Interactive documentary as a living and embodying experience to represent reality: A practice-based case study

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Abstract

This article introduces an innovative approach to comprehending the portrayal of reality within interactive documentaries. Drawing upon my filmmaking expertise, I created the interactive documentary Eden Again to examine how this multimedia genre portrays our understanding of a location, cultures, and social bonds by representing the controversial stories of drying the Marshlands of Iraq. This study also aims to enhance audience involvement, influencing contemporary media culture. These insights stem from a practice-based case study and contribute to the ongoing discussion about the representation of reality. The results indicate that users/viewers generally held favourable perceptions and attitudes toward the positive impacts of interactive documentaries, anticipating a positive reflection on this location.

Keywords: Interactive documentary; Representing; Reality; Location; Culture; Audience

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Introduction

Eden Again is an innovative interactive documentary[1] that explores the cultural and

environmental significance of the Iraqi Marshlands, a region rich in biodiversity and historical

importance, often considered the cradle of civilization. Through its non-linear narrative, the

documentary engages viewers with multimedia elements—clickable maps, personal narratives,

and archival footage—that offer an immersive understanding of the Marshlands and the lives of

its inhabitants (Aburghif, 2022; Gaudenzi, 2013). By intertwining environmental degradation

with the cultural identity of the Marsh Arabs, or Ma'dan, *Eden Again* highlights their deep

connection to this threatened ecosystem.

The draining of the Marshlands under Saddam Hussein's regime, which displaced thousands and

caused ecological devastation, serves as a key narrative in the documentary. This historical event

exemplifies the resilience of the Marsh Arabs, aligning with Hall's (1989) notion that shared

histories and environments shape cultural identity. The film's evocative title references the

biblical Garden of Eden, further emphasizing the profound loss and ongoing efforts for

environmental and cultural recovery. Reflecting on the changing ecosystem of the Marshlands,

the documentary serves as a gateway to understanding Iraq's rich history and culture. (Goodman et al., 2016) argues that "thinking ecologically" encourages consideration of the agents shaping documentary ecosystems. *Eden Again* captures the socio-environmental landscape of the Marshes, profoundly affected by the political and environmental turmoil of the 1990s (Howlett et al., 2023). Through a combination of personal stories and environmental narratives, the documentary offers a comprehensive view of the impact on the local communities, wildlife, and the landscape itself.

Despite 13 years of abandonment between 1990 and 2003, when the area was drained and neglected for political reasons (Cowie, 2011), the Marshes and their people persisted. In response, *Eden Again* documents this history using digital technologies, aligning with Gaudenzi's (2013) definition of interactive documentaries as projects that document "the real" through interactivity (p. 69). This approach ensures that viewers engage with the environmental and cultural significance of the Marshlands on a personal level. Moreover, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2016, the Mesopotamian Marshes are integral to the identity of the Marsh Arabs. Their survival, shaped by centuries of knowledge of the marsh ecosystem, is reflected in their architecture, cuisine, and customs. This interdependence between culture and the environment is central to *Eden Again*, using interactive storytelling to foster a deeper

connection to the region's past and present. As Cowie (2011) notes, such documentaries allow audiences to cognitively and emotionally engage with landscapes, creating a participatory experience (p. 2).

Eden Again addresses the underrepresentation of the Marshlands in media and academic discourse, offering a platform for their environmental and cultural importance to be recognized. Harper and Rayner (2010) suggest that filmmakers should strive to represent contemporary life in ways that resonate with audiences (p. 143), and this documentary fills the gap in representing the long-term effects of the Marshlands' desiccation. Through interactive elements, the film emphasizes the need for conservation efforts and tangible solutions to environmental challenges (Howlett et al., 2023). Ultimately, *Eden Again* exemplifies the power of interactive documentaries to bridge environmental conservation and cultural preservation. By combining personal storytelling with participatory engagement, the documentary offers an immersive experience that ensures the Marshlands, and their people are remembered and respected, raising awareness for their revitalization efforts. As Harper and Rayner (2010) highlight, the cinematic experience can evoke empathy, and *Eden Again* leverages this to deepen viewers' understanding of the Marshlands' significance.

Inspirational Sources and Theoretical Foundations

Eden Again is deeply rooted in the filmmaker's personal connection to the Iraqi Marshlands and the collective memory of the Marsh Arabs. Set against the backdrop of ecological devastation from the draining of the marshes during the political conflicts of the 1990s, the documentary employs practice-based methodologies to highlight human agency in environmental recovery, reflecting Herzog's foundational ideas on documentary filmmaking.

Drawing inspiration from earlier interactive documentaries like *Fort McMoney, Highrise,* and *Bear 71, Eden Again* utilizes a non-linear narrative structure to engage viewers with complex social, environmental, and cultural issues (Nogueira, 2015; Harris, 2016). This immersive approach represents a broader shift in the i-doc genre, allowing audiences to explore multiple facets of the Marshlands while challenging conventional notions of authenticity (Podara et al., 2020).

The interactive documentary also takes cues from Werner Herzog's work, which integrates landscapes as essential narrative elements rather than mere backdrops. Herzog uses landscapes to reflect characters' inner lives, explore themes, and pose existential questions. His approach fosters metaphysical and emotional connections between people and environments, creating immersive experiences where landscapes act as characters that enhance narrative and thematic

depth. As Prager (2007) notes in his book "*The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth*," Herzog's documentaries challenge traditional notions of objectivity in favor of what he calls "ecstatic truth." This concept prioritizes emotional and spiritual insights over literal facts, as seen in Encounters at the *End of the World* (2007), particularly in the poignant scene where Herzog observes a lone penguin seemingly heading toward its demise, offering philosophical commentary on animal behaviour. Herzog's films frequently explore themes of human endurance, the sublime in nature, and the intricate relationship between humanity and the environment which is the orientation that the i-doc *Eden Again* is inspired.

Central to *Eden Again* is Gaudenzi's (2013) concept of the "living documentary," which blurs the lines between representation and participation. By transforming viewers into active participants, the film encourages exploration of its interactive layers, making them co-authors of the narrative and fostering a deeper understanding of environmental and cultural issues (Nash, 2012). Through this participatory model, *Eden Again* showcases the evolving potential of interactive documentaries in addressing real-world challenges.

Implications for Audience Perception and Engagement

Eden Again effectively engages audiences with the intertwined themes of environmental degradation and cultural identity, particularly in relation to Iraq's Marsh Arabs. By using

interactive documentary techniques, the film explores the lasting impact of political conflict on the Marshlands' ecology while emphasizing the resilience and deep cultural connection of the local communities (Guarasci, 2015).

The documentary's interactive features—such as clickable maps, interviews, and archival footage—enhance audience engagement by allowing users to navigate the narrative non-linearly, fostering a personalized and deeper connection to the content (Hondros, 2020). This active participation transforms passive viewing into a critical reflection on environmental and cultural preservation, broadening viewers' understanding of these complex issues (Ogden, 2019). Additionally, ethical storytelling is central to *Eden Again*. The documentary authentically represents the voices of the Marsh Arabs, aligning with constructive storytelling principles that emphasize agency and accurate representation in conflict narratives (McRoberts, 2016). As a result, *Eden Again* not only enriches the discourse on environmental recovery but also sets a standard for how interactive storytelling can shape audience engagement and representation.

Methodology

This section outlines the research methods employed in this study, encompassing a comprehensive literature review, reflective analysis of filmmaking techniques, and an evaluation

of *Eden Again*, the interactive documentary at the centre of this case study. The literature review addresses critical themes such as interactive documentaries (i-docs), locations and inhabitants' representation, and media studies. Additionally, I offer a reflective exploration of my filmmaking techniques, which adopt a dual approach by narrating the Marshlands' desiccation and its broader social, cultural, and ecological consequences.

Two key concepts are applied to evaluate the documentary's representation of reality within its location. First, Helphand's (1986) concept of the cinematic landscape is used to analyse the depiction of the Marshlands. Second, Herzog's idea of nature's symbolic importance, as explored by Gandy (1996) and Ames (2009), is incorporated into the analysis. Hall's (2020) representation theory further supports the interpretation of reality as portrayed in Eden Again, aiding in critically examining how the Marshlands' desiccation and its effects are represented.

To effectively apply Stuart Hall's (1989, 2020) representation theory to cultural identity and cinematic representation, *Eden Again* draws on key concepts from Hall's framework, including the constructionist approach to representation, cultural identity as a "production," the articulation of identity, cinema as a cultural practice, intersectionality, and counter-narratives. By integrating these ideas, the analysis offers a nuanced understanding of how *Eden Again* addresses issues of cultural identity and representation within its interactive documentary format.

The case study focuses on *Eden Again* (2018), an i-doc chronicling the 13-year desiccation of the

Marshlands in southern Iraq, which led to the displacement of its inhabitants and the destruction

of the local ecosystem. The primary aim was to create a digital asset that vividly portrays the

devastating effects of this environmental crisis. The Nature Iraq Organization has archived the

project files, which oversees this critical area's ecosystem. The interactive documentary has been

showcased to various community groups and is available online at the *Eden Again* website. The

production, which took place in the Marshlands of southern Iraq, significantly shaped the

methods employed during filming. This influence will be explored in detail in the following

sections of this article.

The Filmmaking Process

The marshland ecosystem is vast and diverse, and the filmmaking approach adopted two key

aspects: (1) focusing on local stories about the drying of the Marshlands and its impact on the

residents and (2) presenting a broader regional narrative of the location's ecological and cultural

significance. This dual approach highlights why the Marshlands' desiccation and its inhabitants'

displacement is a significant event worth documenting. As Gold & Revill (2004) note,

"environmental representations […] as written and visual depictions […] are essential elements

of the cultures in which we live" (p. 11). Thus, the interactive documentary *Eden Again*

dedicates over half of its runtime to illustrating the drying process and its historical and

environmental consequences. It ensures accuracy through collaboration with the Nature Iraq

Organisation, which provides archival data and documentation.

The visual storytelling in *Eden Again* was shaped by data from interviews and archived

records, reconstructing the Marshlands as they were before, during, and after the desiccation.

Helphand (1986) argues that "perhaps there are aspects of landscape experience best

communicated through film" (p. 1), and this approach was essential in conveying the lived

experiences of the Marsh Arabs and the ecological transformation of the Marshlands. As an

interactive documentary (i-doc), *Eden Again* provides a comprehensive portrayal of the

Marshlands' ecosystem, showcasing both its affluence and the severe impact of the drying on the

environment and its people. The documentary effectively captures the emotional and cultural

depth of the region through interviews with residents, archival footage, maps, written records,

live musical performances, and visually striking cinematography. (Goodman et al., 2016)

emphasizes digital documentary materials' dynamic, mobile, and generative nature, which *Eden

Again* leverages to create an immersive and interactive experience.

Historically, the Mesopotamian Marshes were critical to sustaining the Sumerian civilization.

Although they suffered desiccation, they eventually returned to a paradisiacal state, which the

documentary meticulously represents. Hall (2020) explains that "representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (p. 69), and this system of representation is crucial in communicating the Marshlands' ecological and cultural significance. The i-doc format offers powerful tools for audience engagement by breaking the narrative into segments, utilizing audio-visual elements, and promoting participant interaction. These features allow *Eden Again* to effectively communicate issues affecting socially marginalized communities, including the Marsh Arabs. As Erigha (2015) points out, integrating concepts of representation helps us understand the totality of marginalization (p. 80). By encouraging public discourse and raising awareness, interactive documentaries like *Eden Again* support social change and advocate for the communities they represent. Thus, the historical and production context of *Eden Again* provides a compelling case study for examining how landscape, memory, identity, and history intersect. As someone born in Iraq, my work reflects how the Marshlands' imagery resonates with my childhood memories, bringing a personal and emotional dimension to this cinematic project.

Ethical Considerations in Representing the Marshlands and Its People

The process of representing the Marshlands and the Marsh Arabs in *Eden Again* raised several ethical challenges, particularly in terms of ensuring the accuracy and sensitivity of the interactive documentary's portrayal. As outlined by Aufderheide (2007), ethical documentary practices emphasise the importance of gaining informed consent and accurately representing marginalised communities. As a filmmaker, I worked closely with local stakeholders to ensure that the i-doc accurately reflected the experiences and perspectives of the Marsh Arabs. This collaborative approach helped mitigate potential ethical issues and allowed the i-doc to maintain its commitment to representing "the real" meaningfully and respectfully.

By engaging with themes of environmental degradation and cultural identity, *Eden Again* highlights the importance of authenticity in storytelling, which is particularly relevant to contemporary environmental challenges. As Nash (2011) states, ethical practices in documentary production must be informed by a deep understanding of the contexts in which filmmakers operate. The filmmaker's commitment to ethical representation necessitated ongoing dialogue with local communities, ensuring their stories were told with sensitivity and respect. This collaborative approach enriches the documentary's narrative. It fosters a sense of agency among participants, ultimately enhancing the impact of *Eden Again* within the i-doc genre and its contribution to the representation of reality.

Interactive Documentary as an Embodied Experience of Reality

The production landscape for interactive documentaries is undergoing a significant

transformation, marked by new practices that introduce innovative business models and a non-

fiction, interactive approach. This shift allows audiences to experience documentaries in ways

that transcend traditional formats. As Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) observe that formal and

technological innovation has led to the appearance of novel journalistic narrative forms,

including the interactive documentary. The potential of the i-doc format to experiment with

storytelling opens new avenues for depicting communities and transmitting information to the

user. Consequently, narration, interactivity, and user engagement play crucial roles in shaping

the i-doc experience. Unlike linear documentaries, which follow a clear path from beginning to

end, non-linear formats offer more flexible, user-driven narratives, starting at suggested points

rather than fixed ones.

As an emerging field, the definition of the interactive documentary (i-doc) is still evolving.

Gaudenzi (2013) highlights that the concept of i-docs remains fluid, noting that they develop

within the broader framework of digital convergence. Gaudenzi aligns with Whitelaw's

perspective, emphasizing that i-docs need not follow the traditional linear documentary model

but instead offer new ways to engage with reality. This digital narrative form relies on multimedia tools and interactive storytelling, enabling users to participate actively in shaping the narrative's direction. Scholars like Aston & Gaudenzi (2012), Berenguer (2007), Nash (2012), and Harris (2017) have all contributed to defining interactive documentaries. According to Aston and Gaudenzi (2012), a web documentary serves as a form of reality narration rather than just a digital extension of the linear documentary. Similarly, Berenguer (2007) describes interactive documentaries as interactive narratives emerging alongside hypertext and video games, driven by new media technologies. Nash (2012) adds that web documentaries represent a contemporary structure with a specific function and context. As Harris (2017) puts it, "nonlinear spatiotemporal organization" allows i-docs to enable multiple pathways through their footage and materials (p. 25).

The interactive documentary's integration of hyperlinks and multimedia elements such as photographs, texts, maps, videos, and animations offer users various ways to explore and engage with the content. Gaudenzi (2013) explains that i-docs provide layers of multimedia narratives, crossing traditional boundaries and fostering communication across social, economic, and cultural divides. These documentaries often rely on collaborative group settings during production, emphasizing the collective nature of storytelling, as noted by Aston and Gaudenzi (2012). This structure creates a multi-layered experience where users interact with diverse media

elements, shaping their journey through the content. Gaudenzi (2013) further argues that the

level of interactivity in hypertext projects varies according to the design, allowing users different

levels of control and engagement.

The interaction within i-docs is evaluated based on navigation tools and signs that

encourage user participation. According to Gaudenzi (2013), interactivity can take many forms,

from physical engagement through a mouse or device to deeper cognitive participation. Nash

(2012) similarly discusses the unique ways in which i-docs engage audiences. Berenguer (2007)

asserts that interactive media require collaboration and active participation, distinguishing them

from traditional audiovisual media, which tend to promote passive consumption. This new

medium transforms viewers into "interactors," allowing them to immerse themselves in the

audiovisual experience while also sharing it with others.

Likewise, Aburghif (2022) highlights the importance of conceptual convergence in shaping

interactivity within i-docs, especially as advancing technologies and simulation tools introduce

diverse modes of user engagement. Initially rooted in reality-based narratives, interactive

documentaries now offer users a range of interaction types. Aston and Gaudenzi (2012)

categorize these modes as hyperlink, conversational, and participatory. Nogueira (2020) adds

that the degree of control interactors feel is linked to the openness of the documentary's structure

(p. 65). Aburghif (2022) argues that users seek meaningful decision-making opportunities, and a lack of options can detract from the interactive experience. Nogueira (2020) also underscores the importance of a sense of presence, where interactions with digital elements can create an immersive experience, allowing users to engage with the documentary world (p. 54). Aburghif (2022) emphasizes that prioritizing user experience is crucial, starting with delivering an efficient technical framework and progressing to enhancing the overall interactive experience.

Impact of Practice-Informed Research in Interactive Documentaries and Reality Representation in *Eden Again*

Practice-informed research emphasizes how the practice itself fosters understanding or discovery that can be articulated and shared within academic contexts. As Candy et al. puts it 'practice-informed research, which integrates creative practice with academic inquiry, fosters the development of new and original knowledge by treating research and practice as interdependent processes' (2021, p. 27). In the realm of interactive documentaries, this approach enhances traditional knowledge production by merging experiential learning with scholarly investigation. As Biggs (2004, p. 13) emphasizes, practice-based research encompasses both the process and communication aspects, enabling filmmakers to explore complex narratives while actively

engaging audiences. This dual focus transforms viewers from passive observers into active participants, deepening their understanding of the documentary's subjects.

Eden Again exemplifies this methodology by leveraging interactivity to immerse viewers in the cultural and environmental landscape of the Iraqi Marshlands. Gaudenzi (2013) notes that interactive documentaries empower users to co-create reality, fostering a stronger connection to the narrative. This participatory model not only enriches storytelling but also provides valuable insights into audience perceptions and cultural dynamics. Additionally, the incorporation of multimedia elements allows for a more nuanced exploration of themes such as environmental sustainability and cultural identity. Aston and Gaudenzi (2014) highlights how such projects bridge traditional documentary practices with digital journalism, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and amplifying the impact of knowledge production.

Moreover, *Eden Again* challenges dominant narratives by spotlighting marginalized voices and experiences. Nash (2012) observes that web documentaries maintain the socially conscious ethos of traditional forms while evolving into new expressions. By prioritizing underrepresented perspectives, practice-informed research fosters a more inclusive understanding of cultural and environmental issues. However, as Clift (2012, p. 120) points out, transitioning beyond practice-based research to build a progressive body of knowledge remains a challenge.

This analysis situates *Eden Again* within the context of interactive documentaries (i-docs), highlighting its innovative structure, inspirations, and ethical considerations. Utilizing Hall's (1989) Constructionist approach to representation, the documentary constructs meaning through its interactive format rather than merely reflecting reality. By integrating multimedia elements—such as video, photos, and audio—*Eden Again* creates an immersive experience that underscores the cultural and environmental significance of the Iraqi Marshlands. This participatory format allows viewers to engage with diverse perspectives (Podara et al., 2020), fostering a deeper understanding of the Marshlands.

Furthermore, the documentary's practice-informed research methodology, which emphasizes collaboration with local communities, provides unique insights into the cultural and environmental narratives of the Marshlands. Building on Hall's concept of cultural identity as a "production," *Eden Again* portrays Marsh Arab identity as fluid and dynamic, illustrating how representations of reality actively shape perceptions of both the Marshlands and their inhabitants. This reflexive approach highlights the ethical responsibility of authentically representing marginalized communities, ensuring their voices are accurately portrayed (Aburghif, 2022). Ethical filmmaking, characterized by ongoing dialogue with participants, enhances the documentary's narrative and significantly contributes to the genre's realistic representation (Nash, 2011).

Moreover, *Eden Again* exemplifies the dynamic interplay between theory and practice representation. Throughout its production, the documentary explores the profound injustices and displacements caused by the marshlands' desiccation. (Timpany, 2009) suggests that non-fiction hypertexts can function as comprehensive databases, providing accessible information on specific topics. This perspective informed the documentary's use of cinematic techniques to depict the drying marshes and the application of theoretical frameworks to evaluate its effectiveness in conveying these events. Drawing on Hall's theories of intersectionality and power, *Eden Again* portrays the intersection of cultural identity with gender, class, and environmental activism, while also navigating the power dynamics inherent in representing marginalized communities. Harper and Rayner (2010) assert that depicted landscapes contribute to social formation, influencing human associations and societal norms. The documentary visually advocates for the significance of the marshlands, aiming to raise awareness and mobilize support among filmmakers, scholars, and a broader audience. Importantly, *Eden Again* serves not only as a template for representing reality but also embodies a reflective process that offers a novel analytical approach valuable to both documentary filmmakers and academics. Hence, the key themes and arguments can be delineated as follows:

Cinematic Landscapes in the Digital Era: Evolving Representations, Spatial Engagement, and Herzog's Influence

Landscapes in the film serve as more than mere backdrops, revealing human-environment relationships and shaping cultural interactions (Helphand, 1986). In *Eden Again*, the Iraqi marshlands are integral to the narrative, enhancing the sense of place and deepening residents' connection to their environment. This approach aligns with Herzog's use of landscapes to explore themes of human endurance and environmental impact (Ames, 2009). The i-doc examines the marshlands through themes of drying, displacement, and cultural interconnections. Harper and Rayner (2010) emphasize how cinematic framing creates a dynamic viewing experience, allowing audiences to appreciate the passage of time and anticipate changes within the familiar landscape. Furthermore, Cowie (2011) notes that serene landscape depictions foster a contemplative atmosphere, making the frame dynamic through such movements across and within.

Drawing from Gandy's (1996) concepts, *Eden Again* portrays the Iraqi Marshlands as an indifferent force and a metaphor for human struggles, echoing themes in Herzog's work. The interactive documentary captures the Marshlands' raw beauty and unpredictability while reflecting the Marsh Arabs' resilience and broader cultural and environmental challenges. This

approach mirrors Herzog's use of landscape as a narrative device, emphasizing the complex

relationships between people and their environment.

Central to the documentary's narrative is the concept of "comprehending location,"

illustrated through the audience's interpretation of the marshlands' representation and their

recognition of its emotional and cultural significance. Gold and Revill (2004) discuss how

media shapes our perceptions of the natural world and influences environmental actions. In

Eden Again, the marshlands are depicted as spaces rich in cultural meaning, intertwined

with the lives and histories of the residents.

By blending real-life representation with visual grandeur, *Eden Again* taps into memory,

myth, and discovery themes, forming a reservoir of cinematic narratives (Hall, 1989). This sense

of nostalgia and connection enhances the audience's emotional engagement, transforming the

documentary into a journey through both time and space. This ultimately enriches viewers'

understanding of the intricate connections between nature, culture, and human survival.

Cinematic Exploration of Cultural Identity and Environment: Representing the Marshlands

through Location, Awareness, and Film Techniques

Eden Again offers a profound exploration of cultural identity and environmental issues within the Iraqi Marshlands, utilizing cinematic techniques to engage viewers and enhance their understanding of this unique region. Drawing on Stuart Hall's contributions to cultural studies, the documentary reflects how representation shapes cultural identities, revealing the intricate connection between the marshlands and their inhabitants. Gold and Revill (2004) emphasize that media significantly influences public perceptions of environmental issues, prompting critical reflection on representation and its implications for policy and action.

Central to *Eden Again* are the expansive marshlands of southern Iraq, depicted both in their entirety and through specific drying areas. These landscapes serve as dynamic backdrops that illustrate the local ecosystem's crucial role in weather patterns and as habitats for migratory birds. For centuries, the marshlands have profoundly shaped the cultural identity of the Marsh Arabs, underscoring the deep interrelationship between people and their environment.

This practice-based case study investigates how *Eden Again* represents both location and people. Framing identity as a construct of representation, Hall (1989) posits that cinema shapes our understanding of ourselves (p. 80). The documentary aims to portray the marshlands as a distinctive locale, fostering a recognizable sense of place through imagery that highlights drying areas, abandoned homes, and the displacement of local ecosystems. By incorporating interactive

documentary features, *Eden Again* creates a compelling visual narrative that connects viewers to the region's cultural and environmental realities.

Utilizing a combination of exterior, interior, and aerial shots, the documentary captures the marshlands' beauty while engaging audiences through rich audio-visual elements. (Goodman et al., 2016) highlights the significance of ecological framing, noting the interconnectedness of living and non-living entities within digital systems (p. 15). As an Iraqi filmmaker with deep cultural ties to the marshlands, this i-doc reflects a personal connection that enhances its authenticity and emotional resonance.

Eden Again employs cinematic landscape concepts from Helphand (1986) and Herzog's symbolic nature portrayal (Gandy, 1996; Ames, 2009) to analyse its depiction of the marshlands. These frameworks enhance our understanding of how environments are visually represented to convey specific meanings. Herzog's influence highlights the importance of personal aesthetic encounters with nature, creating distinctive cinematic landscapes. The relationship between environmental issues and cultural identity is complex, with cultural values significantly shaping sustainable practices.

Ecological Disruption and Human Displacement: Examining the Socio-Environmental Consequences of Intentional Drying

The interactive documentary highlights the socio-environmental consequences of intentional marshland drying, focusing on locations severely affected by displacement. While the narrative depicts individual experiences, its broader objective is to connect these personal stories within the larger context of the marshlands' ecological and cultural significance (Hall, 1989). This approach emphasizes the intertwined relationship between place and identity, encouraging the audience to engage with the issue on a deeper level. Drawing on Gandy's (1996) analysis of nature in Werner Herzog's films, the documentary mirrors Herzog's portrayal of human insignificance in the face of vast natural forces. In *Eden Again*, the marshlands' desiccation starkly underscores the overwhelming impact of environmental degradation, where the drying process diminishes human concerns and displaces entire communities. The interactive techniques employed further immerse viewers in the harsh reality of ecological disruption, aligning with Gandy's exploration of nature as both indifferent and overpowering.

By focusing on the intentional drying of the marshlands, *Eden Again* illustrates the profound socio-environmental shifts that follow, aligning with Hall's (2020) representation theory, which stresses how cultural narratives influence perceptions of reality. Gandy's insights into ecological consciousness in Herzog's films also resonate here, as the documentary raises

critical questions about humanity's relationship with nature and the consequences of environmental intervention.

Interactive Reality: Structure, Emotion, and Knowledge Production in *Eden Again*'s Immersive Documentary Experience

Interactive documentaries (i-docs) have revolutionized traditional filmmaking by introducing digital interactivity and user participation. Nash (2012) defines i-docs as enabling users to actively co-create reality representation, a shift that fundamentally alters documentary storytelling. *Eden Again* builds upon these innovations, using a non-linear, interactive format to explore the environmental and cultural issues of the Iraqi Marshlands.

What distinguishes *Eden Again* is its focus on the cultural consequences of environmental degradation, particularly through the Marsh Arabs' experiences. This holistic approach underscores the interconnectedness of cultural resilience and environmental recovery (Harris, 2017; Gaudenzi's (2013) concept of the "living documentary" supports this model, blurring lines between representation and participation. The interactive documentary's use of diverse media creates a multifaceted narrative that enhances audience engagement. Drawing on Herzog's style of using interviews to reflect landscape symbolism (Ames, 2009), *Eden Again* integrates firsthand accounts of the drying marshlands and resulting displacement. Rayner and Harper

(2010) argue that visuals create a "cinescape" transcending geographical boundaries, making complex ideas more accessible.

Voice-over narration guides viewers through fragmented narratives and rich visuals, providing context and inviting reflection on alternative perspectives. Drummer (2014) describe voice-over as the main semantic element of the narrative in documentaries. This approach deepens the narrative, encouraging subjective understandings of the marshlands and their people. By blending representation and participation, *Eden Again* engages deeply with "the real," showcasing the Marsh Arabs' experiences alongside environmental degradation. (Guarasci, 2015) emphasize that this focus encouraging profound reflection on environmental and cultural issues.

The interactive format allows users to explore archival and contemporary footage, mirroring the Marshlands' ongoing recovery. Nichols (1991) argues that while documentaries represent reality, this becomes more complex in interactive contexts where users shape their experiences. *Eden Again's* fragmented, non-linear structure encourages dialogue about environmentalism, cultural identity, and storytelling fluidity.

Thus, informed by practice-based research, *Eden Again* demonstrates how creating interactive documentaries can generate new knowledge (Smith & Dean, 2009). This aligns with Bruzzi's (2006) view that documentaries should foster collaborative relationships with viewers,

contributing to new ways of understanding and presenting reality. Moreover, the documentary

positions environmental restoration as both an ecological and cultural process, intertwining the

Marshlands' recovery with the revival of the Marsh Arabs' way of life. This dual focus

distinguishes *Eden Again* within broader discussions on how documentaries address real-world

issues (Gifreu-Castells, 2018). By pushing viewers to critically reflect on the content and their

interpretive roles, *Eden Again* underscores the potential of interactive documentaries to effect

meaningful change.

Sustainable Cultural Tourism: Balancing Economic Development with Heritage Preservation and Documentation

Eden Again highlights the potential of representation to influence perceptions and create

economic opportunities. By showcasing the marshlands, the documentary positions this location

as a potential tourist destination. Carl et al. (2007) argues that films like *The Lord of the Rings*

transformed New Zealand into a global tourist hotspot (cited in Aburghif, 2022). Similarly, *Eden*

Again serves as a form of destination marketing. Building on Gandy's concepts of nature

representation in Werner Herzog's films concerning the blurring of reality and fiction, Gandy

(1996) notes that Herzog's documentaries often blur the distinction between documentary and

fiction. This is particularly evident in Herzog's manipulation of scenes for aesthetic effect, reflected in the portrayal of the marshlands in *Eden Again*. It generates interest among viewers who may be inspired to visit, creating new revenue streams for local businesses and contributing to regional development.

The film effectively captures the culture, history, and heritage of the marshlands, resonating with cultural and heritage tourists. (Croy, 2010) notes that films reflecting a location's cultural and environmental significance tend to have the greatest impact. Additionally, (Kim and Park, 2023) find that local communities often view film tourism positively, appreciating its indirect benefits. In *Eden Again*, the visual representation of the environment plays a crucial role in engaging the audience. Thus, the depiction of the marshlands immerses viewers in their cultural and historical richness, evoking emotional and intellectual responses. Moreover, *Eden Again* contributes to ongoing discussions about the portrayal of reality, particularly within the growing genre of interactive documentaries. This genre challenges conventional understandings of locations, cultures, and social relationships, addressing important issues while actively involving the audience in shaping cultural perceptions.

In representing the marshlands and their inhabitants, *Eden Again* plays a vital role in preserving cultural heritage. By documenting the lived experiences of marshland residents, the

documentary fosters a deeper appreciation for these cultures and combats stereotypes, promoting

tolerance. Positive cultural representation can empower communities, instilling pride and

reinforcing cultural identity. Furthermore, this artistic expression can stimulate economic

opportunities, such as cultural tourism, while enhancing global understanding of

interconnectedness.

The film also emphasizes the significance of "living heritage" by enriching existing archives

with residents' testimonies, especially considering the loss of homes and lives in the region. This

documentation enhances the preservation of the marshlands' cultural and environmental history,

ensuring that future generations can learn from these lived experiences.

Call for Further Research

Future research should focus on overcoming the challenges of representing the marshlands and

their ecosystem. Gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the region is crucial to

accurately depict its complex biodiversity. Efforts to raise public awareness of environmental

degradation and promote conservation, both locally and globally, must be prioritized. By

upholding scientific accuracy and encouraging global support, *Eden Again* aims to contribute to

the ongoing discourse on biodiversity preservation and the cultural significance of the marshlands.

Looking ahead, future applications of this methodology could expand the research by exploring broader themes, such as Iraqi multiculturalism as a metaphor for national identity. This would further test the proposed approach for analysing how interactive documentaries represent location and people, building on the insights gained from this case study. So, future iterations of interactive documentaries could expand on the uncovered aspects of this rich ecosystem and cultural landscape, continuing the representation of the Marshlands and their significance.

Conclusion

Eden Again advances the interactive documentary genre by seamlessly integrating personal narratives, ecological concerns, and the cultural significance of Iraq's Marshlands. Through innovative multimedia techniques, it illuminates the intricate relationship between environment and culture, offering unique perspectives on restoration efforts and the Marsh Arabs' resilience. By applying Stuart Hall's representation theory (1989, 2020) and Gandy's (1996) analysis, the documentary provides a nuanced portrayal of nature and cultural identity within an interactive framework. It conceptualises "location" as a fusion of physical landscapes and inhabitants'

emotional ties, drawing on scholars like Helphand (1986) and Harper and Rayner (2010) to situate the Marshlands in their historical and cultural context.

The interactive documentary's dual structure balances the broader ecological narrative with the Marsh Arabs' lived experiences, illustrating how geographical connections shape cultural identities. Its interactive format bridges the gap between representation and reality, inviting participatory engagement from viewers. Moreover, *Eden Again* enriches environmental and cultural resilience discourse by centering marginalised communities. It challenges traditional narratives and addresses a literature gap by highlighting the Marsh Arabs' role in restoring their homeland. This focus on the interdependence of ecological recovery and cultural survival contributes to broader conversations about representing marginalised groups and their environmental relationships (Goodman, et al., 2016).

As an innovative case study, the interactive documentary's immersive approach fosters empathy and advocates for continued research and conservation. By engaging audiences both emotionally and intellectually, it underscores the importance of thoughtful representation of complex global issues, serving as a model for future projects exploring the interconnectedness of culture and environment.

In conclusion, practice-informed research in interactive documentaries enhances knowledge production by combining experiential learning with academic inquiry. This approach enables filmmakers to tackle complex narratives and engage audiences as active participants. By amplifying marginalised voices, projects like *Eden Again* offer a more inclusive understanding of cultural and environmental issues, challenging dominant narratives and expanding the horizons of interactive documentary storytelling.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] [Editor's Note]: There have been recent articles in *CINEJ* that discussed various aspects of documentary aesthetics such as Çalışkan (2023), Hudac (2023), Imran (2023), Moeck (2023) and Siriwardena (2023). This contribution on interactive documentary by the author is a first for the journal and a highly informative piece on i-docs. Please cite as: Aburghif, H. Interactive documentary as a living and embodying experience to represent reality: A practice-based case study. *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, *12*(2), 30–65. https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2024.617.