The Shore Line and the Practice of Slow Resilience

By Liz Miller

VIDEO:

http://theshorelineproject.org/#!/about?howto

Since I was five, I've spent a few weeks every summer in Maine. As an urbanite from Baltimore, coastal Maine is where I learned to fish, to clam, and to love the coast. The small house my family rents is precariously close to the shore and one summer we returned to find a rock wall constructed to protect our rental cottage from an encroaching sea. It was built shortly after Hurricane Sandy raged through other eastern seaboard communities. This wall and the politics unfolding in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy drew my attention to the global politics of manufactured coasts.[1] How were other coastal communities confronting the threats of extreme weather or rising seas? How were they responding in the aftermath of disasters? How did the surge of coastal tourism, the dumping of industrial waste, unchecked development and resource extraction all contribute to the complexity of coastal concerns? I began to consider the coast itself as a story device. The shoreline is a frontline. It's also a method of imagining ourselves connected to something we love and a future we want to defend. In what ways could an interactive documentary visualize and connect human and non-human communities that survive and adapt in one of the most dynamic places on the planet? I was drawn to the shoreline as subject, metaphor and even method – an invitation to think beyond borders, disciplines or species. This is how I conceived of *The Shore Line,* a collaborative web documentary profiling the efforts of educators, artists, architects, scientists, city planners and youth organizations from nine countries taking actions along our global coast.

Still by Deborah Vanslet in *To the Mainland* http://theshorelineproject.org/#!/archive?Solution=Migrant Justice

At the same time, I had some burning questions about the intended audience and the efficacy of an environmental interactive. Tom Waugh coined the term "the committed documentary" to describe films specifically invested with a goal to engender political action or consciousness.[2] How would a committed interactive function and what might I learn about the politics of convening in the digital age? [3] More specifically what if I focused on the classroom as a "site" of social change. Every environmentalist I know emphasizes the critical role of education in addressing climate change, so why not start there? What kinds of new models of engagement could happen by prioritizing teachers, students, schools, and community educators as co-creators in outreach and curriculum design?

A collection of slow resilience stories

Selecting my co-creators and target audience as students and educators was no coincidence. For the last ten years I have taught media courses and made films about food sustainability, environmental justice and climate change at Concordia University in Montreal. The more you know, the more depressing it becomes. "So what can we do about this?" is the sometimes desperate refrain I hear in classes. The solutions presented in many media projects can feel overwhelming or out of reach to my

students. For example, in the compelling film *Sonic Sea* (Dougherty, 2016), about protecting whales and other sea life from the destructive effects of seismic testing, global ocean traffic, and oceanic noise pollution, one of the solutions is to literally *slow down* the speed of global trade. This is an important but daunting task. Alternatively, the solutions flagged at the end of some films are centered on individual actions and can feel a bit *under*whelming given the structural challenges we face; change a lightbulb, take shorter showers, change your diet. How might we as educators and documentary makers represent collective responses to climate disruption that take into account complex power dynamics connected to colonialism, capitalism, class, race, age, and gender? And how might we point to both the affordances and the limitations of media. Aren't the very screens used to communicate about climate change also part of the problem? Regardless of all of this complexity, I still wanted to grapple with that critical question "So what can we do about this?" And I wanted to explore how I might use this project to convene, to imagine, and to work towards an alternative future.

Change at the shoreline can be sudden with storms that result in massive destruction, flooding, displacement and death. The extreme weather of 2017 is a frightening forecast of future trends.[4] At the same time, environmental changes come in the form of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence," involving the gradual seeping of toxins into the water, the displacement of shoreline communities and cultures, and the erosion and disappearance of beaches.[5] What about the gradual and often invisible processes of social change? I began to think about the inspiring work of communities along the coast as *slow resilience* – a gradual and rooted strengthening, enacted through processes that involve creativity, a deepening knowledge of coastal ecosystems, new collaborative frameworks, conversations, actions, mutual care and the foregrounding of potential over problems. In this way, *The Shore Line* became a collection of *slow-resilience* stories – portraits of people working together, taking actions over time, often in quiet but resourceful ways.

Still by Eva Brownstein in *Dreaming of Trees*, http://theshorelineproject.org/#!/archive?Solution=Youth Leadership

Over three years and in collaboration with students and filmmakers from around the world we curated a collection of 43 video profiles, of people confronting the threats of unsustainable development and extreme weather on a scale that my students could identify with. Our objective **was to** represent imaginative thinking and solutions into each narrative, even if the solutions were temporary or incomplete. I was inspired by Anna Tsing's notion of "collaborative survival" and her invitation to seek out the places and moments where humans and non-humans converge in the midst of ruin.[6] Tsing implores readers to focus on what manages *to survive* in the face of pollution, extinction and climate change.[7]

Committed documentaries, past and present

For many of us, the appeal of interactive documentary is the non-hierarchical curation of people, place and environments. Many Rose has traced the forerunners of participatory interactive media to alternative and community initiatives where the social processes around a media production are as vital as the finished products.[8] Scholars Helen De Michiel and Patricia Zimmerman suggest that interactives present an 'open space' where iterations, communities and diverse forms of engagement can emerge (2013, 355).[9] The open architecture of an interactive permitted a range of new opportunities for a collaborative

web documentary like *The Shore Line.* With my co-creator, Helios Design Labs, I was able to connect local stories and forms of resilience into a global network, to help students or users explore how class, gender and geographical differences impact the way people imagine solutions and plan for the future. With the affordances of an online project, we designed interactive maps, visualizing datasets of growing coastal populations and shrinking coastal wetlands so that users could grasp the present and future risks of development on the very ecosystems that protect us. An open architecture offered a forum to engage with teachers to develop educational resources and to ensure that each video was connected to concrete actions in the form of a strategy toolkit, downloadable teaching guides and resources that we could refine over time.[10]

Still by Eva Brownstein, in *Mapping Heritage* http://theshorelineproject.org/#!/archive?Solution=Coastal Heritage

Despite all these unique opportunities, including the fact that the site is free and available online, the project can get lost in an over-crowded mediasphere. Furthermore, our community partners, the network of the people we featured in the films, are scattered all over the world presenting unique challenge for a "community" project. And while we tapped into the proliferation of innovative tools to map, visualize and understand coastal vulnerability, had we really translated the raw data we had at our fingertips into an emotionally resonant experience? Would we move people to action with our fragmented set of stories? An enduring

challenge for the committed documentary is how to use it strategically for social engagement. What we know from past committed documentaries is that media alone does not mobilize communities and allies. There is an enormous amount of work involved in the **creative curation** of partners, networks and circuits of distribution that are all working together to get a project into the hands of people who can use it. For our team, the work of getting *The Shore Line* into classrooms is an exercise in *slow resilience*, one that requires patience, time and many lessons. And the goal is not to "deliver" a ready-made project but to use the project to get more teachers, students, and organizers talking across disciplines, broadening our networks and imagining new collaborations that will support alternative futures.

If the mandate of a committed documentary is to encourage a push from information to action, from users to engaged publics, and to discover the potential of a documentary to foster new networks, the interactive might have an edge over the long-form documentary. Rather than screen a 70-minute film accompanied by a twenty-minute discussion, we can show 20-minutes of film and have a 70-minute discussion. If there is one major lesson I have gleaned from my experience of making an interactive, it's that I want to make less media and create more exchanges. The other day a student in my class asked me when we might see a shift or swell of consciousness around climate change that would get us thinking and acting more towards collaborative survival. I encouraged her to start imagining it and then take the first step towards it. This was the same challenge I posed to myself when making *The Shore Line.*

Image Designed by Helios Design Labs

Notes

[1] John Seabrook, "The Beach Builders: Can the Jersey Shore be saved?" *New Yorker*, New York, July 22, 2013.

[2] Thomas Waugh, *Show Us Life: Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, Metuchen, New Jersey, Scarecrow Press, 1984

[3] Liz Miller & Martin Allor, Choreographies of collaboration: social engagement in interactive documentaries, Studies in Documentary Film, 2016: DOI:10.1080/17503280.2016.1171686

[4] Hurricane Irma destroyed Caribbean islands, temporarily shut down Puerto Rico, and forced the evacuation of more than six million Florida residents. South Asian floods in India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan impacted more than 41 million individuals.

[5] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, 2013.

[6] Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2016.

[7] Ibid., p. 3

[8] Mandy Rose, "Not Media About, But Media With: Co-Creation for Activism" in Idocs: The Evolving Practices of Interactive Documentary, New York: Colombia University Press, 2017

[9] Helen De Michiel and Patricia Zimmerman. "Documentary as Open Space." In *The Documentary Film Book*, edited by Brian Winston, London: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan. 2013. 366–375.

[10] For more

Notes on contributor:

Liz Miller is a documentary maker and professor interested in new approaches to documentary. Her films on timely issues such as water privatization (The Water Front) refugee rights (Mapping Memories), gender rights (En la Casa), and climate change (Hands On , The Shore Line) have won awards and influenced decision makers.