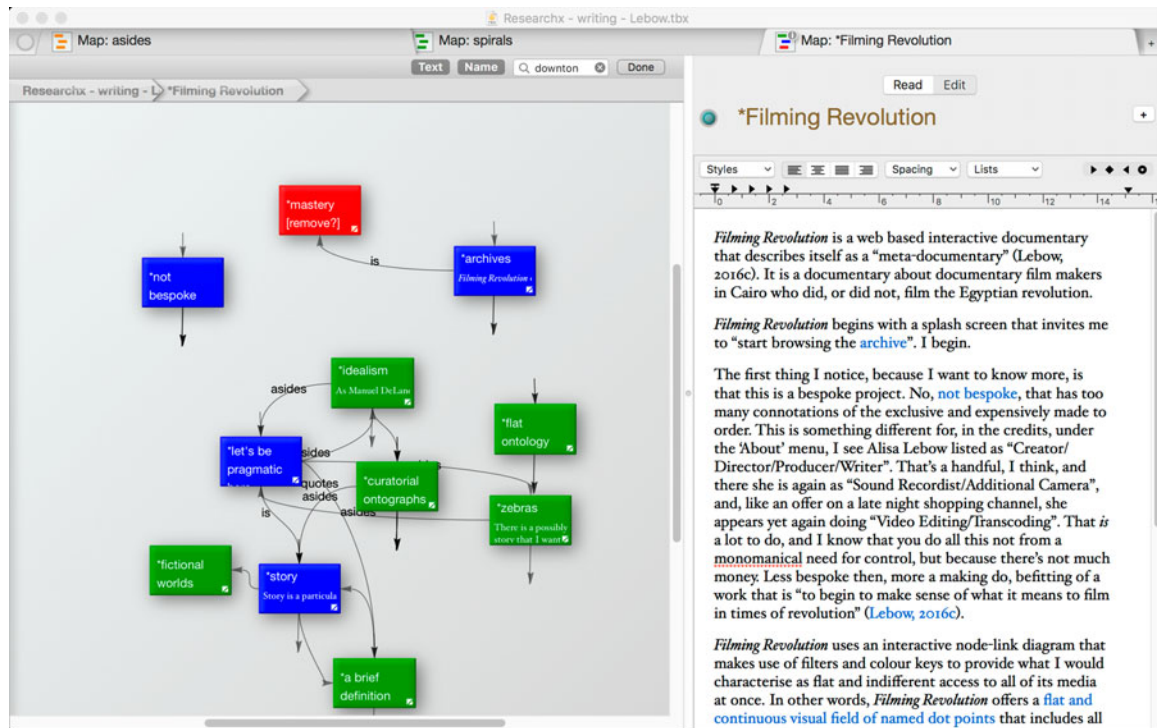


Figure 7. Part of this essay as it was written as a hypertext in Storyspace.

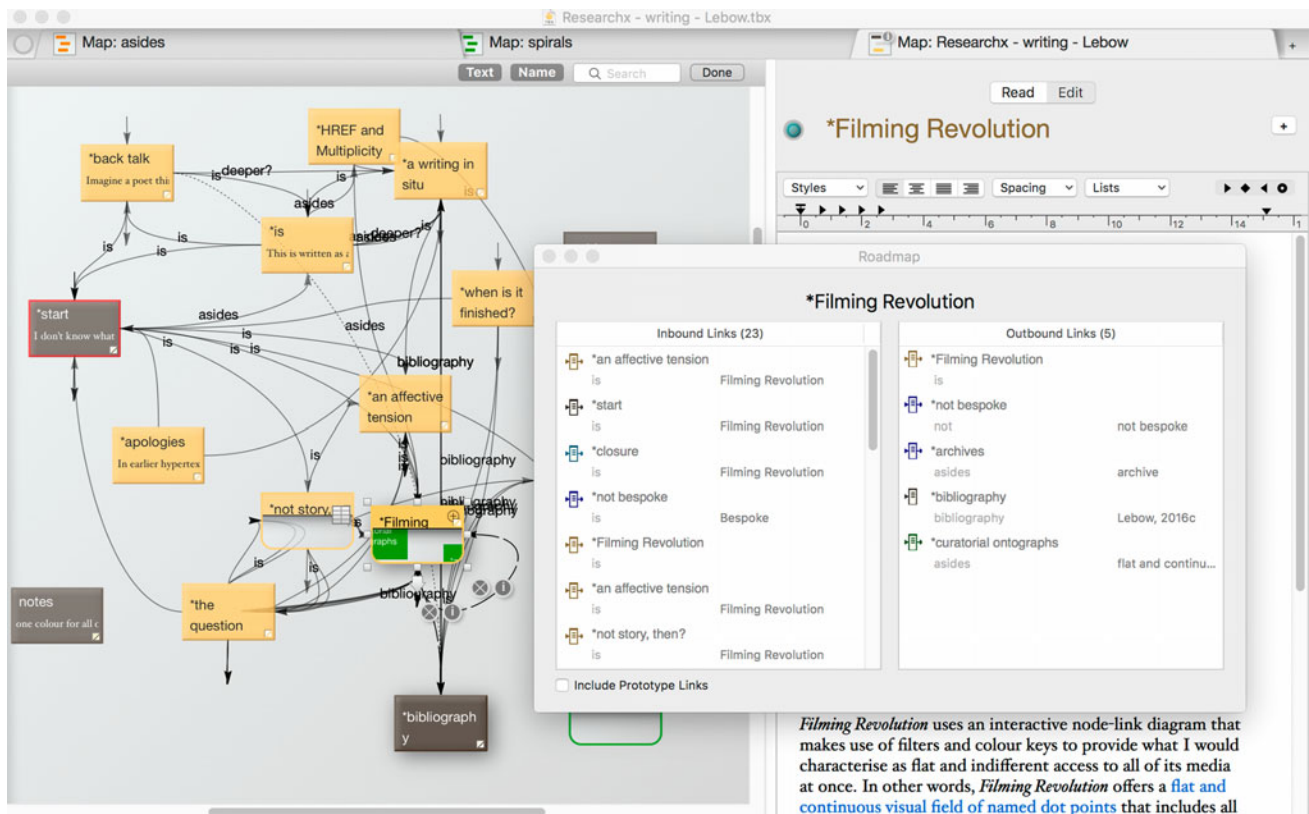


Figure 8. This essay in Storyspace showing links in and out of an individual node.

9.3 Apology

In earlier hypertext essays I often began as if I were writing an epistolary novel, with a letter to the reader. These letters provided an apology, by way of an account, for why I had written and published something academic as hypertext.

If **this essay** does not make sense on a page too bad. Too much of my academic writing has tried to accommodate socio-cultural-technical networks and publication technologies that academic practice and publishing thinks it requires. This academic machinery maintains and remains invested in the linearity of the page, and the causality of story, as if this is the only way that knowledge can happen. This is the **hegemony of story and causal linearity** as the canonical form of knowledge production and dissemination in the academy, even where we argue for multiplicity, assemblage, and complexity.

9.4 A Writing in Situ

Bruno Latour in 'From Multiculturalism to Multinaturalism' criticises a "modernist way of imagining rationalist thinking"¹³ that only desires to act when it already knows what to do, when thought has already "agreed on one best way" so that action becomes only "the implementation of knowledge into the real world".¹⁴ As Latour summarises, "[o]nce we know for sure, we act; when we are not sure, we don't act."¹⁵

Arguing for a contrary understanding Latour seeks a sense of action that: is never the realization, nor the implementation, of a plan, but the exploration of the unintended consequences of a provisional and revisable version of a project.¹⁶

Hypertextual writing (writing hypertext hypertextually) realises this exploration of the unintended. In the case of this essay the provisional is manifested by the deliberate constraint to employ a lo-fi, lo-rez **sketch writing**. It is provisional, revisable, even bordering on the ephemeral as it was written from the affectivity of an **encounter**. It was mostly written in the grey jet lagged alterness of the quiet deep night at a cramped desk, in a three star hotel, over several days, in Bristol.

Logical structure in hypertext — and **Filming Revolution** — emerges through the act of linking parts (in hypertext links have always been recognised as significant actors) and one writes from a position of not knowing what will be next, nor how they may come to be connected. It is, then, grounded in the possibility of "unintended consequence".

This essay is less a whole narrative than a **listing** of observations, anecdotes, and wonderings. This is a methodological model for a computational nonfiction practice that can accommodate text, writing, sound, video, in assemblages that involve computers and networks as actors.

9.5 When Is It Done?

In the centre of Reassembling the Social Latour stages an imagined dialogue between a student and professor. Eager to learn what actor-network theory is and how to use it the student is exasperated to be told that it offers no particular theory, nor even a rigorous method. Finally, exasperated, the student exclaims:

¹³ Bruno Latour, 'From Multiculturalism to Multinaturalism: What Rules of Method for the New Socio-Scientific Experiments?,' *Nature and Culture*, 6, 1, 2011, p. 12.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

- S: But that's exactly my problem: to stop. I have to complete this doctorate. I have just eight more months. You always say more descriptions but this is like Freud and his cures: indefinite analysis. When do you stop? My actors are all over the place! Where should I go? What is a complete description?
- P: Now that's a good question because it's a practical one. As I always say: a good thesis is a thesis that is done. But there is another way to stop than just by adding an explanation or putting it into a frame.
- S: Tell me it then.
- P: You stop when you have written your 50,000 words or whatever is the format here, I always forget.
- S: Oh! That's really great. So my thesis is finished when it's completed. So helpful, really, many thanks. I feel so relieved now.¹⁷

There is a pragmatism here that we can easily recognise. An end is not something immanently and magically there but something that requires its own manufacture. An end in any linear media (whether writing, music, or film hardly matters) is not a transcendental given that guarantees and authenticates completion, but is something negotiated between the work, its thinking, the length it is expected to be, and the clamour of a deadline. (Or disinterest.)

This essay adopts a similarly pragmatic definition of completion, disavows **closure**, and is finished because it is long enough.

9.6 Closure

The **talk I gave at i-Docs in Bristol** began, theoretically and personally, with some back story. Rewinding to the 1990s and my first experience of **hypertext**, I said:

Links in hypertext are not navigational. They express affinity, agreement, elaboration, disagreement, confusion, relation, relevance, contrariness, and connection. Writing here is a live laboratory of thinking in practice because the links made in the act of writing establish the relations that create structure, and this structure emerges in the very act of writing. Links create an epistemological architecture that does not precede their writing, and the shape of what is formed, the network of relations that emerges, is never known in advance. This is a Latourian actor-network.

From this I learned that links create multiple relations between parts, that writing done this way could still make knowledge claims, and that links emerged iteratively and generatively in the act of writing. I also learned that for this to happen I had to surrender some of my agency and to trust in this surrendering. I learned that ideas are things that are obstinate, and this is their pleasure and right for they have their own agency, quite apart from me, and that as things they have different ways, different facets, through which they can be interconnected.

This mirrors how I think, the way ideas and things are always densely intertwined, entangled, implicated promiscuously by each other. I have always struggled, with invisible horrible difficulty, with writing, and its tidy introductions, polite serial this then that capped by a well crafted conclusion that teleologically appears inevitable, collecting the previous pieces into a white picket fenced whole (snipping off the bits, discretely, that might hang over).

Continuing in a similar vein this essay is an entangled little body of writing where closure is, like viewing **Filming Revolution**, decided because you've either convinced yourself you've read it all, read enough of what you're interested in and are sated, or read enough to know that what you've read **enough**.

¹⁷ Bruno Latour, 2005, p. 148.

10 Story (A Spiral)

10.1 Being Pragmatic

Story is the bane of my theoretical life. When I argue that there are ways other than stories to understand the world (at least for an imagined computational nonfiction theory and practice) I am met with one of three replies.

The first is agreement, recognising that not everything is a story, and that much of the world is indifferent to its being narrated or not — the sun was shining several thousand million years before our species was even a **twinkle in our hominoid ancestor's DNA**, and will comfortably outlive us, no matter what we may want to say about it. This is my position.

The second asserts, with rising indignation, that everything is a story. This argument relies upon **critical theory's linguistic turn** and loosely argues that a) language is how we communicate, b) that language is synonymous with the linguistic, c) the linguistic is structured by difference so any relation between sign and meaning is arbitrary, d) and since it is arbitrary it is therefore made possible by an expression of social, political, or ideological power, and so constructs the world, hence e) the world is constructed, f) because we can only communicate about it linguistically.

Language as the normative centre of understanding is unquestioned for this second position, as is the incantation of structuralist and poststructuralist theory. Alternatives evidenced by things such as description, concrete poetry, song, fugue, music, painting, dance, haiku's, or play are ignored. All is story and nothing escapes its colonising power. This is a constructivist view of the world and what we can know that is absolute. This is not my position.

The third response has the politeness to limit story to the human. It still insists on the centrality of language that the linguistic turn initiated, yet is able to accommodate the view that amoeba, atoms, and antelopes do not need, use, and are indifferent to stories. Here, in stronger and weaker forms, language remains integral to what constitutes the world for the human, and so the world becomes, as with the second view, an epistemological rather than ontological problem. (Ontology largely being relegated to the deep problem of what it is to be a person. The **sort of person who has the time and intellectual leisure to delegate the awkward materiality and resistance of stuff to others.**)

While each of these positions should not be dismissed or caricatured so cavalierly, the concern of this essay is less the critique of linguistic anthropocentrism, but to pragmatically **bracket off story** as something that matters. This pragmatism is useful because the stronger and weaker varieties of constructivist epistemology tend, when tackled, to let the definition and purpose of story slip and slide so much that it becomes indistinct and no longer does any work because, by being nearly anything, it becomes nothing.

10.2 A Brief Definition

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's narratological primer offers this definition of **story**:

Story' designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events.

Whereas 'story' is a succession of events, 'text' is a spoken or written discourse which undertakes their telling. Put more simply, the text is what we read. In it, the events do not necessarily appear in chronological order, the characteristics of the participants are dispersed throughout, and all the items of the narrative content are filtered through some prism or perspective ('focalizer').

Since the text is spoken or written discourse, it implies someone who speaks or writes it. The act or process of production is the third aspect — 'narration'.¹⁸

¹⁸ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, Routledge, 1983, p. 3.

Note that a story has events with a temporal order and it is narrated. This chronological order is logical, not only that something happened before something else but that what happens prior is understood to cause what happens later. It is a form wedded to, that invites and requires, these **direct causal lines**.

10.3 Story

Story is a **particular way** of narrating. A story will have characters that do things and whose actions are internally consistent with the logic of the world that a **story proposes**. Stories, even where they elegantly feign otherwise, have a certainty of form where their game and pleasure is to know where they are going while appearing surprised at arriving there.

A story has characters who undertake actions that are coherent in the terms established by the story and these actions are always understood in light of the destination that is the end of the story. Furthermore, not only are story actions and events understood in light of the end of the story, they are also understood to cause this end. This much is all basic narratology.

Stories are then teleological and do not describe accidents. The presence of closure creates this teleology and are what makes stories a closed causal universe.

Story is not the same thing as discourse. Discourse, certainly since Foucault, is any communicative system that creates epistemological structures through its performance. The discourse of medicine, for example, is made up of a myriad of descriptions, accounts, actions, institutions, people, machines, pathogens, reports, definitions, symptoms, manuals, interpretations, stories, and bodies, and it is if not nonsensical, then certainly not useful, to describe medical training, text books, diagnostic machinery, medical equipment, anatomy classes, blood cells, and pathology laboratories as only stories, as Annemarie Mol makes very clear in *The Body Multiple*.¹⁹

Therefore, except for some forms of animism and monotheism, I do not think the world is a story in any ontological sense, nor is it being narrated. Geological history and action, nuclear and astro physics, modern biology, mathematics, even my smart phone as it chatters away amongst GPS, 4G and wifi signals are not telling stories. That each of these can have stories told about them and can be characters in stories, is not under question. However, because we can make something a character in a story or tell stories about something is an epistemological claim and is quite different to saying that these things are then only able to be characters in stories, which is an ontological claim.

10.4 Story Worlds

Stories create worlds that are internally consistent and we are able to make knowledge claims about this world on this basis. This is fiction's difference to nonfiction as fiction is only subject to this one demand of internal logical consistency. **Nonfiction**, on the other hand, rather than creating worlds, relies upon knowledge claims about the world.

Hence in Star Wars it is true that there is a 'force', light sabres are weapons, and there is a warrior cult called the Jedi. The evidence for these claims comes from the fictional world itself and this provides sufficient evidence. Nonfiction, on the other hand, requires its knowledge claims to be tested against the world, and not only on the basis of what a text says.

10.5 Interpretive Labour

Those of us who view, think, understand, or make nonfiction work that avoids the **abstraction that story entails** seem to feel the need to explicitly bracket off story as a privileged case. In doing this we often become indirect apologists for story in the very moments we are advocating for **something else**. For example, this was what Lebow did during her talk at the i-Docs conference in Bristol, wielding a litany of ready-to-hand homilies to shield or deflect criticism, before trying to say how things other than story are significant for a non-narrative nonfiction. This litany of phrases (which I too

¹⁹ Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*, Duke University Press Books, 2002.

commonly use) includes “I am not saying not to use stories”, or “I am not criticising story per se”, or “I am not saying that you can't tell stories with these things”, or “that stories are not a problem”.

Why do we feel obliged to bracket off story into its own special corner and not directly say that stories have problems? Feminism, postcolonialism, and queer theory do not have this dilly dallying recalcitrance. Perhaps it reflects the extent to which the **linguistic turn** has inserted itself so deeply into our theoretical psyches. Or it might be the anxiety of nearly two hundred years of industrial mass media confronted by the maelstrom of fragmentary everyday media making inaugurated by blogging, and reified by FaceBook, Twitter, Vine, Instagram, SnapChat, Periscope, and the increasing number of granular, digital documentation apps and services that erode the centrality of story, and the authority of institutional story tellers?

This obligation to appease and apologise for questioning story is a variety of what anthropologist David Graeber describes as “interpretive labour”.

For Graeber interpretive labour is how minority groups within a dominant culture are obliged to understand the mores of that dominant culture much more intimately than the dominant culture needs to understand the minority. The cost of causing offence, of being misunderstood, of getting it wrong, is so much higher for members of the minority than for those in the dominant culture. As Graeber pointedly notes:

These effects are often most visible when the structures of inequality take the most deeply internalized forms. Gender is again a classic case in point. For example, in American situation comedies of the 1950s, there was a constant staple: jokes about the impossibility of understanding women. The jokes (told, of course, by men) always represented women's logic as fundamentally alien and incomprehensible. “You have to love them,” the message always seemed to run, “but who can really understand how these creatures think?” One never had the impression the women in question had any trouble understanding men. The reason is obvious. Women had no choice but to understand men.²⁰

Interpretive labour occurs where those subject to power are obligated to understand its machinations and moods, the rules of the game as it were, in ways that those who are inherently privileged do not.

In the context of interactive documentary this interpretive labour is happening when we take aim at story's **anthropocentric essentialism**, what speculative realism describes as its **correlationism**. Those of us arguing alternatives to story also do this interpretive labour on behalf of our critics because we are obliged to know more about story and its alternatives than those who grant story sovereignty. In this regard story appears and operates as an ideology.

10.6 Law on Laws

In my talk at i-Docs in Bristol, in relation to what could be described as the ideological hegemony of story, I used an analogy from John Law's critique of the blind spot in sociological research methods. Law argues:

Particular sets of rules and procedures may be questioned and debated, but the overall need for proper rules and procedures is not. It is taken for granted that these are necessary. And behind the assumption that we need such rules and procedures lies a further range of assumptions that are also naturalised and more or less hidden. These have to do with what is most important in the world, the kinds of facts we need to gather, and the appropriate techniques for gathering and theorising data.²¹

I appropriated this quote, substituting Law's “rules and procedures” with my own “story and narrative” to arrive at:

Particular types of stories and narratives may be questioned and debated, but the overall need for proper stories and narratives is not. It is taken for granted that these are necessary. And behind the assumption that

20 David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, Melville House, 2016, p. 68–9.

21 John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, Routledge, 2004, p. 5.

we need such stories and narratives lies a further range of assumptions that are also naturalised and more or less hidden. These have to do with what is most important in the world, the kinds of stories we need to gather, and the appropriate techniques for gathering and theorising these stories.

Why? Well, as Law also suggests:

If much of reality is ephemeral and elusive, then we cannot expect single answers. If the world is complex and messy, then at least some of the time we're going to have to give up on simplicities. But one thing is sure: if we want to think about the messes of reality at all then we're going to have to teach ourselves to think, to practise, to relate, and to know in new ways.²²

Stories, implicitly and necessarily, simplify. This is their **use, value, joy and privilege**. It does not mean that they are the best or only means for nonfiction. For computational nonfiction stories are not the point, or a particularly good use, of the affordances and **messy entanglements** that computers, networks, and the world entails.

11 Excursus (Provocations)

11.1 Flat Ontology

The nodes and links of *Filming Revolution* are what Levi Bryant in *The Democracy of Objects* describes as a flat ontology.

For Bryant flat ontology “rejects any ontology of transcendence or presence that privileges one sort of entity as the origin of all others”²³ and that “all entities are on equal ontological footing”.²⁴ *Filming Revolution* shows all its parts as a cloud of nodal points and so makes minimal distinctions amongst these parts. Indeed, even after you have selected a node and its links are highlighted, all the other parts of the work remain visible and available. This flatness refuses to privilege something over anything else, is one possible response to the **teleology and logical causality that underwrites story**.

Such a flat ontology offers a way to think about computational nonfiction as a **curated ontograph** where granularity enables multiple loose connections between parts, reflecting a basic affordance of computers and networks.

11.2 Curatorial Ontographs

In *Alien Phenomenology* Ian Bogost riffs off Graham Harman to appropriate, and to some extent rehabilitate, the word ‘ontograph’. Bogost argues that:

Like a medieval bestiary, ontography can take the form of a compendium, a record of things juxtaposed to demonstrate their overlap and imply interaction through collocation. The simplest approach to such recording is the list, a group of items loosely joined not by logic or power or use but by the gentle knot of the comma. Ontography is an aesthetic set theory, in which a particular configuration is celebrated merely on the basis of its existence.²⁵

For Bogost the ontograph is a type of list making that can be textual, aural, or visual. This sort of list making is **flat and open** ended to the extent that the list in its simplest form does not rely on a hierarchy (it is not a ranking), and can always be added to. When making a list possible connections and relations between terms do not need to be grounded, nor defined, by any particular informing principle or episteme. For Bogost an ontograph “records ... a profusion of particular perspectives on a particular set of things”.²⁶ A list is then open ended, can begin anywhere, and ends where it ends simply, explicitly, and only because you have come to the last thing on the list.

22 Ibid., p. 2.

23 Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, Open Humanities Press, 2011, p. 245.

24 Ibid., p. 246.

25 Ian Bogost, 2012, p. 38.

26 Ibid., p. 52.

A list is **not a story**, and offers itself as a methodology for assembling items into collections that are open, flat, indiscriminate, interested, and partial. This essay, like *Filming Revolution* and its granularity, plays (at least a little) with the **profusion of perspectives** and parts that ontography encourages.

11.3 Back Talk

Imagine a poet thinking that to write poetry they did not need to write poetically. Good practice obliges you to **work inside your media**. This is the only way it can be allowed to push and pull at you and to talk back, what Donald Schön famously describes as 'back-talk'.²⁷ This back-talk is the agency of its materiality asking to be heard. Words, ideas, sentences, phrases, and their relations are the particular affordances and materialities of writing in hypertext. This is a different practical and epistemological economy than a writing defined by the page. This is what **this essay is**. Computational nonfiction is similarly obligated to learn how to listen to this back-talk.

11.4 Correlationism

Correlationism is a term Quentin Meillassoux introduced to **recent materialist theories** that are variously labelled speculative realism, Object Orientated Ontology, and speculative materialism.²⁸ Correlationism **describes as anthropocentric** the way we take things (and being) to exist only in correlation to the human. More specifically, correlationism describes the view that things exist because of a relation between a human mind and the world. Things implicitly have significance (and being) as a consequence of this act of conferral by us as perceiving and intending phenomenological centres and agents.

Ian Bogost has **similarly characterised correlationism** as the general view where "humans and the world are inextricably tied together, the one never existing without the other".²⁹ **Story**, as Bogost says, "acts as a correlationist amplifier".³⁰

11.5 The Linguistic Turn

The contribution of the linguistic turn to theory has been substantial and demonstrated the way that language, including stories, construct worlds. However, the error of the linguistic turn has been to then mistake this structuring as the world, or all that it is possible to say about the world. As Levi Bryant recently argued:

Everything became an alienated mirror of humans and the task became demonstrating that what we found in things was something we put there. To speak of the powers of things themselves, to speak of them as producing effects beyond their status as vehicles for social relations, became the height of naïveté.³¹

This is one way to recognise how privileging the linguistic is a form of **correlationism**. Correlationism easily includes views that treat **story** as our only heuristic for sense making in the world.

11.6 The Material Turn

Contemporary theory is currently experiencing a material turn, witnessed in the rise of terms such as 'speculative realism', 'Object Orientated Ontology', 'posthumanism', 'actor-network theory', 'tiny ontology', 'unit operation', and 'speculative materialism'.

27 Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think In Action*, Basic Books, 1983.

28 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, Trans. Ray Brassier, Bloomsbury Academic, 2010.

29 Ian Bogost, 2012, p. 4.

30 Ibid., p. 40.

31 Levi R. Bryant, *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, p. 3.

This material turn leaves behind the **language and discourse centred models of poststructuralism**, arguing that structural and poststructural theories that are premised on language as origin and cause inevitably limit our ability to understand and say things about the capacity and agency of nonhuman things. More significantly, the material turn understands that what might once have been thought of as inert matter is anything but, and that our world contains an infinity of things that have agency without any need of the human, and where these things intersect with the human the material agency of these things matters for and to the human — outside of any concerns of intent or meaning. It is this question of intent and meaning that sees theorists such as Ian Bogost advocating for methods **other than narrative** as ways to address and describe the world.

11.7 Mastery

Lebow, writing about why she made *Filming Revolution* rather than undertaking the more usual academic action of writing an essay, or book, notes:

“to position myself as the author of a book about filmmaking in Egypt since the revolution, is to put myself in the position of mastery over my subject, a positioning I was unwilling to take at the outset as now.”³²

Later, she observes:

“Rather than playing the expert, which is all I would be doing, I preferred the position of interlocutor, an interactivity that is amplified rather than reduced by this platform. My questions led to a range of responses most of which are aired here, and can be heard in dialogue with one another, not just with me. My role as producer or director becomes one of facilitator, organizing the material in ways that can be accessible, searchable, allowing it to resonate on multiple levels.”³³

Mastery though is no longer the descriptor of what we need to do, or should be doing. Its connotations of **control over the material** flies in the face of the elegant and often indolent recalcitrance of what we work with. Whether **ideas, code, video, codecs, electricity, or people**.

11.8 Idealism

Manuel DeLanda has acerbically criticised idealism in an interview with Dolphijn and Van der Tuin: “the paradox is this: idealism was created by males who were in an academic environment in which their material practices were reduced to a minimum, and who had wives who did all the material work”.³⁴

There is a **reasonableness** to this that sets me back on my heels with its pragmatic bluntness. Outsource the **recalcitrance of the world** to others and it is easy to imagine it doesn't matter.

11.9 HREF and Multiplicity

In HyperText Markup Language (HTML) it is the href attribute that defines a link from the source to a destination URL. This specification allows a link to have a single destination. In a hypertext program such as **Storyspace**, and most other hypertext systems developed and imagined before the dominance of the Web, a link is understood to be capable of having multiple, simultaneous destinations.

32 Alisa Lebow, '**FR Background**,' *Filming Revolution: Reflections*, 2016.

33 Ibid.

34 Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, eds, 'Interview with Manuel DeLanda,' *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, Open Humanities Press, 2013, p. 47.

This means that a phrase or sentence in Storyspace can have many simultaneous destinations. The difference between the Web and its HTML protocols, and a hypertext system like Storyspace is that it offers more agency for the link. Philosophically, this reprises the traditional distinction between the one and the multiple. In a genuinely hypertextual system, however, the ability of a link to have as many destinations as it wants is an expression of multiplicity, it is neither one nor many as it is both. It is this multiplicity that makes hypertext a relational media and is why *Filming Revolution* is a relational interactive documentary. Such **relationality**, as a multiplicity, is a basic affordance for any computational nonfiction that wants to engage with the world beyond only describing it, that wants to work with the computational and the network rather than colonise it.

Biography

Associate Professor Adrian Miles is co-director of the **non/fictionLab**, and Deputy Dean Learning and Teaching in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, in Melbourne, Australia. He was formerly the Program Director of the **consilience Honours lab**. Adrian does research on networked video, interactive documentary, and computational nonfiction, from a materialist point of view with a Deleuzean cinematic inflection. Adrian's research interests also include pedagogies for new media, digital video poetics, and experimental academic writing practices.