

Anna Wiehl im Gespräch mit Alisa Lebow

Evidence from Living Documentary Archives

**Authorship, Curation and editing
in Interactive Database Documentary**

**An interview with Alisa Lebow on her interactive
meta-documentary *Filming Revolution***

Kurzbiografie

In 2012, Alisa Lebow, filmmaker and film scholar based in London, curated a program for the Istanbul Film Festival called «Filming Revolution». The program consisted of contemporary films emerging out of the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria, bringing them into dialogue with revolutionary films from other eras and countries, such as Algeria, Iran and Palestine. The dialogues were not only staged between films, but also between filmmakers, historians, and theorists, culminating in a fascinating roundtable discussion in front of a rapt audience. After this inspiring experience, she came to the conclusion that it would be a pity if this encounter had to end with the festival only to disappear into oblivion afterwards.

This led Lebow to design a dynamic interactive platform that might make it possible for some «energy to flow back to the filmmakers on the front lines in the form of works and ideas from previous and ongoing struggles». ¹ Initially the idea was to touch on a broad range of contexts and experiences, both contemporary and historical. The result of this effort is the interactive database archive project *Filming Revolution*. *Filming Revolution* brings together the words, ideas, and projects of independent filmmakers working in Egypt since the revolution.

In the course of her research, Lebow visited Egypt twice and filmed over 30 interviews with filmmakers, activists, archivists and artists there. These interviews were edited based on theme and linked to trailers and extracts from their projects, as well other material, such as articles and external websites. Thus, *Filming Revolution* is meant as a record of ideas and methods, as much as it is of filmic output. It is less

1 Alisa Lebow in an interview with Anthony Alessandrini for *jadaliyya*. Anthony Alessandrini: *Filming Revolution: An Interview with Alisa Lebow*. In: *jadaliyya*, 19.11.2015. http://photography.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23217/filming-revolution_an-interview-with-alisa-lebow (21.04.2016).



1 Istanbul Film Festival, April 2012 *Filming Revolution* Roundtable. From left to right: Andrei Zagdansky, Mourad Ben Cheikh, Elyes Bacchar, Agnes Devictor, Khaled Fahmy, Hanan Abdalla, Alisa Lebow

an archive of audio-visual evidence of the Egyptian uprisings than an archive of the thinking and resultant projects that emerged in the aftermath of those heady days.² Unlike the well-known crowd-sourced website *18 Days in Egypt*, which attempts to chronicle the events of the revolution itself based strictly on user generated content, *Filming Revolution* is instead a carefully curated creative rendering of the filmmaking strategies and ideas emerging in Egypt after the dust has settled. *Filming Revolution* strives to set up various kinds of relations and to enable individual paths to enter into the mini-universe that is the independent film scene in Egypt.

How would you describe Filming Revolution? Is it an interactive archive? Is it a participatory platform or is it a meta-documentary?

As I'm not sure whether we can call it a documentary per se, I invented the phase «meta documentary», because in some sense the goal of the project is to document documentary projects. Even though it's a project about film-making, it's not attempting to be a straight up documentary, even in an interactive sense.

2 Cf. Alisa Lebow: *Filming Revolution*. <http://www.filmingrevolution.org> (21.04.2016).

I guess we can call it an interactive documentary database. We can call it any number of things. In fact, I'm happy to leave that to others to define, but what was important for me was that it is both an interactive experience that has a conceptual basis and that it is also a useful research tool.

*So if we approach interactive documentary in general and *Filming Revolution* in particular as a research tool – for whom did you design it? For academics and archivists? For filmmakers, journalists and other media practitioners? For those involved in the event – i.e. for activists? Or did it even become a tool for thought for you yourself as filmmaker and media scholar?*

I'm not sure all interactive documentaries set out to be a research tool. I think some intend to provide an «experience» or to «tell stories», or what have you. There are those that seek to entertain, and others, I suppose, to inform. And of course, depending on how you think of research, any cultural artefact can be useful for research purposes.

I very much hope that *Filming Revolution* will be useful and interesting for all that you mention. It has certainly become a tool for thinking for myself. I've yet to really fully understand all of the material that the website is slowly revealing to me. It's something that I'm still learning from and hope to continue learning from. But more than for myself, I hope that it's a tool for others. I believe there are multiple audiences for this project and each will engage with it differently.

The filmmaker in Cairo who knows many of the players and shares a history with them will engage with the material differently than, say, a journalist in New York, who is interested in making connections between films from the Occupy movement and Egypt. Yet another type of engagement would be the researcher, say a PhD student, who is analysing filmmaking strategies across the region. Ideally this is an inspiring resource for any of these positionalities, in different ways, and many more as well.

Were there any projects that inspired your thinking of interactive documentaries as research tools?

Yes, there were several, but most often their interfaces were dismal: [They organize material in ways that] you might as well just go to a library and pull out books. These projects might be very useful, but they do not have any design concept for the interface other than to make it easy and clear.

Others were very dynamic, beautiful, exquisite even, however, they lacked the ability to retrieve information. So for *Filming Revolution* I had to figure out how to find the right balance between dynamic graphic presentation and retrieve-searchability.

This screenshot shows a network diagram with 'FIRST PERSONAL FILM' at the center. Nodes include 'WAVES', 'SHERIF GABER', 'ALIA AYMAN', 'BASSAM MORTADA', 'VIOLA SHAFK', 'MOHAMED RASHAD', 'ABDULLAH SHARKAS', 'YASMIN ELAYAT', 'AHMED INOOR', 'CATHARIS', 'AHMED FAWZY SALEH', and 'RIT NICHARDT'. Each node is connected to the center and has associated text notes. The interface includes a search bar, navigation tabs (ABOUT, CREDITS, REFERENCES, REFLECTIONS, COMMENTS, CONTACT), and a filter menu on the right with categories like 'activation', 'archive', 'audience', 'distribution', 'documentary', 'film as weapon', 'evidence (legal)', 'film festivals', 'filming revolution', 'first person/personal film', 'funding + distribution', 'history + memory', 'identity', 'independent fiction filmmaking', 'independent film initiatives', 'issues/themes/clashes', 'journalism', 'limits of representation', 'memory + history', 'metaphor/allegory', 'miscellaneous', 'narrating the revolution', 'random', 'revolution 2.0', 'role of the artist', 'what is revolution?', and 'women/gender'.

This screenshot shows a network diagram with 'FIRST PERSONAL FILM' at the center. Nodes include 'MOHAMED RASHAD', 'ABDULLAH SHARKAS', 'KANDAKE', 'CATHARIS', 'ALIA AYMAN', 'NADA RIYADH', 'BASSAM MORTADA', and 'RIT NICHARDT'. The interface includes a search bar, navigation tabs (ABOUT, CREDITS, REFERENCES, REFLECTIONS, COMMENTS, CONTACT), and a filter menu on the right with categories like 'activation', 'archive', 'audience', 'distribution', 'documentary', 'film as weapon', 'evidence (legal)', 'film festivals', 'filming revolution', 'first person/personal film', 'funding + distribution', 'history + memory', 'identity', 'independent fiction filmmaking', 'independent film initiatives', 'issues/themes/clashes', 'journalism', 'limits of representation', 'memory + history', 'metaphor/allegory', 'miscellaneous', 'narrating the revolution', 'random', 'revolution 2.0', 'role of the artist', 'what is revolution?', and 'women/gender'.

This screenshot shows a network diagram with 'FILMING REVOLUTION' at the center. Nodes include 'ANIMATION', 'GENDER/SEXUAL VIOLENCE', 'MOBILITY', 'METAPHOR/ALLEGORY', 'PROPAGANDA', 'UNDERGROUND/ON THE SURFACE', 'TO FILM OR NOT TO FILM', 'FUNDING + DISTRIBUTION', and 'FILMING REVOLUTION'. A portrait of Salma El Tarsi is shown. The interface includes a search bar, navigation tabs (ABOUT, CREDITS, REFERENCES, REFLECTIONS, COMMENTS, CONTACT), and a filter menu on the right with categories like 'activation', 'archive', 'audience', 'distribution', 'documentary', 'film as weapon', 'camera as a resource', 'evidence (legal)', 'film festivals', 'filming revolution', 'first person/personal film', 'funding + distribution', 'history + memory', 'identity', 'independent fiction filmmaking', 'independent film initiatives', 'issues/themes/clashes', 'journalism', 'limits of representation', 'memory + history', 'metaphor/allegory', 'miscellaneous', 'narrating the revolution', 'random', 'revolution 2.0', 'role of the artist', 'what is revolution?', and 'women/gender'.

2–4 Screenshots from Filming Revolution’s rhizomatic interface enabling the dynamic exploration of interview extracts coalescing around specific issues and thus creating a virtual dialogue (<http://www.filmingrevolution.org>, 21.04.2016)

Were there also other issues apart from this delicate balance that were especially important when designing an interface? What were your main intentions?

There are always several layers of an interface. Some people might approach an interface in a way to utterly simplify it, to reduce those layers. I was interested in having these layers visible – I tried to avoid oversimplifying. Thus I decided that these layers should be part of the experience. I do not want the user to be able to easily come to the material and digest it. There is something much more complicated about the scene that I'm creating or that I entered into in Egypt that deserved its own complexity.

So again, you had to balance usability on the one hand and your documentary argument – this idea of complexity – expressed in the design on the other hand?

Exactly. I do not want to overwhelm anybody, but I want the users to experience the breadth of possibilities. And apart from that, I want to give them some tools to be able to then negotiate that breadth.

The first screen you encounter once you've entered the site is the 'global archive', which appears to be quite vast. All of the possible themes and categories and people and projects are encountered here, but then there are ways to filter the archive to get to smaller clusters and to follow different pathways.

In my opinion it's important for people to have an experience that has a concept behind it. In the case of *Filming Revolution*, the concept is based on enabling different constellations of relations, the Benjaminian idea that these relations are not linear and shouldn't be reduced to a simple causal link or chain, but that they can reconfigure, almost in a crystalline structure, depending on what it is you are looking for or interested in. Ideas are brought into relation, interview extracts coalesce around specific themes, in effect creating a virtual dialogue on a whole range of related issues.

*This brings us back to one of the essential issues with regard to interactive factual storytelling and the experience of designing of i-docs: the combination of indeterminacy and randomness on the one hand and the creation of meaningful experiences, usability, the searchability of audio-visual archives or databases – the fact that despite the openness of pathways, *Filming Revolution* is not authorless.*

The concept of authorship really has to be opened up quite a bit for me here. On the one hand I felt myself much more of a curator than an author: A curator has a great detail of editorial input, but she leaves things much more open than is the case with 'authorial presence' in the traditional sense. So 'curator' would come closest to describing my role in *Filming Revolution*. However, this concept needs some modification, too: It doesn't account for the fact that I was doing the interviews, asking

a series of questions; it doesn't necessarily account for the actual writing of the accompanying articles that I wrote for every interview.

Although I call these accompanying texts 'articles', they are basically notes about the interview – but they are notes that come from a particular point of view: mine! I didn't try to write them in a detached objective way. I thought it was the one place where my experience of the interaction could emerge and I had no interest in hiding my authorial voice.

In addition, the term curator might not fully account for the fact that the project was conceptualized entirely by me and thus entirely 'framed' if you will, by me. This is clearly my creative project in one sense. Yet at the same time it is a platform for others – other people's ideas and projects.

I think the process of editing deserves some mention, in that it was different from any other video editing I have done. I experienced the editing of the interviews as almost 'non-judgemental', which is the opposite of how I have always thought of editing. If you are editing a linear piece, a documentary say, of 90 minutes, a hell of a lot ends up on the proverbial cutting room floor. You are making judgements all of the time. You are deciding what stays, what goes, what goes next to what, what creates the desired dramatic effect. You are making very stringent editorial decisions.

However, you did do some form editing.

Yes, but in contrast to my linear documentaries, with this project, I edited basically for coherence; somebody had to be making sense. They [interviewees] had to be making a point, and if they had made the point twice, I just took the one that was more engaging, more articulate. That was more or less the extent of my judgements. My judgements didn't extend to whether I agreed with the person or not, whether I liked what they were saying or not, or whether it fit with what someone else had said. In fact, many people brought in all kinds of issues that I hadn't considered beforehand. To that extent they also determined many of the themes of their interviews. If something came up in an interview that I hadn't thought of, it *certainly* had a place in this website. As long as it related somehow to the general theme of the website – independent filmmaking in Egypt since the revolution – it was in. So that almost complete lack of judgement in the editing process was a very new experience for me.

Process and the procedural emergence of meaning seems to play a key role. How far is this linked to the idea of revolution itself?

I don't like to belabour the metaphor of revolution in that I don't think this is – or at least I'm not the one to claim whether this is or isn't – a revolutionary structure. When I talk about revolution [in my writing on the subject], I try to avoid the tendency of certainly Western historians to foreclose the possibilities of the

revolutionary wave and to suggest that it is all over, just because we happen to be in a counterrevolutionary moment.

However, I try not to burden the website too much with these ideas, even if I aimed to create a structure that loosely corresponds to the ways the organization of these current revolutionary movements have unfolded as multiple, as rhizomatic, as non-hierarchical, etc.

So in that sense, you maybe could say that metaphorically speaking, there is a relation [between interface design, procedural meaning making and the contemporary idea revolution], but I wouldn't push it too far.

Taking into account all of the afore-mentioned issues and tendencies, challenges and opportunities – where do you personally see the future of documentary practices and documentary research?

I've never thought that interactive documentary would replace more traditional, or shall we say more established, forms of documentary (as I don't think the most interesting linear documentary work is 'traditional' in any sense), but rather I see it developing alongside linear practices and expanding how we think about documentary, which is always a good thing. Similarly, I don't think that there's just one way to make interactive documentary work. Not all projects aim to be understood as research let alone tools for research, and not all projects aim to be creative either. Mine aims to be both. What I set out to do was a type of 'film studies 2.0' where we're no longer confined to the printed page and we can bring our object of study alive for the audience, while simultaneously providing an invaluable research tool for anyone who is interested (and has enough bandwidth, it should be said). I can see a place for this type of project beyond film studies as well, and in fact I've been talking with many people who have all kinds of projects for which the template of *Filming Revolution* can be of use, everything from bringing an already existing archive online in a dynamic way, to creating a project charting the uses of media to end patriarchy. The possibilities are limitless.

Abbildungsnachweis

Umschlag: Screenshot Google-Bildersuche (Suchbegriff: «web documentary», 14.7.2016).

Samuel Gantier

1: *Voyage au bout du Charbon* (http://www.lemonde.fr/asiapacifique/visuel/2008/11/17/voyage-au-bout-du-charbon_1118477_3216.html); 2, 3: *Bear 71* (<http://bear71.nfb.ca/#/bear71>); 4: *Code Barré* (<http://codebarre.tv/fr/#/fr>); 5: *Sandy Storyline* (<http://www.sandystoryline.com>); 6: *Fort McMoney* (<http://www.fortmcmoney.com/#/fortmcmoney>); 7: Teaser für *Jaurès Pas à Pas* (<http://jaures-pas-a-pas.fr>).

Florian Mundhenke

1–3: Abbildungen aus Nutzerstudien zu *Prison Valley*, erstellt am Institut für Kommunikations- und Medienwissenschaft der Universität Leipzig..

Daniel Fetzner/Martin Dornberg

1–4: <http://parasite.metaspaces.de>; 5: Screenshot aus *Sensory ethnography* (http://parasite.metaspaces.de/#SENSORY_ETHNOGRAPHY), 6: Screenshot aus der Google Analytics von BUZZ (10.3.2016).

Elisa Linseisen

1–3: Screenshots aus *Limbo* (<http://inlimbo.tv/de/>).

Nicole Braidia

1–6: Screenshots aus *Refugees* (Arte 2014); 7–10: Screenshots aus *Refugee Republic* (Submarine Channel 2014).

Anna Wiehl (Interview mit Alisa Lebow)

1: Fotografie Lebows vom Istanbul Film Festival (April 2012), 2–4: <http://www.filmingrevolution.org>.

Alle Screenshots wurden von den AutorInnen selbst erstellt.