The State of Interactive Documentaries in Turkey Within the Digitalization Process of Documentary Production

Ersan Ocak, Ph.D.
TED University, Turkey

Abstract

In Turkey, the digitalization of documentary production occurs in two distinct modes, parallel to the developments worldwide. We can term the first mode as "formal digitalization." In formal digitalization, documentaries traditionally produced using analog devices are now made, distributed, exhibited, or broadcasted entirely digitally. Consequently, while the narrative structures and cinematic/televisual audio-visual regimes established in analog documentary filmmaking are preserved, the production, distribution, exhibition, and broadcasting processes have become entirely digitalized. Within this digitalization mode, new opportunities emerge, leading to partial innovations in the production, distribution, exhibition, and broadcasting of traditional documentaries. In the mode of digitalization we call "structural digitalization," some documentarians—or artists, designers, and experts from different disciplines—leverage the unique affordances of digital medium and devices to produce digital documentaries where diverse narrative structures can be designed alongside established cinematic/televisual narrative structures using different audio-visual regimes. The digital documentaries produced within structural digitalization, characterized by their immersive and interactive qualities, are identified as new genres such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and interactive documentaries. While the process of formal digitalization in the documentary field has been completed in Turkey, very few interactive documentaries have been produced as part of the structural digitalization. This paper aims to understand the reasons behind this limited production. To achieve this, it attempts to reinterpret the digitalization process in Turkey's documentary production from a symptomatic reading perspective.

Keywords: Documentary, Digitalization, Structural digitalization, Interactive documentary, Symptomatic reading

Introduction

In Turkey, digitalization in documentary production occurs in two distinct ways, paralleling global developments. The first way, which we may refer to as "formal digitalization," involves the transition of documentary films and television documentaries—previously produced using analog equipment—to digital production, distribution, screening, and broadcasting. While the established narrative structures and cinematographic/televisual audiovisual regimes of documentary filmmaking are preserved in

this process, the means of production, distribution, and exhibition have become entirely digitalized over time. This form of digitalization brings about partial innovations within these processes, enabled by newly emerging digital opportunities.

The second way, termed "structural digitalization," involves certain documentary filmmakers—or artists, designers, and specialists from various disciplines—who leverage the unique potentials of digital media and devices to design digital documentaries with alternative narrative structures and audiovisual regimes beyond the traditional cinematographic/televisual formats. These digital documentaries, characterized by their 360-degree, immersive, and interactive features, manifest in novel formats such as virtual reality documentaries, augmented reality documentaries, and interactive documentaries. Such emerging digital documentary forms significantly expand the scope of the documentary genre.

However, given the potential complexity of examining all these new documentary forms together, this study will be limited to a specific category: interactive documentaries that are published on the internet, operate not only on smart televisions but also on computer, tablet, or mobile phone screens, and are structured around non-linear narratives.

In Turkey, the process of formal digitalization in the documentary field has been completed; documentaries and television documentaries are now entirely produced through digital means within established narrative and audiovisual regimes. In contrast, examples of interactive documentaries made within structural digitalization are scarce. This paper seeks to understand the reasons behind this limited production. To achieve this, it attempts to re-read the digitalization process in documentary production in Turkey in a more holistic and alternative manner.

The article will begin with a general methodological discussion. It will first justify the necessity of approaching the subject outside of a chronological, cause - and - effect - based, linear -progressive understanding. Then, inspired by the "symptomatic reading" method developed by Louis Althusser and introduced into the literary/theoretical field by Frederic Jameson, it will propose an interpretive framework that reads the digitalization of documentary production in Turkey through the lens of historically embedded paradoxes within the field of documentary. After listing these paradoxes as they have emerged in both national and global contexts of documentary production and

consumption, the paper will examine the production processes of formal and structural digitalization through this contextual framework. Before concluding, the study will analyze examples of interactive documentaries produced in Turkey to uncover the reasons behind the limited nature of their production.

1. Methodology

To reveal why interactive documentaries have been produced so sparingly during the digitalization of the documentary field in Turkey, we must develop a methodological approach that holistically addresses the two existing ways of digitalization. To do this, we must first move beyond the tendency to interpret these two ways of digitalization through a historically sequential (chronological) and causally linked linear-progressive mindset. There is no logical basis for assuming that structural digitalization can only occur once formal digitalization has been completed. Similarly, asserting that formal digitalization is a necessary precondition for structural digitalization is also logically unfounded. In such cases, linear-progressive historical narratives based on chronological, causal relationships inevitably fail to recognize certain cases, conditions, phenomena, and events.

We must also avoid other detrimental outcomes that result from the mechanical application of this kind of linear-progressive schema. For instance, although interactive documentary is a new form that expands the boundaries of the documentary field, we should not be quick to assume that it is more advanced—or hierarchically superior—than traditional documentary forms. Such a presumption must be treated with caution. Each new form of documentary emerges when a filmmaker finds the existing narrative structures and/or established audiovisual regimes inadequate or unsatisfactory for addressing the issues of their time (Nichols 2017, 114). Filmmakers tend to resolve these inadequacies by designing and conceptualizing within the scope of new opportunities presented by emerging platforms and production tools.

John Ellis (2012, 34) refers to documentary filmmakers as "technological opportunists," highlighting their inclination to utilize technological advancements to express the subject matter they are working on more effectively. This approach allows documentary filmmakers to find ways to realize their work, even when technological resources are limited or problematic. While not all, a significant number of filmmakers perceive the emergence of a new medium, such as the digital domain, as an opportunity to invent new narrative structures and audiovisual regimes. However, it would be incorrect to claim that technology determines the nature of the documentary merely because filmmakers follow technological developments to serve their creative objectives (Ellis, 2012, 34).

In conclusion, we must distance ourselves from a technologically determinist and chronologically linear-progressive perspective. A new documentary form does not invalidate its predecessors; instead, it introduces a difference that expands the scope of the documentary field.

2. Thinking Through the Paradoxes of Documentary Cinema as a Method

In this article, I aim to establish a conceptual framework based on the paradoxes of documentary cinema as a methodological approach. Drawing on this framework, I will explore how both ways of digitalization in Turkish documentary cinema can be contextualized. Within this context, I intend to uncover the minor differences that emerge in the production and consumption processes of traditionally existing documentary forms within formal digitalization in Turkey, while also explaining why so few interactive documentaries have been produced during structural digitalization.

Developing a conceptual framework through paradoxes is inspired by "symptomatic reading," a method first proposed by Althusser concerning Marxist philosophy and later re-conceptualized by Frederic Jameson for literary and theoretical criticism. Althusser's and Jameson's approaches to symptomatic reading differ significantly. According to Timothy Bewes (2010, 5-8), the primary distinction between the two lies in conceptualizing the symptom. Althusser's version is not a process of revealing what is hidden, nor a method that can be applied by a critical subject for interpretation. His symptomatic reading is a cyclical practice rooted in his reading of Marx's *Capital* and his engagement with Marxist philosophy. Given the specificity of its scope and application, this method is not easily generalizable to other fields (Bewes, 2010, 6).

Jameson, on the other hand, in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), developed a form of symptomatic reading intended to produce a critique of literary or theoretical texts by uncovering repressed, obscured, or veiled meanings beneath the surface of the text. Like Althusser, Jameson believes that texts are shaped by what is absent or invisible, yet he differs from Althusser by positing "history" as the singular absent cause. Thus, Jameson argues that the criticism produced through symptomatic reading brings to the surface and reconstructs the history suppressed by the text (Best & Marcus, 2009).

I propose a more straightforward and accessible method inspired by Althusser's and Jameson's symptomatic readings. I aim to holistically interpret how the two forms of digitalization have unfolded in Turkey by examining the paradoxes embedded within the historical development of the literature on Turkish documentary cinema and the entrenched beliefs about documentary (both in Turkey and globally) that have become paradoxical over time.

In the digitalization process, what documentary filmmakers and audiences fail to see is precisely what they are doing. Digitalization is typically first associated with formal digitalization. Within this framework, filmmakers and audiences tend to view digitalization merely as a means of overcoming production and consumption challenges, enabling them to make or watch higher-quality documentaries. In the context of structural digitalization, however, most fail to recognize the potential to create new narrative styles and/or audiovisual regimes through the unique affordances of the digital medium and its production tools. In both cases, they continue their documentary production and consumption practices, which are shaped by historically entrenched, often contradictory beliefs about documentary. Unless a significant event emerges that agitates, provokes, or challenges them at a deep level, they will persist in their practices within the bounds of these paradoxes.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by "paradoxes" in reference to documentary cinema (in Turkey). A paradox, in simple terms, refers to a belief or proposition that is internally contradictory. A paradox arises when reasoning that appears logically sound and based on true premises leads to self-contradictory or logically untenable conclusions. Regarding beliefs about documentary cinema, it is implausible for such beliefs to retain their validity in rigid form in the face of historical shifts in the relationship with reality across all domains of life, and amid paradigm shifts brought on by technological changes. Thus, we may now begin to discuss the prominent paradoxes that shape the field of documentary.

3. Prominent Paradoxes of Documentary Cinema (in Turkey)

As Nichols (2017, 104) points out, the lack of a singular definition of documentary—or the insufficiency of any single definition to encompass all types of documentary—inevitably leads to invalidating certain beliefs and assumptions about the genre over time. In other words, many commonly held views and convictions regarding documentary gradually transform into paradoxes as they evolve historically. On the other hand, the impossibility of rigidly defining documentary or confining it to a single mold is a positive feature of the genre (Nichols 2017, 104). This characteristic has allowed documentary cinema to remain a creative art form open to continuous evolution and transformation.

In the following discussion, I will highlight the prominent paradoxes associated with documentary cinema. These paradoxes are acutely felt and frequently debated among documentary filmmakers, critics, and academics in Turkey, but they are by no means unique to the Turkish context. They are also recurrent discussion topics in global documentary film festivals and critical and scholarly publications.

In this context, I will begin by examining the origins of these paradoxes in Turkey through the distinctive historical development of the (Turkish-language) literature on Turkish documentary cinema. Subsequently, I will outline a set of paradoxes that have emerged from widely held, established beliefs about documentary cinema in Turkey and worldwide.

3.1. The Paradox of Documentary Being Viewed More as an Ethical Than an Aesthetic Act in the Historical Development of Turkey's Documentary Cinema Literature

When looking at the origins of documentary cinema in Turkey, we encounter "documentary records," much like the early days of cinema worldwide. As Hakan Erkılıç (2015, 109) notes, "regardless of whether one begins the history of Turkish cinema with the Manaki Brothers or Fuat Uzkınay, it traces back to documentary record films."

A retrospective look at Turkey's documentary cinema literature reveals that the term "documentary record" (*belge film*) has been used in two distinct ways. On one hand, with a historical emphasis, it refers to single-shot visual recordings of events, phenomena, or situations from different regions, societies, or cultures, produced before the early spread of montage in cinema. In this sense, the Manaki Brothers' 1905 footage of their grandmother Despina spinning wool in Manastır, or the Lumière Brothers' "Arrival of a Train" (1895), are considered documentary records. Similarly, Fuat Uzkınay's *Demolition of the Ayastefanos Monument* (1914), often cited as the first Turkish film, was produced with the intention of documenting a specific historical moment as it occurred. As montage became a fundamental cinematic act, producing documentary records extended beyond single shots. The primary goal of documentary records was to reflect reality as it is, without the director's interpretation. In contrast, documentary films shape reality creatively through narrative structure and cinematographic style, distinguishing them from documentary records.

The difference between documentary records and documentary films was overlooked in Turkish cinema literature for a long time. Until the late 1960s, the term documentary record (*belge film*) was used both in its original sense and interchangeably with documentary film (*belgesel film*) (Erkılıç 2015, 109). This second usage caused the term to take on a misleadingly broad meaning, falsely encompassing documentary films. Yet, many documentary films were produced in Turkey before the 1970s. These included military documentaries from the late Ottoman and early Republican periods, city symphonies made by Nâzım Hikmet (though no copies survive), and a large number of university-produced documentaries created in the 1950s and 1960s by figures such as Selahattin Eyüboğlu, Mazhar Şevket İpşiroğlu, and Adnan Benk within the Istanbul University Film Center (Çelikcan 2021, 14-21). Despite this production, the term "documentary" (*belgesel*) only began to be used

in Turkish literature in the late 1960s and became established in the 1980s. Erkılıç (2015, 110), in his comprehensive review of Turkish documentary literature, highlights the problematic conflation of documentary record (*belge film*) with documentary film (*belgesel film*).

Due to the prolonged use of documentary record (*belge film*) instead of documentary (*belgesel*), it is fair to say that until the 1980s, documentary cinema in Turkey was perceived mainly as the mere representation of reality through documentary images. This perception ignored the fundamental distinction that separates documentary from documentary record: the director's narrative and formal creative interpretation.

The defining feature of a documentary is that it deals with real people, events, and phenomena that exist in the historical world. Like any filmmaker, the documentary filmmaker is expected to creatively interpret this reality through a unique cinematic vision, employing narrative forms and audiovisual regimes. Despite this, the abovementioned contradiction exposes one of the field's core paradoxes.

Because the representation of real-world elements in documentary cinema largely stems from recording them with a camera, documentaries are predominantly composed of documentary images. Even though documentary filmmakers reinterpret reality through their perspectives, unlike producers of documentary records, they often rely on conventional narrative structures and established audiovisual regimes. As a result, documentaries tend to be produced within the stylistic templates dictated by these traditions. Over time, for creators and audiences, the reproduction of reality in documentaries becomes synonymous with these templates. This identification reduces documentary to an ethical rather than aesthetic act, framing the representation of reality as a moral responsibility rather than a creative endeavor.

In summary, the long-standing belief (particularly up to the 1980s in Turkey) that a documentary's primary defining feature is its archival/documentary nature is reinforced by its confinement to conventional narrative structures and visual regimes. This results in the perception of documentary as an ethical act more than an aesthetic one. This paradox, which reduces documentary from a central cinematic genre to an ethical endeavor, can lead to claims that aesthetic treatments—such as stylization through audiovisual techniques or narrative innovation—undermine truth and are thus unethical. Consequently, the documentary filmmaker is expected not to explore artistic innovation or inventive audiovisual regimes but to remain within predefined ethical templates. One of the most serious risks here is that documentary, due to its ethical imperative, may devolve into a simplistic "truth generator," perceived as a cinema that produces a singular version of reality.

3.2. The Paradox of the Absent Documentarian: The Effacement of the Filmmaker Herself in Pursuit of Objective Truth

A widely held belief asserts that the director or producer of a documentary must maintain a distanced and objective stance toward the subject or topic of their film. This expectation parallels the perceived objectivity of scientific knowledge. For documentarians to reveal the truth, they are expected to suppress their thoughts and emotions regarding the film's subject, effectively effacing themselves from the work. Their personal opinions, sentiments, and viewpoints are presumed to remain external to the film. Through this complete detachment—by avoiding any form of bias or personal engagement with the subject—the documentary is believed to represent the truth authentically. This situation constitutes what might be termed the paradox of the documentarian who can only truly become a documentarian by not being present in their film.

Combined with the first paradox discussed earlier, this logic transforms the director/producer into a figure who must refrain from departing from conventional narrative structures and established audiovisual regimes, avoid personal creative interpretation, and exclude their subjective thoughts and emotions from the film. They are expected not to express their individual perspective within the cinematic work. Despite widespread acceptance of Grierson's famous definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality," the actual practice contradicts this very definition. A documentarian caught in this paradox is not only absent (*namevcut*), but also, in a sense, rendered unreal.

3.3. The Paradox of Documentary Cinema as the Kind of Cinema That Does Not Come to Mind When One Thinks of "Film"

When the term "film" is mentioned, documentaries are rarely the first to come to mind. For most viewers, if not all, "film" typically evokes feature-length, fictional films constructed within a classical narrative structure. Most of these films belong to the realm of commercial entertainment cinema. They are generally high-budget productions created within the industrial model of Hollywood. Even the non-Hollywood examples that come to mind are often fictional feature films designed to emphasize national differences, yet many of these are also produced in the Hollywood style (Ellis 1992, 23-24).

Despite the growing interest in documentary cinema since the 2000s, documentaries are still produced with significantly lower budgets and largely outside the production standards of the film industry. As a result, we encounter what can be described as a third major paradox: documentary cinema is the form of cinema that does not immediately come to mind when one hears the word "film."

3.4. The Paradox of the Audience Viewing the Documentarian More as a Scientist (or Historian) Than as an Artist

Most viewers assume from the outset that a documentary film will present them with the truth. Because documentaries inform and confront the viewer with reality, they are often respected a priori, not due to cinematic expectations, but simply because they are documentaries. In this context, the audience tends to fall into a paradox: rather than viewing the documentarian as a director or artist, they regard them as a sober, respectable, and ethically upright figure.

Since documentaries deal with real events, phenomena, and people, their script and cinematographic design are typically preceded by extensive research. This research often involves consultations with experts and scholars, and attempts are made to conduct the inquiry using scientific methods. The underlying motivation here is the belief that the credibility and prestige of scientific knowledge will reinforce the authority of the documentary's representation of truth. As such, the documentarian emerges as a filmmaker at the intersection of filmmaking and scientific knowledge production. Audiences who perceive documentarians this way tend to fall into a paradox: they see the filmmaker not as an artist, but rather as a scientist, or more specifically, as a chronicler of history—a narrow, almost bureaucratic historian. It is not uncommon for some documentarians to view themselves this way…

From this point onward, the article will critically examine how the abovementioned paradoxes inform and influence the formal and structural digitalization processes in Turkey's documentary production.

To answer the article's guiding question—why has the interactive documentary form, which emerged through structural digitalization, been so rarely produced in Turkey?—I will begin by outlining the key features of this form. I will then analyze two high-quality examples of interactive documentaries produced in Turkey within the context of the paradoxes discussed. These steps will allow me to arrive at a concrete response to the question posed and a conceptual conclusion in line with the broader framework developed in this study.

Let us begin by discussing the minor variations that have emerged in the production of historically rooted documentary forms during the process of formal digitalization in Turkey within this paradox-informed contextual framework. Then, we will attempt to explain why so few interactive documentaries have been produced during the structural digitalization process in the country.

4. Documentary Production in Turkey During the Process of Formal Digitalization

In the field of documentary production, we define the complete transition from analog to digital technologies—while preserving established narrative structures and audiovisual regimes in production, distribution, exhibition, and broadcasting—as "formal digitalization." Through formal digitalization, the standard practices of producing, distributing, exhibiting, and broadcasting analog documentaries are simply transferred to a new medium and reproduced in essentially the same manner within the digital environment. At this point, let us examine the changes that occurred throughout the entire process—from production to consumption—starting with the shift from celluloid to analog video devices, and later to digital video equipment, within this transition of mediums. While enumerating these changes, we will also assess formal digitalization through the contextual framework shaped by the paradoxes of documentary cinema that were outlined earlier.

In the 1970s, as Turkish cinema faced a profound economic crisis, shooting documentary films on celluloid became increasingly difficult. Meanwhile, the emergence of analog television broadcasting in Turkey during the same decade—and its expansion throughout the 1980s—provided more opportunities to screen documentaries. Consequently, analog video cameras and editing suites in documentary production became increasingly widespread. In this context, the transition from celluloid to analog video in documentary production is largely explained through an economic discourse. Here, "economic" refers to lower monetary costs and reduced time and labor requirements, enabling faster and more convenient production. This economic discourse can be concretely articulated as follows:

Producing documentaries with analog video was less costly than making them with a film camera and celluloid. The use of analog video introduced numerous conveniences and new possibilities in documentary filmmaking's production and post-production stages. For example, the obligation to develop celluloid footage and wait for a working copy from the lab before editing was eliminated. That is to say, the uncertainty of image and sound quality recorded on celluloid—and the time loss caused by the chemical development process—no longer posed a problem. Analog footage recorded on videotapes could be used directly for editing or broadcasting on television without undergoing any chemical processing. Compared to celluloid film montage, editing analog video was a much easier process.

On the other hand, analog video had a significant drawback compared to celluloid: the image quality of analog footage recorded on videotape was markedly lower than that of celluloid. Thus, it could not meet the quality standards required for cinematic exhibitions. Since analog video was invented as a by-product specifically for television broadcasting, i.e., its broadcasting quality standard has been determined by the technical norms of television.

What is it that documentary filmmakers failed to see during the transition from celluloid to analog video, and what did they do during this process? In other words, if we interpret this process through the lens of the expression "what documentary filmmakers fail to see is what they are doing," what do we encounter? Cinematographic language and the established audiovisual regimes that produce it were historically developed within the context of celluloid and cinema cameras. The images captured through these audiovisual regimes were edited following established cinematographic principles. The visual quality achieved with celluloid was projected onto large screens and enchanted audiences within the darkened, public setting of the cinema hall. Symbolically, celluloid represents this entire world of cinematographic construction. Conversely, analog video, as mentioned earlier, was invented for television broadcasting and was designed and produced to support television's ceaseless, high-tempo, immediacy-driven broadcast logic. By their very nature, the electronic images of analog video did not possess the high image quality derived from the chemical properties of celluloid. Despite this, documentary filmmakers insisted on applying the cinematographic narrative structures and audiovisual regimes they had learned through working with celluloid to the analog video medium. In this sense, while benefiting from the economy of analog video, produced for television broadcasting, documentary filmmakers either failed to perceive or deliberately ignored the televisual aesthetics it embodies and offers.

They adopted a conservative stance, attempting to maintain cinematographic aesthetics within a televisual medium and through televisual production devices, even though this was not inherently possible. Their attachment to the grandeur and mesmerizing impact of celluloid images stemmed from their deep desire to create cinema. Within this intense desire for the cinematographic world, they also failed to see—or could not see—the alternative aesthetic domain offered by analog video, namely, *videographic aesthetics.* Here, I refer specifically to the aesthetic realm invented during the analog era of video art within the second wave of the avant-garde, especially feminist video art, distinct from televisual aesthetics. What documentary filmmakers effectively did was an attempt to make cinema out of analog video, even while fully aware of the medium's inherent inadequacy.

For documentary filmmakers who are deeply committed to cinema, approaching television broadcasting, which is regarded as artistically and culturally inferior, along with its televisual narrative structures and audiovisual regimes, means a complete severance from cinema itself. As directors and producers of a genre already marginalized as "the kind of cinema that does not come to mind when one hears the word 'film'," such a move would amount to abandoning cinema altogether. The more they try to avoid the paradox of being part of a cinema that does not come to mind when the word "film" is uttered, the more documentary filmmakers find themselves entangled in the other paradoxes of documentary.

The more documentaries are produced within the televisual capacities of analog video, the more they are pulled into being regarded as ethical acts rather than aesthetic ones. Viewers increasingly come to perceive the documentary filmmaker not as an artist (a filmmaker) but as a respectable scholar, a competent researcher, or, in the narrower sense, a chronicler of history.

In the 1980s, documentaries produced in Turkey mainly used analog video. The digitalization trend, which emerged in the second half of the 1990s, rapidly accelerated and spread throughout the 2000s. A transitional phase occurred first: analog signals recorded on videotapes were replaced by digital data recorded on the same type of tapes. Intermediate formats such as Digital8, MiniDV, DV, DVCPro, and DVCam emerged. Later on, as is the case today, image and sound data produced digitally began to be recorded directly onto hard drives or memory cards. Non-linear editing systems began to be used to edit these images and sounds produced as digital data. In this way, digital data could be edited without undergoing any format or encoding changes, and without data loss.

With the completion of formal digitalization, two fundamental developments took place. First, image and sound materials in the documentary filmmaking process were fully transformed into digital data. Audiovisual material recorded digitally onto hard drives or memory cards could now be reviewed during or after shooting and transferred without loss to the hard drives of digital editing systems. Access to audiovisual data within the digital environment became direct. This immediate access saved serious time in the editing phase regarding labor. Second, the main limitation of analog video was overcome: the quality of audiovisual material reached—and eventually surpassed—the quality standards of celluloid.

As a result, the fundamental transformation brought about by converting audiovisual material into digital data is that the medium in which such material is produced, recorded, stored, and processed becomes entirely digital, thus completing the process of formal digitalization. While the visual-aesthetic quality norms rooted in celluloid cinema continue to function as foundational technical standards, cinematographic audiovisual regimes remain operative as essential conventions during both shooting and editing. With the achievement of celluloid-level quality in the digital realm, documentary filmmakers regain access to the possibilities of the cinematographic world and once again become capable of producing cinematographic narrative structures and audiovisual regimes. At this point, however, two open questions must be raised, though they will not be answered here: *To what extent can documentary filmmakers fulfill their desire to make cinema within and following the complete realization of formal digitalization? Can the economic discourse in this historical process still be relevant?*

When we examine production relations in documentary filmmaking through the lens of formal digitalization, we observe that no radical shift has occurred from established practices. The logic of cinematographic production and its associated division of labor continue to hold sway. In other words, the occupational roles and titles (director, cinematographer, sound engineer, editor, etc.) used in the division of labor within a cinematographically oriented production model remain the same. However, the individuals holding these titles now perform their tasks using digital tools. Naturally, this shift in medium requires everyone involved in the production process to acquire and internalize knowledge and competencies specific to digital media. In time, those unable or unwilling to adapt to this transformation are excluded from the entirely digitalized world of documentary production.

The hierarchical and power dynamics embedded in cinematographic production relations and division of labor continue to be preserved within formal digitalization. However, it would be inaccurate to say that everything has remained unchanged and that no new roles have emerged. For instance, the increase in digital data's quantity and technical complexity has given rise to a new professional category: digital data management. Although not entirely new, since a similar form of data management existed for analog audiovisual material, this role was previously subsumed under the broader job descriptions of assistant directors and editing assistants. Yet, its technical demands were not as intricate as they are today. In the current context, a digital data manager is included in the team during pre-production planning and is responsible throughout the production and post-production for ensuring the integrity and usability of digital audiovisual material within the editing system. Thus, as a result of rapidly advancing digital technologies and increasing image-sound quality standards, it can be said that although production processes and relationships largely remain intact, formal digitalization has led to an increase in both the number of roles and the required technical expertise, as well as a general rise in task complexity within documentary film production.

Within the framework of formal digitalization, while conventional narrative structures and existing documentary forms continue unchanged, the audiovisual regime itself is not fundamentally challenged, nor is there a serious pursuit of innovation. Documentaries produced within the classical linear narrative model continue to be made in the digital medium, just as in the analog media. In other words, the conceptual approach to shooting and editing remains preserved. Cinematographic composition rules are adhered to during shootings, and the narrative of the documentary continues to be edited linearly from the opening to the closing scene. Some of the new possibilities offered by digital cameras and editing units used in shooting and post-production offer alternatives in areas such as transitions and visual effects, allowing for greater convenience and speed. As a result, formal digitalization opens space for an aesthetic approach characterized by an increased and refined use of video transitions and effects. Apart from this, no radical transformation is observed in audiovisual regimes. In other words, cinematographic norms developed around composition and image-sound design are maintained.

While in the analog era, documentaries were distributed to cinemas via film reels, with formal digitalization, this process now involves special hard drive units known as Digital Cinema Packages (DCPs). The medium on which the film is recorded has become smaller and less prone to damage. Although a digital projector has replaced the analog projection machine in the theater, there is no change in the viewing experience for the audience in the cinema.

Documentaries produced for television, which were formerly broadcast over the airwaves as analog signals, can now be accessed via digital terrestrial transmission, satellite, or cable. Digitalization improves broadcast quality for viewers watching documentaries at home in the comfort of their living rooms. More significantly, in addition to traditional linear programming, digital television channels now offer a viewing model where viewers can watch the content of their choice at any time. On-demand video platforms enable viewers to watch documentaries whenever and as often as they like.

To summarize, although digitalization offers many new possibilities, most documentary filmmakers adopt a conservative attitude, perceiving it merely as a change in medium. They regard achieving the visual quality once offered by celluloid as the essential development in formal digitalization. Motivated by the desire to continue producing documentaries within the technically superior, high-quality visual realm of cinema, they aim to preserve established cinematographic narrative structures as they are. Meanwhile, the hierarchy and power dynamics of cinematographic production relations and division of labor remain intact within formal digitalization. Only a minor difference can be observed: with digitalization, specialization deepens, the number of personnel increases, and tasks become relatively complex. While the narrative structures of cinematographic storytelling remain unchanged in the context of formal digitalization, a visual-aesthetic sensibility shaped by the increased use of digital effects has also found its way into documentary filmmaking. For the documentary cinema audience, the experience of watching a documentary in a cinema hall remains unchanged after formal digitalization. However, television viewers watching documentaries on digital platforms at home can now watch them outside the broadcast schedule, whenever and as often as they wish.

In conclusion, when we examine the process of formal digitalization through the contextual framework shaped by the paradoxes of documentary cinema, we observe that no major change has occurred in

documentary production. The minor differences that have emerged involve the expansion of the cinematographic language developed on celluloid through digital capabilities. The fundamental paradoxes of documentary cinema continue to persist. Now, let us explain why so few interactive documentaries have been produced in Turkey during structural digitalization.

5. The Scarcity of Interactive Documentary Production in Turkey During the Structural Digitalization Process

In the context of documentary production, "structural digitalization" emerges when certain documentary filmmakers—or artists, designers, and experts from other disciplines—go beyond established cinematographic/televisual narrative structures and audiovisual regimes, and develop and produce new documentary storytelling forms that are native to the digital environment and its unique affordances. As previously mentioned, this type of documentarian— whom John Ellis characterizes as a *"technological opportunist"*—pursues this path either because conventional cinematographic/televisual forms prove insufficient for conveying the subject matter, or because they wish to invent a new documentary mode of expression through formal experimentation, making use of the different potentials offered by the digital medium.

Among the digital documentaries produced through such approaches within structural digitalization, the most commonly encountered types include:

- 360-degree documentary
- Virtual reality documentary (VR documentary)
- Augmented reality documentary (AR documentary)
- Database documentary
- Web documentary (webdoc or web documentary)
- Cross-media documentary
- Collaboratively produced documentary (collab-doc)
- Documentary game (docu-game)

Digital interactive documentary types distinguish themselves by significantly expanding the field of documentary. These works are not designed for cinema screens or television broadcasts. That is to say, while they may draw upon cinematographic and televisual narrative structures and audiovisual regimes, they cannot be limited by them. On the contrary, since they are created to function outside the domains of cinema and television, they operate primarily through narrative forms and audiovisual regimes native to the digital environment. These digital documentaries shift the documentary beyond cinema and television, carving out a new domain for the genre.

Moreover, they challenge and expand the boundaries of documentary theory, which until the 2000s had been developed primarily through analyses of analog-era documentaries—mainly cinematographic, and to a lesser extent, televisual (Hight 2008, 3). Documentary

theory must now grapple with terms such as algorithm, software, database, interface, and interaction. It must also revisit foundational issues like representation, genre, textuality, and authorship, which had been conceptualized in relation to analog technologies (Nash 2022, 2). Within this theoretical expansion prompted by structurally digital documentaries, one must attend to "shifting relationships between realities, audiences (reimagined as 'users'), technologies, documentarians, and discourses" (Nash 2022, 2). Ultimately, the integration of digital environments and production tools into documentary in the 21st century necessitates a reassessment and redefinition of both the theoretical paradigms and the practical applications shaped by the analogue age (Hudson & Zimmermann 2015, 4).

As stated at the outset, attempting to address all of these new digital documentary forms in a single discussion would render the argument excessively complex. For this reason, the scope of this study is limited to the interactive documentary—a format distributed via the internet, functional across smart TVs, computers, tablets, and mobile phones, and characterized by a non-linear narrative structure. Within this delimitation, I will first identify the core elements that form the shared foundation of interactive documentaries, to reveal why production in this genre has remained limited in Turkey during the process of structural digitalization. I will then focus on two high-quality examples of interactive documentaries produced in Turkey that are still accessible today. In doing so, I will reinterpret these works through the contextual framework shaped by the paradoxes of documentary cinema.

5.1. The Core Elements Defining the Common Ground of Interactive Documentary Forms

The core elements that constitute the common ground of interactive documentary forms can be listed as follows:

- Interactive documentaries are designed based on the capabilities provided by the digital medium and production tools; they are presented on digital platforms and online.
- The digital medium is significantly more powerful and effective than previous media regarding temporal, spatial, and sensory interactivity. In this respect, "digital interactivity" stands out as the defining characteristic of these documentaries.
- Interactive documentaries operate on database structures. The options that offer the viewer the ability to make choices—and thereby transform them into a user-player—are made possible through these database structures.
- Interactive documentaries can move beyond the linearity of classical narrative structures, forming the foundation of cinematographic and televisual storytelling. Thanks to the affordances of digital media, narrative flow can proceed in non-linear formats.

The fundamental elements listed above are essential for interactive documentaries. In addition to these, there are two more elements that, within the context of structural digitalization, can enhance user-player satisfaction at the end of the design and production process:

• Since interactive documentaries aim to transform viewers into user-players, they are designed intentionally to be playful.
• For the essential elements mentioned thus far to be well-designed and effectively executed, the production of interactive documentaries must be grounded in an interdisciplinary understanding and practice.

These fundamental elements are specific to structural digitalization in general and interactive documentaries in particular. Keeping these in mind, two high-quality interactive documentaries produced in Turkey—both of which remain accessible today—will be examined in the following section.

5.2. Examples of Interactive Documentaries Produced in Turkey

During the 2010s in Turkey, several interactive documentary projects were produced. Although the number of such projects was not significant, they stood out for the high quality of both their content and interaction design. From these projects, two remain accessible today and stand out for their high production quality. One is "16 Ton" (2011), an interactive documentary designed by Ümit Kıvanç, who compiled and edited all the audiovisual content and wrote and voiced the narration <http://gecetreni.net/16ton_root/16ton_ana.html>. The other is "Planet Galata" (2010), co-directed by Florian Thalhofer and Berke Baş <http://planetgalata.com/>.

In addition to interactive documentaries, creators in Turkey have also produced interactive projects in other domains. One such example was "Çalışma Odam" (*My Study Room*) (2012), produced by ntvmsnbc, a work of digital journalism that presented the working environments of artists such as Pınar Kür, Fazıl Say, Mehmet Güleryüz, and Bülent Ortaçgil on a city map. This interactive project combined photographs and videos of artists' workspaces. Although it was originally accessible at <http://calismaodam.ntvmsnbc.com/>, the project is no longer available online.

In the field of oral history, a project titled "Young people Speak Out: The Contribution of Oral History to Facing the Past, Reconciliation and Democratization in Turkey," conducted under the direction of Prof. Dr. Leyla Neyzi, was carried out between 2011 and 2012. This research project, which brought together contributors from diverse fields—including researchers, designers, media producers, and curators—focused on youth. It explored how young people construct their understanding of the past through narratives learned from older generations, media content,

and other sources. The interactive project is still accessible at <https://www.gencleranlatiyor.org/> and more information can be found at <https://www.gencleranlatiyor.org/hakkinda.html>.

Since this paper focuses specifically on interactive documentaries, we will now examine in greater detail the two aforementioned examples. Let us begin with the interactive documentary "16 Ton" (2011).

5.2.1. 16 Ton (2011)

This interactive documentary, which was released online in 2011, was entirely created by Ümit Kıvanç through an intense effort spanning a year and a half. Kıvanç expresses this fact on the documentary's website by crediting himself with "design-labor-text: Ümit Kıvanç." The documentary narrates the history of humanity through the inhumane act of mining, turning upside down the dominant discourse of the age of free markets and freedom. The song "*16 Tons*," which lends its name to the documentary, is used throughout the film in various performance versions as both a connector and a mnemonic. Originally a hit in the United States at the end of 1955, the song recounts the harsh life and poverty of coal miners.

Kıvanç characterizes his documentary as a "desktop film." Indeed, it is a meticulously crafted interactive documentary, produced largely on a desktop, following extensive desktop research, and animated primarily through photographs, illustrations, drawings, and engravings from the internet. The work includes only a limited number of original moving images.

Kıvanç states that viewers can watch the entire film from beginning to end in a linear fashion or view each section separately. They may also choose to watch the sections in any order and as often as they wish. In addition to the film's full script, the website offers supplementary information and explanations on the individual pages of each section.

The *16 Ton* documentary is, in every sense, an interactive documentary: it is designed using the affordances of structural digitalization and presented online; it offers interactive possibilities to the viewer; it is the result of extensive research and design stored within a database structure that invites viewers to navigate between multiple options; it transforms the viewer into a user-player through these choices; and it allows the user to step outside of linear narrative structures and experience a non-linear narrative.

Let us now evaluate this interactive documentary through the contextual framework shaped by the paradoxes of documentary cinema. First and foremost, it should be emphasized that *16 Ton* was not designed for cinema screening or television broadcast. It is essentially intended for online viewing on computer, tablet, or mobile phone screens, because its narrative structure and audiovisual regimes are fundamentally derived from the digital ecosystem of these devices.

In other words, it is unlikely to come to mind when one hears the word *film*. Indeed, because the interactive documentary belongs to the realm of structural digitalization, it exists outside the domains of cinema and television. For this reason, *16 Ton* cannot be regarded as a documentary film or a television documentary. It is a digital interactive documentary. In this respect, the paradox of *"documentary cinema as the kind of cinema that does not come to mind when one hears the word 'film'"* is inapplicable here. And this is not unique to *16 Ton*—it applies to all interactive documentaries incorporating the core features outlined earlier.

As Kıvanç rewrites the history of humanity through the inhumane labor of mining, the user-player may perceive him more as a historian than a documentarian. On the other hand, the viewer's ability to start at any section and watch in any order introduces a situation that contradicts the chronological, teleological, cause-effect-driven, and linear-progressive structure of conventional history writing. Moreover, one can argue that Kıvanç invites the viewer to participate in this rewriting of human history by encouraging them to become a user-player. Additionally, due to the constant presence of Kıvanç's approach and authorial presence embedded within the film through digital audiovisual regimes, it would be inaccurate to claim that he is *absent* or has *erased himself* as a documentarian.

5.2.2. Planet Galata (2010)

Planet Galata is an interactive documentary directed jointly by Florian Thalhofer and Berke Baş in 2010, focusing on individuals working on the Galata Bridge. The directors approached and listened to several of these individuals, including restaurant owners Kemal, Gaffur, and Erkan; bridge maintenance workers Bayram and Erdoğan; and bridge manager Ömer <http://korsakow.tv/projects/planet-galata/>.

In 2010, *Planet Galata* was broadcasted as a linear documentary on ARTE/ZDF, and a non-linear, interactive version was released online. In 2017, Talhofer redesigned the online interactive version. The interactive documentary remains accessible online today, although users must pay €4.50 to access it. Those seeking to use the film for educational purposes, such as in classrooms, may request a free access link directly from Thalhofer.

Florian Thalhofer is also one of the developers of the Korsakow software, which was created to construct non-linear narratives. Thalhofer claims that Korsakow is not only a software but also a philosophy for thinking about non-linear storytelling <http://planetgalata.com/>. According to him, the linear storytelling model of celluloid-based cinema is inadequate for addressing the complexities of contemporary life. In contrast, Korsakow leverages the logic of the digital environment and the ability to access data instantaneously, allowing users to construct non-linear narrative structures that can be continually reassembled in different ways.

Thalhofer argues that if you are a visionary journalist, artist, anthropologist, etc., you must be open to non-linear storytelling.

In *Planet Galata*, following the introduction, users encounter a range of choices presented as thumbnail images, words, or short phrases. Each selection leads to a randomly chosen narrative fragment associated with one of the social characters. In other words, the user is shown only one of several possible outcomes for each choice. If restarted, even with the same initial choice, the outcome may differ. As a result, the user-player constructs a sequence of narrative fragments, linking the lives of people working on the Galata Bridge based on potential relationalities and probabilities.

Examining the documentary's design process reveals that the creators categorized narrative fragments according to what they perceived as causal or contingent relationships among the social characters associated with the Galata Bridge. As user-players, when we select one of these categories, we are randomly presented with one of the narrative fragments within it. Thus, the probability of retracing the same narrative path is quite low when restarting the documentary. Even with similar selections, one will likely encounter a different trajectory composed of new narrative fragments.

This design adopts a stance that encourages the viewer to become a user-player and even pushes them toward becoming storytellers. As the user navigates the web of associations structured by the directors, they attempt to interpret each segment through cause-and-effect reasoning. However, the relationship between consecutive fragments may be causal or contingent. In either case, the user-player assumes the responsibility of constructing the narrative, effectively becoming the author of the story sequence.

Let us now evaluate *Planet Galata* within the contextual framework shaped by the paradoxes of documentary cinema. This interactive documentary does not operate through a cinematographic or televisual aesthetic. Even though the footage may have been shot in such a manner, the viewer, via a computer screen, primarily engages with a selection interface based on database clusters. This interactive documentary manifests a digital aesthetic that is a product of structural digitalization. Ethically, the directors choose to be "context-providers" rather than traditional narrators (Daniel 2012, 217). Within the non-linear operation of the narrative sequences they have created using digital tools, the user-player shares the ethical responsibility of building the narrative. One of Thalhofer's key assertions, as cited by Aston and Gaudenzi (2012, 133), is that interactive non-linearity emancipates the documentarian from the need to impose a singular perspective upon the audience. Consequently, the paradox of documentary being perceived more as an ethical than an aesthetic act

takes on an entirely new form in this interactive work. As *Planet Galata* operates within a newly emerging digital aesthetic, the ethical burden is redistributed between the documentarian and the user-player.

The paradox that suggests the documentarian must efface themselves from the film in pursuit of objective truth also becomes irrelevant here. By closely engaging with the personal worlds of its social characters and presenting their accounts of life on the Galata Bridge, Planet Galata does not aim to pursue an "objective truth." Instead, the documentarians deliberately step back and delegate the task of proliferating potential realities to the user-player.

As one possible form of documentary production emerging after cinema and television, within the realm of structural digitalization, it would not be accurate to describe *Planet Galata* as a film. It is neither a documentary film nor a television documentary. It is, in every respect, a digital interactive documentary. In this work, where the viewer becomes a user-player, the documentarian is neither a director in the cinematic/ televisual sense, a scientist-like artist, nor a historian. Instead, they are digital documentarians who have archived narratives of individuals working on the Galata Bridge and entrusted the construction of stories based on those narratives to the user-players.

Conclusion

In this study, my perspective has been oriented towards understanding the affordances that digitalization offers to documentary filmmakers and audiences, and toward comprehending the transformations that have occurred in the production and consumption of documentaries through digitalization. In doing so, I made a deliberate effort to move beyond discussions that focus solely on the difficulties of documentary production, such as lack of financial support, institutional weaknesses, or copyright issues. These are certainly valid concerns, especially for documentary filmmakers who aim to make a living through their work. However, in addition to these, I sought to open up a discussion on documentary production and consumption during the digitalization process, particularly regarding the limited production of interactive documentaries in Turkey, through the contextual framework formed by the paradoxes that have emerged within the historical development of documentary cinema.

The observations and discussions I have presented above may be seen as an attempt to sketch a general picture of the digitalization process within Turkey's documentary production landscape. My primary aim, however, was to challenge the dominant mode of understanding that operates within a linear-progressive logic, based on historical chronology and deterministic cause-and-effect reasoning. Additionally, I observed a prevailing tendency among filmmakers and audiences to assume without questioning that formal digitalization determines structural digitalization. I aimed to draw attention to the problem with this presumed determinism relationship and demonstrate its lack of logical validity. One of the main goals of this study was to explore what it might mean to read these two forms of digitalization together.

As a result, it became clear that formal digitalization can ultimately not move beyond reproducing the paradoxes that have historically shaped the development of documentary cinema. At best, it gives rise only to minor innovations or differences in documentary production and consumption. In contrast, we can speak of major shifts occurring within the process of structural digitalization. Structural digitalization signals the emergence of post-cinematic and post-televisual forms and styles of documentary. Through the new documentary genres that arise from structural digitalization, the field of documentary expands. This expansion indicates that documentary filmmakers and audiences must adopt new positions, perspectives, and mental frameworks.

So, what answer can we give to the concrete question posed at the outset? Let us recall the question: *Why are so few interactive documentaries produced in the structural digitalization era?* This article offers a preliminary response to that question. On the other hand, some key reasons have already begun to crystallize. First, documentary filmmakers and audiences in Turkey still primarily aspire to produce documentary films rooted in a cinematographic tradition or televisual style. Despite the frustrations they experience when unable to create these forms, the documentary community in Turkey continues to conceive of, produce, and debate documentary cinema from within a conservative cinematographic mindset.

In this regard, there is a pressing need for a broad and inclusive discussion on the contemporary forms of documentary production. This discussion must involve not only documentary filmmakers and viewers, but also those who produce critical and academic work on documentary, those who teach documentary filmmaking, and, ultimately, everyone engaged in this field.

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