

## *Baghdadi Street Life: Examining the Challenges of Representing and Recreating Baghdad in Interactive Documentary – A Practice-Based Case Study*

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### Abstract

This study explores the challenge of representing urban environments, focusing on the misrepresentation of Baghdad in mainstream cinema. It argues that interactive documentaries (i-docs) offer a powerful framework for creating more authentic, nuanced, and participatory city portraits. Drawing on a practice-based research methodology, this article analyses the creative and structural choices behind the i-doc *Baghdadi Street Life* (2022). Specifically, it demonstrates how the project employs a hub narrative structure to subvert monolithic narratives of conflict. The study provides concrete examples of the i-doc's user interface, navigation, and layered multimedia, showing how users can explore themes of resilience, culture, and daily life on streets like Al-Mutanabbi and Abu Nawas. By foregrounding co-creation with Iraqi participants, the project counters the passive viewership of traditional film and establishes Baghdad's streets as sites of community and lived experience. The article concludes by discussing the ethical considerations of this co-creative process and the i-doc's potential impact on its intended audience, contributing to scholarly debates on urban representation, i-doc typologies, and ethical filmmaking.

**Keywords:** interactive documentary; urban representation; practice-based research; Baghdad; city image; hub narrative; co-creation; ethical filmmaking; misrepresentation



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# *Baghdadi Street Life: Examining the Challenges of Representing and Recreating Baghdad in Interactive Documentary – A Practice-Based Case Study*

Hsham Aburghif

## Introduction

The representation of cities in filmmaking is a complex process that often defaults to entrenched stereotypes, particularly for cities like Baghdad, which are frequently reduced to monolithic images of conflict and decay (Mennel, 2008). This article examines how the interactive documentary (i-doc) format can challenge these misrepresentations. It presents a practice-based case study of the i-doc *Baghdadi Street Life* (2022), a project designed to offer a more nuanced and ethically driven portrayal of the city.

Traditional linear films often construct a singular 'city image' that overlooks the complexities of urban life (Koeck & Penz, 2003). In contrast, *Baghdadi Street Life* leverages the unique affordances of interactivity (non-linear storytelling, user participation, and multimedia integration) to present an alternative narrative. This article argues that by adopting a hub narrative structure, the i-doc allows users to navigate a multifaceted representation of Baghdad, one that foregrounds the everyday resilience, cultural vibrancy, and diverse perspectives of its residents.

This study makes three primary contributions. First, it provides a clear methodological framework for practice-based i-doc research. Second, it offers concrete analysis of how specific interactive mechanics can be used to construct a complex urban portrait. Third, it addresses the crucial ethical dimensions of representing a post-conflict city and its inhabitants. By doing so, it moves beyond theoretical assertions to demonstrate how an i-doc can actively subvert misrepresentation and foster a more authentic understanding of place "to examine how this multimedia genre portrays our understanding of a location, cultures, and social bonds" (Aburghif, 2024, p.30).

### Methodology: A Practice-Based Approach

This article employs a practice-based research methodology, where the creation of the i-doc *Baghdadi Street Life* is itself the primary mode of inquiry (Aston & Gaudenzi, 2012). The analysis is therefore an auto-ethnographic reflection on the creative, structural, and ethical decisions made during the project's development. This approach allows for a granular examination of the relationship between theoretical concepts (like 'city image') and their practical application in a digital, interactive medium. The argument is built not on external observation alone, but on an insider's account of the intent and mechanics behind the i-doc's design. This method makes the author's voice integral to the analysis, shifting between the role of "the filmmaker" (as creator) and "the researcher" (as analyst) to bridge theory and practice.

## Deconstructing the 'City Image': Baghdad in Interactive Form

Mainstream media often portrays Baghdad as what Menzel (2008, p. 207) terms an "empty wasteland," a backdrop for geopolitical conflict devoid of its inhabitants' rich social and cultural tapestry. *Baghdadi Street Life* was conceived as a direct response to this, aiming to create a 'Baghdad-real', not an idealized utopia, but a version of the city informed by the lived experiences of its people. The central challenge was to translate this goal into a functional interactive experience, allowing audiences to engage with the city's dynamic essence (Aburghif, 2024).

A crucial facet of this practice is the subjective nature of the filmmaker's experiences. As Lebow (2012) argues, the illusion of objectivity dissipates as the filmmaker's subjectivity becomes integral to the frame. This acknowledgment emphasises the personal nature of representation, recognising the filmmaker's perspective as a vital component in portraying Baghdad's complex reality. Moreover, Erigha highlights the importance of qualitative inquiries in understanding issues of inequality, emphasising the need for research that sheds light on racial underrepresentation (2015, p. 83). In alignment with this perspective, *Baghdadi Street Life* embarks on a comprehensive exploration that leverages the dynamic features of interactive documentaries. This innovative approach seeks to intricately represent Baghdad's essence and the diverse experiences of its inhabitants, providing valuable insights into the representation

dynamics and the challenges of underrepresentation in media. The reciprocal relationship between residents and their city is poignantly illustrated in the notion that "the city is rooted in the habits and customs of the people who inhabit it" (Park, 1915, p. 578). This principle is a guiding thread throughout the documentary, demonstrating how interpersonal dynamics shape Baghdad's urban tapestry.

Navigating the landscape of urban representation involves considering the profound impact of the city's sociocultural dynamics. Drawing from Koeck and Penz's insight, filmmakers must create a "filmic space" and depict a "city image" that is legible (2003, p. 2). This article explores how the filmmaker represents Baghdad while confronting entrenched narratives, introducing a nuanced perspective that aligns with Koeck and Penz's framework of "filmic space versus real space." This approach highlights the interplay between representation and lived experience, emphasising the inherent power dynamics within the urban fabric.

Cinematographic choices are pivotal in challenging the marginalisation often associated with urban spaces. Koeck and Penz note that films have a "lingering effect" on the cities they portray, which can influence our perception (2003, p. 373). Thus, *Baghdadi Street Life* aims to intentionally represent vital events and moments in the lives of Baghdadis, emphasising key facets that encapsulate contemporary Baghdad rather than providing a comprehensive

rendering.

Focusing on narrative and thematic elements, the interactive documentary skilfully eliminates superfluous details, acknowledging the interviewees and the filmmaker's responsibility to craft an encounter that respects residents' entitlement to the urban space. This strategy transcends mere visual depiction, constructing an immersive representation that resonates deeply with the audience. Thus, *Baghdadi Street Life* serves as a medium of representation and a dynamic conduit for exploring the intersections of culture, identity, and urban experience.

Considering the misrepresentations of Baghdad and its people in various films, this interactive documentary adopts a distinctive approach to its portrayal. The choices made in representation reveal how meaning is constructed in film (Brunsdon, 2012, p. 224). For instance, as users navigate from the green suburbs to the bustling Abu Nawas Street, they witness the historical and modern facets of Baghdad and its populace. Moreover, Lu (2022) asserts that cities are constructed by visible and invisible urban spaces, whose representation captures profound transformations within urban environments (p. 6). In this context, the interactive documentary represents not only the city of Baghdad but also the perspectives of the Iraqi interviewees, navigating the hierarchies inherent in the medium. This work of storytelling

is essential in screening the city, reflecting Hallam's (2010) argument that "the relationship between film and the city is increasingly recognized as the archetypical ground for examining visual and sensory experience" (pp. 277-279). To represent in an interactive documentary is to define a world shaped by its inhabitants' experiences, especially within Baghdad's context. For instance, *Highrise: Out My Window* (2010) combines photographs, videos, and interviews to explore Highrise communities worldwide. Such projects cater to diverse sensory modalities, enhancing the storytelling experience and providing a holistic representation of complex realities (Nash, 2012).

### The Hub Narrative Structure of *Baghdadi Street Life*

To avoid a prescriptive, linear narrative, the i-doc is built on a hub narrative model (Gaudenzi, 2013), by offering innovative ways to represent reality (Aburghif, 2022). The central interface is an illustrated, interactive map of Baghdad, which serves as the 'hub.' Major streets, such as Al-Mutanabbi Street (the historic centre of literary life), Abu Nawas Street (known for its social scene), and areas of Al-Mansour (a modern commercial district), act as primary 'spokes.'

Users are not guided along a fixed path. Instead, they choose which street to explore by clicking on it. This act of choice immediately positions the user as an active explorer rather than a passive viewer. Upon entering a 'street,' the user is presented with a main video file a slow,

observational tracking shot of the environment. This design choice establishes a sense of place and atmosphere, allowing the city's visual and auditory textures to emerge.

### Case Study in Nuance: Navigating Al-Mutanabbi and Abu Nawas Streets

The effectiveness of the hub model is best illustrated through specific user journeys.

**Al-Mutanabbi Street:** When a user navigates to this location, the screen displays the main tracking shot of the bustling book market. Embedded within this video are several pulsating 'hotspots.' For example:

Clicking on a bookseller opens a pop-up window featuring a short interview. In it, the bookseller recounts the street's 2007 bombing but quickly pivots to discussing the renewed vibrancy of the literary community today. The user is then given two choices: a 'Resilience' icon, which links to other shopkeepers' stories of rebuilding, or a 'History' icon, which opens archival news footage of the bombing. This layered design allows the user to engage with the history of trauma without letting it define the entire narrative.

Clicking on a book cover triggers an audio overlay of a resident reading a poem by the Iraqi poet Al-Jawahiri, connecting the physical space to its intangible literary heritage.

**Abu Nawas Street:** This section challenges the image of Baghdad as socially conservative. The main video shows families and friends enjoying the Tigris riverfront.

A hotspot on a musician playing the oud initiates a video where he discusses the importance of music in public life. The user can then navigate to a gallery of Iraqi musical instruments or a playlist of popular Iraqi songs, immersing them in the city's cultural soundscape.

Another hotspot over a 'masgouf' fish restaurant opens a short documentary clip about this traditional Baghdadi dish, connecting urban space with culinary tradition and social gathering.

Through these mechanics, the i-doc moves beyond simple representation. It constructs a dynamic, multi-layered "filmic space" (Koeck & Penz, 2003) where history, culture, personal testimony, and sensory experience coexist. The user's movement through this space (choosing what to click and which path to follow) creates a personalized narrative that reflects the complex, non-linear nature of the city itself.

### The Politics of Representation

Creating an alternative narrative of Baghdad required more than just technical innovation; it demanded critical engagement with the ethical responsibilities of representation.

## Ethical Considerations and Co-Creation

Recognising the power imbalance inherent in documentary filmmaking, *Baghdadi Street Life* was developed through a process of co-creation. This principle, central to participatory i-docs (Aston & Gaudenzi, 2012), was implemented in several ways:

**Informed Consent and Agency:** All participants were fully briefed on the project's aims and its interactive nature. They were given the choice to be named or remain anonymous and had the right to review and approve their filmed segments before final inclusion.

**Collaborative Storytelling:** Interviews were conducted as open-ended conversations rather than interrogations. Participants were encouraged to guide the discussion, focusing on what they felt was most important to convey about their lives and their city. This acknowledges them not as subjects, but as co-creators of the narrative.

**Avoiding Extractive Filmmaking:** The project sought to create a 'living archive' that could be of value to the community itself, rather than simply extracting stories for an external audience. The online format makes it accessible to the Iraqi diaspora and residents, fostering a sense of shared ownership.

## Intended Audience and Impact

The i-doc was designed for two primary audiences:

A non-Iraqi, Western audience, whose perception of Baghdad has likely been shaped by

mainstream news and war films. For this group, the project aims to foster empathy and disrupt stereotypes by providing an immersive encounter with the city's humanistic and cultural dimensions.

The Iraqi diaspora and residents of Baghdad, for whom the i-doc can serve as a platform for memory, reflection, and connection. By seeing their own stories and spaces represented with nuance and respect, the project aims to contribute to a collective sense of place and identity.

The desired impact is not to present a "complete" or "objective" truth, as such a goal is illusory (Lebow, 2012). Instead, the aim is to demonstrate that Baghdad, like any great city, contains a multiplicity of truths and that the i-doc format is uniquely suited to representing that multiplicity.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that interactive documentaries provide a vital tool for challenging reductive cinematic portrayals of urban environments. Through a practice-based analysis of *Baghdadi Street Life*, I have demonstrated how specific structural and interactive choices can generate a more complex and authentic representation of Baghdad. By employing a hub narrative structure, layering multimedia content, and prioritising user-driven navigation, the i-doc transforms the viewer from a passive consumer of a single story into an active participant

in a multifaceted world.

This approach consciously moves away from the "objective" gaze of traditional documentary, instead embracing the subjectivity of both the filmmaker and the participants as a strength. The co-creative methodology and ethical considerations discussed are not peripheral but integral to the project's goal of creating an empowering and respectful representation. Ultimately, *Baghdadi Street Life* shows that an i-doc can do more than just depict a city; it can create a dynamic, dialogic space where the city's inhabitants speak for themselves, revealing Baghdad not as a site of perpetual crisis, but as a place of profound resilience, culture, and community.

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## The i-doc

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