

Cinematizing agenda – visualizing change

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Abstract

Thinking about the activism nowadays it is impossible to exclude the power of the visual, of film, cinema, of video, of multimedia platforms and social media extensions that offer a possibility of conveying a message probably stronger than any other tool at our disposal. An emerging form nowadays is the web-documentary or interactive documentary, among the other names it got, which changes the way we see the cinematic narrative and offers another perspective on the engaged audiences. Is there a viable connection between the web-documentary production and social change? Is there a functional form in which the two correspond - an activist project which attained its goal through or with the help of an online documentary film? Can this hybrid art form be used as a tool for social change and how?

In this paper I will address these questions, as well as combine different interpretations and suggestions using as a starting point the crossing of documentary cinema and activism practices.

Keywords: Interactive Cinema, Non-linear Narrative, Documentary, Activism, Social Change

Introduction

Since the beginnings of problematizing and theorizing documentary, the mythology about its ability to intervene in the reality and social context of everyday life has been propagated. With the contemporary possibilities of digital emersion, of documentary interactive modes of production and reproduction it has been even more present and accentuated. But is it possible to think about the link between documentary cinema and social change beyond the myth? In order to explore this possibility, in the first place it is necessary to define the main concepts.

Activist documentary

When distinguishing documentary film from other film forms, there is an anticipation of truth, reality, of “discourse of sobriety” as written by Bill Nichols¹. We expect to trust what we see and take it as a representation as well as the comment of the factual world. Being “real” and trustworthy makes the documentary an obvious choice of media for conveying a message, be it political, economic, historical, social etc. With the popularization of the genre, there is much more debate about how documentary film can be used not only to inform on a topic but also to spark the debate and move to action. So what is it that makes of a documentary film an activist one? Broadly defined, it is marked by its activist cause. It can be an engagement

with some NGO, or a devotion to a policy change on higher political level or an idea of informing the public and attempting to spark the individual behavioral change. The point here is that within any activist film there is a visible ideology. Furthermore, with the democratization of the media and its global distribution, stronger digitalization and connectivity options, the social activism has found its voice amplified especially through the film. The number of productions with strong activist message, from the short video clips posted on YouTube or Facebook to the feature documentaries screened in the movie theaters, is growing. Grierson, the “father” of the documentary himself thought that the form should be used not only for the entertainment purposes but to address “actual social problems and possibilities of modern [...] society”², but that doesn’t turn every documentary into an activist film by purpose or a goal. I turn here to a set of criteria originally defined by Angela J. Aguayo’s rhetorical investigation of documentary film and video. Aguayo states that contemporary activist documentary film opens a space for collective political action, which is connected to a specific social movement, and intervenes in the process of social change by facilitating action beyond mere consumption and elaboration, in the end, activist texts start to intervene in broader political context and circulate widely³.

One of the key distinctions of any documentary film is that it addresses the world in which we live, rather than a world imagined by the filmmaker⁴. That premise makes it a good starting point when researching the correlations between filmmaking and social change. On a very simplified level, watching a documentary, the audience automatically thinks about retrieving something real, something from their environments that can extend their knowledge on a topic, broaden their perspective, deepen, or change their attitudes towards it, and ideally encourage to action. Obviously, the activist documentary as a niche is still quite broadly defined. A lot of documentary films get labelled as such just because they cover some controversial issue. Nevertheless, in order to be truly marked as the activist, a documentary should have an agenda attached and aspire to create a space for action while the filmmakers themselves invest in the social change as a side product of their film.

Cinematic language and new media

As Lev Manovich puts it, among the three cultural forms (cinema, written word, human-computer interface) that are shaping the cultural interfaces nowadays, cinema is probably the strongest one. “Liberated” from the physical storage, their forms and organizational strategies became available to be used and explored in new circumstances and contexts⁵. A

hundred years after the cinema's birth, cinematic ways of seeing the world, of structuring time, of narrating a story, of linking one experience to the next, are being extended to become the basic ways in which computer users access and interact with all cultural data.⁶ That access and more importantly the interaction without which the interactive documentary does not exist, makes of it a relational object, as highlighted by Sandra Gaudenzi, which we cannot study using just the traditional film and documentary theory.⁷ It surpasses just the single author, the filmmaker, and includes all the spectrum of organizations and individuals who "make" the documentary and those who later keep it alive.

The creative transformations in cinema are always in juxtaposition with the technological aspects enabling them. An interesting approach elaborated in the work of Jeffrey Shaw is that "at the fringe of an increasingly monocratic commercially driven cinema and games industry, new media art is pushing the creative and critical boundaries of the cinematic imaginary."⁸ He uses the term cinema as "any practice in which the projection of images plays a vital role, regardless of the media used (film, videotape, digital code)."⁹

Furthermore, a lot of different practices can and do coexist, allowed by the post-media condition. As brought by Weibel, this condition is defined by two phases – first the equivalence of traditional media and then its mixing. The author states that, after acknowledging each and every media tool and outlet as equals, their mixture brings innovation and creative development in art. Above that, it shows signs of significant democratization, the emancipation of the observer, and we witness "the birth of a new kind of democratic art in which everyone can participate."¹⁰ Precisely, as in interactive or web-documentary where the cinema entwines with digital video, computer, ultimately Internet and immerses the observer.

Interactivity

The four-dimensional systematization offered by Kate Nash¹¹ based on existing scholarship, primarily in new media¹² systematizes our understanding of this complex and still underexplored concept and focuses on interactivity and documentary in particular. She explores interactivity considering its technological, relational, experimental and discursive aspect. If interactivity is "conceived of as a multidimensional phenomenon in which the actions of users, documentary makers, subjects and technical systems together constitute a dynamic ecosystem"¹³ then it helps in approaching individual documentary projects. When analyzing it, technological dimension offers an insight into the way(s) the interactive project was "put", through which media and what are the technological prerequisites, which have been changing and growing in recent years, for any viewer to access it. This leads to the second one, the relationship that the project itself builds with the audience, alongside with the relations that are built between the authors and the audiences and among the individuals in the audience themselves.

In this kind of interactive projects, the individual experience is very important. It is also crucial, how audience experiences the documentary and, although there has been a lot of speculations about interactions implying engagement, there is a serious lack of studies in the field. Since that experience is, at various levels, different from the "traditional" documentary, the discursive dimension helps to understand the relationships between the audiences' experiences, actions and reactions together with the discourse of the project itself, especially taking into consideration how the concept of authorial voice here can be somehow changed.

The interactivity gives the agency to the viewer. Instead of just assisting what is unfolding in front of her/him, the viewer now has much more control. Even if we take into consideration that this choice is limited, simply by participating, the viewer has an opportunity to contest the meaning on a larger scale than in a traditional form of cinema. The interactivity therefore "creates a series of relations that form an ecosystem in which all parts are interdependent and dynamically linked."¹⁴ As a brief example, I will use here two already established interactive documentaries – *Highrise: Out My Window* (2010) by Katarina Cizek and *Journey to the End of Coal* (2008) by Samuel Bollendorff and Abel Ségretin. Although with different topics and different styles, what they share is a complete lack of linearity and "authorial" guidance, in a way that every single viewer has a potential to view and experience the documentary unfolding in front of him in a completely different manner.

By opening the homepage of *Highrise: Out My Window* we are confronted with the collage of images of buildings, people and a map, and the way we are going to view the film will depend on our own system of choices – where, whom and what are we going to see and listen.

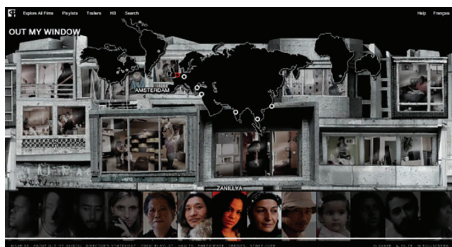


Image 1 - From *Highrise: Out My Window*

The Journey to the End of Coal is structured somehow differently where after starting the "journey" and assisting the videos in front of us we are always offered with a choice of question/answer which we want to pursue. Although our choices in each passage are limited, it still means that various viewers will have completely different personal experiences, interpreting the meaning on their own and creating their viewpoints. All of this should help the engagement.



Image 2 - From *The Journey to the End of Coal*

Nevertheless, what is necessary to mention is the possibility of interactivity turning to “interpassivity.” The options which the viewer has while interacting with the documentary are not always, nor could be, completely open. They depend of the content made reachable to the audiences and arranged by the author. Something close to what Daniel Palmer described as the “paradox of user control”¹⁵, where the choice becomes the illusion and the domination, although not that evident, still exist. In addition to that, the mere idea that the interactive documentary is available anywhere and anytime, waiting for us to explore it in our own pace and freedom of choice, leads to never really engage.

Impact

With the broader usage of the new media in reaching and “activating” the public, especially through the social movements, the debate about the possible impact and its measurement has broadened too. Still, there is not a single answer as well as there is not only “one” impact. As Kate Nash stated, the impact itself is multidimensional with different targets which include individuals, groups all the way to social and political structures, and different goals from awareness to changes in attitude and bigger social and political changes.¹⁶ Since there is an obvious challenge in measuring or studying the impact, the research data and an approach to it should depend strongly on how the impact is defined.

In his personal manifesto, Peter Wintonick states that social change is a result of the “greater digital dialogue, pluralism, tolerance and participation.”¹⁷ It is precisely in this dialogue, the mediation which the new documentary forms are offering, that the impact should be explored. I am inclined defining the impact depending on the aims and ideas of the filmmakers and the whole circle that contributed during the production. This follows the idea developed by Nash and Corner on “strategic impact documentary” in which they argue that the “social impact is something that the project team work to produce, through the processes of strategic communication, rather than something that just happens (...) when audiences encounter the film.”¹⁸

There is still a lot of cases where it is implied but poorly argued. That’s why The Center for Media & Social Impact invested in a collaborative report on “Assessing

the Social Impact of Issues-Focused Documentaries: Research Methods & Future Considerations”¹⁹, as well as Fledgling Fund’s “Assessing Creative Media’s Social Impact”²⁰, which both give examples and methodological possibilities in how to approach the impact. These “guides” are not definitive, they respond to the time and context of their production, but still can help combat presumptions, be it in favor or against the “impact media”, and encourage a research in a field that is obviously growing.

Audience

To understand and measure the impact, the most problematic and inevitable task is reaching the audiences. Although with the increased digitalization we have broader and easier access to the quantitative data – number of viewers, number of comments, likes, shares etc., age and social group of the viewers – the qualitative data is much harder, although not impossible, to access. To grasp the impact of any activist documentary one should follow the audiences, the way they interact with the documentary itself as well as how and if they continue to interact afterwards; be it sharing, contributing, organizing and in any way acting upon the issue the documentary brought up.

Where the audiences are of the concern, from the methodological perspective there are always going to be a few issues. First of all, it was hard to imagine an easily definable group even before the rapid growth in digitalization and distribution technologies, and now, talking about the cinema made to be seen online, it seems even harder. So who constitutes these virtual communities?

Community

As a set of relationships among different people, a community is a figurative place where they share and nurture common ideas, thoughts, feelings, views etc. The members of a community should have “an individual and collective sense that they can [...] influence their environments and each other.”²¹ With the contemporary developments in technology, the concept of community transferred to the domain of virtual world too. The Internet is making it easy to create and flourish different networks among the people around the world. When researching the possibilities of impact through the interactive and web documentaries, the sole concept of the interactivity and web places the virtual communities on the forefront. In ideal circumstances, these communities are the ones that are going to “spread the word” and make the issue viral. Nevertheless, what cannot be forgotten is that the basic idea of activist documentaries, be they virtual or not, always talk about the “real” communities, the ones affected by the issue the filmmaker wants to address and bring attention to. However, how and if they do it is debatable. Which brings us to the concept of social change.

Social change

The potentiality of documentary filmmaking to spark the social change processes has been debated probably as long as the form exists, and now with the interactive online projects it is being developed even more. The most commonly evoked “proof” is that the audiences are more connected and getting more involved. In the case of interactive documentaries sometimes they even have a chance to create and recreate the narrative. It changes the idea of the spectator as a mere recipient, who finally becomes an active participant.

A much-praised example of this is collaborative interactive documentary *18 Days in Egypt* (2011) by Jigar Mehta and Yasmin Elayat. “The idea behind *18 Days in Egypt* is to really re-envision the documentary of the future and to get the audience closer to the storytellers. In our case, the storytellers are the people that actually lived these experiences.”²² It aimed to document the protest in Egypt as they were unfolding and develop the empathy around the world for the cause. The history now tells us how this particular story ended, but the fact is that in the moment and on the ground, the changes were being made. The facts are that the much higher geopolitical influences were responsible in the course of the events we call the Arab Spring, but the hype the social media created cannot be ignored. What the authors wanted to stress at the time was that the media that spread the stories also put forward different ones while leaving behind so many others. Here their project tried to step in by giving voices to the ones that might go unheard.

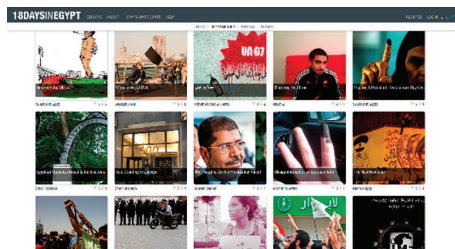


Image 3 - From *18 Days in Egypt*

The point is that the social change is a concept for which is hard to access a univocal and simple definition. It can be understood as the “plethora of changes in the institutional structure of a society in a given time frame”²³, or as a “process of change in the social structure of a society in its constitutive institutions, cultural patterns, associated social actions and conscious awareness.”²⁴ It is not necessarily the “result of an evolutionary process but a reaction in the shape of processes of reflexive social learning towards existing ways of life and forms of practices becoming obsolete.”²⁵ The kind of social change that can be relatively easily traced in case studies is the rise in the micro-level societal impact, rise in the awareness, implementation of new ideas, organizing and collective

action, with the change maybe not visible instantly, but prompted and in the process of making. For that to happen the filmmakers usually construct their interactive documentaries around the strategic idea and grounded in the fieldwork behind the main problem, already mapping the prospects and goals they want to accomplish. Above that, the questions posed by Jane M. Gaines in *Political Mimesis* interrogating the “powerful documentary mythologies intertwined with the actual historical events”²⁶ and interpreted as a social change are still valid for the interactive documentary - What do we count as change? How do we know what effects the film has produced? How do we determine where consciousness leaves off and action begins?

Interactive/Web-Documentary and Social Activism

So, what is an interactive or web documentary and how does it respond to the activist causes?

For us to be able to even talk about the interactive/web-documentaries, it was necessary for the two communication fields to merge – the digital media and the documentary filmmaking. As Arnau Gifreu suggests in his attempt to define the emerging genre, “a fusion begins from mutual attraction: the documentary genre contributes with its several modes of representing reality, and the digital media genre contributes with its new navigating and interacting modes.”²⁷ All these qualities are seen as something usable and valuable in the contexts of advocating, persuading, mobilizing the general public, in this case promoting the social change. It is important to understand that the interactive media redefined the documentary experience by taking a bit of the “control” out of the filmmakers’ hands and dividing it with the audience. One of my hypotheses is that the key to the engagement lays precisely in the distribution process. Still I would like to note that the fact the documentary experience is here redefined, does not mean that the documentary form deteriorated or moved into another direction from the “tradition”, but rather that this is one of the possible paths it took in its evolution. What does change in comparison with the traditional documentary form is that the linear narrative is loosen or lost as interactivity brings non-linearity, spontaneous exploration of the content and collaboration between the maker and the viewer, generating more proactive content. Since the early beginnings of the genre this proactivity has been explored among the activist filmmakers, NGOs and advocacy groups. What still needs further attention are the models and formulas that will make these collaborations work in an attempt to bring to the social change.

Cinematizing agenda

We can assume that new media forms of interactive documentaries imply new type of engaged audiences. Still, this does not necessarily mean that these audiences will take the necessary actions to move the activist mission forward, at least there is no proof for this statement. One of the reasons is that the form

is relatively new and constantly evolving, the other is the problem of capturing something as intangible as for instance empowerment, elevated consciousness, but also political or social changes. Without due research on a larger scale, we can only speculate up to which point is it really an aftermath of the interactive documentaries' call for action or merely a coincidental event. In very practical terms, in order to achieve as much as possible, all the involving actors should be mobilized with the final objective in mind.

Jodi Nelson-Tabor showed that 76% of initiatives of non-profits fail to motivate the actions needed for their cause.²⁸ Joined effort of NGOs and filmmakers with the new digital platforms and interactive documentaries could possibly be the answer. To cinematize the agenda means then to use the resources and actions of the NGO and present it and disseminate via interactive platform for new documentary forms using the language of cinema thus fostering the engagement and calling to action. "Participatory communities using (...) media platforms can be trained in coherent and cohesive ways can be trained in new form of media practice for the purposes of acting as agents of social change."²⁹ Here is precisely where significance of interactive documentary lays. They have a "potential to foster connections between the private realm of media engagement and of public participation."³⁰ Placing this interactive documentary online and for public access isn't enough though. Here is again where the presence, activities, contacts and network of NGOs, associations and other activist groups enters the scene. It is plausible to think that a constructive and focused agenda both by filmmakers and the activist groups can create feasible strategies for dissemination and reach different levels of impact.

As was already mentioned when talking about impact, in 2016 The Fledgling Fund published an Impact Workbook "to support filmmakers who are telling stories and building engagement campaigns intended to make social change."³¹ It is by no means a definitive and absolute formula for reaching that change; rather a comprehensive guide through the processes of teaming up, production, campaign plans etc.

A very similar document is a Hotdocs' "Documentary Impact: Social Change Through Storytelling." Though with somehow idealistic opening that states that the "intangible magic of the documentary film" is part of the "awakening of empathy within audiences"³² still provides strong arguments on potential impact of documentary films based on case studies.

So how can we cinematize the agenda? If the aim of the desired impact is social change, it begins with and within the individual, then joined and engaged individuals create a movement and thus lead to transformative cultural, political or institutional changes. Cinematizing it means using the language of cinema to affect, connect and engage.

To address the idea of cinematized agenda, let's look in detail, and in correspondence to the two above mentioned "manuals," at the 2017 project *The Shore Line: A storybook for a sustainable future* by Liz Miller.

"A good story, well told, is critical to a successful impact strategy."³³

In a time when we witnessed a devastating climate caused tragedy in Mozambique and at the same time several countries are pulling out from the Paris Agreement, the topic of sustainable future and the damage done to the planet is more than a "good story" to tell. Liz Miller decided to use her interactive documentary on the climate crisis to offer different type of educational resource "that offer students hope and practical solutions to address the complex environmental issues that await them"³⁴ by focusing on individuals, solutions that can be done and present challenges that need our attention.

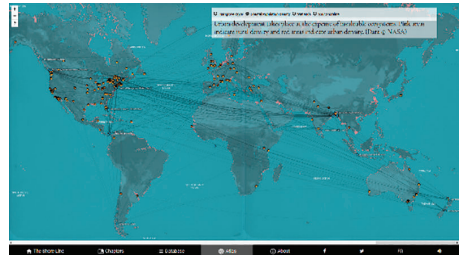


Image 4 - From *The Shore Line*

The documentary is dynamic, visually attractive and resourceful. It includes video profiles of people from different geographies and different fields, their experiences, the interactive map of potential and actual risks for the coastal ecosystems and a rich and systematized database linked to the main, six-chapter storyline.

"Film impact campaigns need smart strategy."³⁵

The strategy is clear from the mere overview. The author was connected to the students and educators throughout the production, leading to the creation of strategy tool kits that can be found in the course of visualization. What I found particularly interesting a part called "Educator's exchange" which is a companion to the interactive documentary that attempts to create a network of educators to "promote climate literacy and to discuss how their communities and classrooms are responding to rising sea levels, increased flooding and storms" that way contributing to the work of each of the teacher that involves as well as the further development of the project. Furthermore, the database offers a set of classified subjects (by strategy toolkit, people, country and threat) that are accompanied by questions, links, and reading and activity suggestions. Alongside the documentary, the viewer is confronted with the strategically organized additional information that can help the knowledge construction and contemplation, ideally leading to action.

"The specific goals of a social impact strategy will inform who is the most important audience"³⁶

In this case, the audience chosen are the high-school and university-level students as well as their educators. So, if the goal is to talk about, alert about the climate change and its impact on the ocean and incite critical thinking and sustainable ideas, then the chosen audience makes a lot of sense, the education *is* critical in addressing the climate crisis. The educators are encouraged to use each one of the possible navigation paths with suggestions for discussion and different modes of learning – solution-based learning, media literacy and production and comparative learning. What is worth mentioning is that the project was built in collaboration with the same groups that are intended to be “the most important audience” thus creating the grounds for fruitful engagement by the same groups around the world.

“Filmmakers don’t have to become social change experts, but should they choose to create a social impact campaign, they should assemble a team and partnerships with others to deliver a strategy.”³⁷

That was precisely the case with *The Shore Line*. Besides the filmmaker (writer, producer and director) Liz Miller, a team of people worked on its production. As is expected from any audiovisual production, we have a story and creative development team, interactive design, research and script consultation, interactive sound design, camera, editors, music and sound, but then we also have curriculum development and outreach team, as well as codirectors on different locations, some of which are youth groups and teachers, with the participation of scientists, urban planners, artists, activists. Subsequently, through the film, the filmmaker and her team are working on taking the project, available in three languages, to the classrooms, organizations, activist groups and communities.

“Media impact is demonstrated when people are talking about the issues of the film.”³⁸

Talking about the number of views and likes on social media and coverage in the mainstream ones, there is no great number to report. Nevertheless, the 43 people “enacting change along the coast”³⁹, as well as all the students and teachers included in the project already attest to certain level of outreach, a focused one. Moreover, as we defined the impact, it should go beyond the statistical data on number of viewers and likes, and find a way to track how deep and voluminous the engagement is, to which extent the advocacy strategy is elaborated and how it functions.

In the terms of “guidelines” *The Shore Line* looks like an excellent model and includes almost all of the proposed ideal circumstances for creating an impact. A year and a half have passed since its launch, and the next step would be to contact the teachers and students that collaborated on it as well as teachers and classrooms that used it to really comprehend if it achieved the desired impact.

Challenges

The intervention of interactive documentary in engagements and activities for social change has already been established. The projects based on this idea are being made already several years, almost since this new media itself has emerged. The rise in the number of interactive socially proactive documentaries lead to the augmented interest in different research fields as well. The challenges for these studies are numerous, and in the context of rapidly changing digital environments, it exponentially grows too. Thus, from a methodological point of view, it is undoubtedly complicated – how to measure something as complex as audiences, reception, impact, and finally social change. Nevertheless, attempts are being made, laboratories invested in combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to grasp the possibilities and build strategic tools for artists and scientist interested in this conjuncture of interactive media and impact and social change.

Finally, through the course of this paper, we were talking about the possibilities of interactive cinema using agenda to create and curate engagement for social change. It was implied that the authors and other contributors have an altruistic agenda that will serve the people and communities it was made by and/or for. What I would like to propose here for further contemplation is, if it works and if by following the certain “rules” we can transform the agenda to the engagement and impact, molding and shifting audiences’ perspectives and actions, then it is equally possible to work both ways, creating the narratives following completely opposite agendas, more concrete, it is possible to use the same tools for environmental issues and sensibilization for migrant crisis for example, as it is for rapidly growing “fake news”, populist and hate speech agendas etc. In this overly mediated world, where apparently, all the information is available at the reach of a mouse click, it gets more and more important to invest in media literacy and critical thinking to be able to extract and apprehend the information from this very crowded mediasphere. The language of cinema and audiovisual is extremely potent here and using it with activist networks and bottom-up approach may lead to visualizing positive change.

Endnotes

- ¹ Nichols 2001
- ² Sussex and Grierson 1972
- ³ Aguayo 2015
- ⁴ Nichols 2001
- ⁵ Manovich 1997
- ⁶ Manovich 1997
- ⁷ Gaudenzi 2011
- ⁸ Shaw 2012
- ⁹ Weibel and Shaw 2013
- ¹⁰ Weibel 2012
- ¹¹ Nash 2014
- ¹² McMillan 2002; Quiring 2009
- ¹³ Nash, Hight & Summerhayes 2014
- ¹⁴ Gaudenzi 2013
- ¹⁵ Palmer 2003
- ¹⁶ Nash & Corner 2016

- ¹⁷ Wintonick 2013
¹⁸ Nash & Corner 2016
¹⁹ Chattoo and Das 2014
²⁰ Barrett and Leddy 2009
²¹ Chavis & Kein 2015
²² Mehta 2012
²³ Heintz 1958; as cited in Howaldt, Butzin, Domanski & Kaletka 2014
²⁴ Zapf 2003; as cited in Howaldt, Butzin, Domanski & Kaletka 2014
²⁵ Jaeggi, 2013; as cited in Howaldt, Butzin, Domanski & Kaletka 2014
²⁶ Gaines 1999
²⁷ Gifreu 2011
²⁸ Nelson-Tabor 2018
²⁹ Nelson-Tabor 2018
³⁰ Nash 2017
³¹ Leddy, Strom and Barrett 2016
³² Finnerman 2014
³³ Finnerman 2014
³⁴ Miller 2018
³⁵ Finnerman 2014
³⁶ Finnerman 2014
³⁷ Finnerman 2014
³⁸ Finnerman 2014
³⁹ Miller 2017

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