4th International Visual Methods Conference

Troubling the Humanist Teleology of Digital Storytelling

visual methodologies

VISUAL METHODOLOGIES
ISSN: 2040-9456

Cover Photograph by Ray Gibson

Heather Lynch

Glasgow Caledonian University, UK

heather.lynch@gcu.ac.uk

Heather completed a Fine Art PhD in 2006. Based at Glasgow Caledonian University, (Health and Life Science). Her research critiques policy premised on communitarianism and explores the creative potential of Nancy's relational, antagonism and difference.

Abstract

As a central strand of the 4th International Visual Methods Conference (IVM4 took place in Brighton 2015 with a focus on critical approaches, narrative and visual research methods), Digital Storytelling was represented as a model of participatory research with significant potential for emancipatory impact. Joe Lambert founder and Executive Director of the Story Center (formerly Centre for Digital Storytelling) gave a keynote presentation; there were also a significant number of parallel presentations that reported research from digital storytelling practices. Many of these drew on the methods proposed by the Story Center which position this practice as socially transformative. However, the ways in which this vein of digital storytelling is couched within Freire's Hegelian teleology generates a range of ethical problems. Freirean approaches rest on a humanist notion of the dialectic of recognition and when translated to the level of the collective, this ends in a problematic model of collective identity, which is ultimately exclusionary and particularistic. More recent thinking on the commons by Italian theorists (Esposito, 2010; Hardt and Negri, 2011; Agamben, 1993) continues the struggle for liberation but sidesteps these problems through a rethinking on how the commons is formulated. Read in conjunction with Rancière's aesthetic politics these ideas offer alternative possibilities for participation by artists interested in emancipation and resistance.

Keywords: Digital storytelling, Freire, commons, Esposito

Digital Story Telling (DST) occupied a central strand of IVM4 Conference with pioneer Joe Lambert as keynote. While DST has relevance to the growing social media environment (Couldry, 2008) and to the debate on socially engaged arts practice (Bishop, 2012; Kester, 2011) this article focuses on forms that extend from Lambert's influential DST movement based in Paulo Freire's (2011) development theory. Lambert's (2006) participatory approach foregrounds narrative as central to the outcomes of self-realisation and social transformation. While I do not intend to undermine the wider outlook of DST, I will argue that for a significant range of DST work the Hegelian teleology through which its ideological premise has formed is problematic. There is therefore a need for a more radical approach capable of responding to contemporary social problems.

I will briefly describe how the form of DST aimed at social transformation aligns to the Freirian, Hegelian dialectic model. Then I will summarise key criticisms of this ideology. Finally, I will outline contemporary Italian theories of the commons, how these relate to the aesthetic politics proposed by Rancière and therefore provide new perspectives on emancipation which have relevance to visual media.

DST

This discussion is concerned with the Freiran process of DST which is grounded in Hegel's (1977) dialectic teleology. The Hegelian dialectic of the master-slave is based upon his theory of reciprocal recognition which he developed from the work of Fichte (2005). The master's identity is dependent upon the subordination of a slave, while the slave only becomes aware of her/his situation in the struggle for recognition and ultimately only becomes a human, by overthrowing the master, hence Freire's intention of 'humanisation' (2011). This formulation of the struggle for recognition has come to define how we have perceived a whole range of social movements, from workers rights, women's rights, US civil rights movements, disability to LGBT activism.

Much DST work has inherited this logic. According to Polk's (2010) review of the history of Digital Storytelling a central aim is to facilitate a listening platform which amplifies the voices of the oppressed. While not all work shares this focus much is made of the disadvantage of participants who are often described as 'peripheral' (Burgess, 2006); 'marginalised' (Alexandra, 2008); 'impoverished' (Hall and Katz, 2006) and 'excluded' (Dunford, 2014). Drawing from Freire' s notion of 'conscientization' (2011), DST views storytelling as a process that provides insight, and ultimately empowers participants to become productive included citizens. As such it lends itself to health (Gubrium, 2009) and education (Hull & Katz, 2006). Second, the telos of self-realisation can only be recognized on a collective level through 'solidarity'. DST work is frequently undertaken as a group where shared concerns might lead to clarity of the issues through the right to speak. Finally the stories aim to achieve recognition by society and the state which leads to changed attitudes, practices and legislation. For Freire as Hegel the role of narrative is central to the construction of identity and solidarity. There is however growing criticism of this form of critical theory, the main points of which are outlined below.

Contradiction/ Neo-communitarianism/ Anthropocentricism

The process of sublimation where the oppressed are locked into the logic of the oppression in order to achieve recognition and freedom, is a contradiction which follows through Hegel to Freire. Oppressed and oppressor are melded as a totality which Levinas (1969) suggests reduces the other to the same. An ethical problem of this is that freedom is dependent on pre-existing terms and therefore is not freedom. This contradiction can be seen where DST participants, such as those indicated above, are unproblematically depicted as 'marginal'. By definition this defers to the world of the oppressor and 'humanisation' can only be found within its confines. While it may be argued that Freire set out the need to identify 'limit-situations' in order that pre-existing terms might be exceeded, the problem remains. This is articulated in Biesta's (2006) philosophy of education where he argues that neo-Marxist approaches derived from Hegel such as Freire's are based on a problematic idea of human rationality. Therefore a rational understanding or in Freire's terminology 'conscientization' of a given situation will allow autonomous self-directing individuals to surpass this. On the premise of empirical evidence as much as post foundational thinking Biesta argues that being human does not and cannot rest on rationality oriented toward an ideal end, but is an act of engagement always in the making. This presents a very different model of education. One not based on the teleology of ideal outcomes but the creativity of radically open affect.

A further critique levied at Freirean approaches is that consciousness raising may create another dominion (Blunden, 2013), either through the ways in which the freedom sought by the newly empowered group acts to oppress others, or through the ways in which the sublimation of the oppressor continues to act in the transformed situation. An example of this can be found in the disability movement. People who have a learning disability diagnosis experienced unconscious exclusion through the empowered activists with physical impairment who based their case on cognitive ability despite physical limitations (Swain & French, 2000; Lynch, 2008). Through the recognition of one group another becomes further excluded. Another concern around dominion relates to the ways in which the collective has been harnessed to normative capitalist politics.

In recent years across Anglo/American politics, the language of community and civic participation has grown increasingly and resulted in a raft of policies which centre community. Increasingly communities are expected to take greater responsibility for local infrastructure. As much of this drive has come from the political centre-right, this has led to the beguilement (Fyfe, 2005) of the left who

traditionally function as the voice of the people. Amongst the range of criticisms is that this approach to community building appeals to a conservative traditionalism which seeks to shrink the state and in doing so gives greater freedom to markets. Scholars critical of this approach, dubbed neo-communitarianism (Joseph, 2002), describe it as a tyranny of participation (Cook & Khotari, 2001) as those involved are effectively empowered to further the capitalist project. The arts, particularly, in the UK have been harnessed for this work as creative process affords community building through the forging of expression and identity (Lynch and Allan, 2007; Merli, 2002; Belfiore, 2004).

A final criticism, which generates the possibility of a radically different approach to emancipation, is that the Hegelian humanist ideology of DST promotes human exceptionalism and sidelines the complex material ecology within which human subjectivity is actualised. There is a growing body of trans-disciplinary scholarship, in education (de Freitas, & Curinga, 2015), anthropology (Ingold, 2011), geography (Amin, 2012), and science and technology studies (Latour, 2005), which frame contemporary issues and opportunities as more than human. In doing so the totalizing dialectic logic of identity based on recognition is avoided. Giroux (2009) proposes a more open reading of Freire as a border crosser, however in order to achieve this his ideas must be decoupled from humanist teleology. Contemporary Italian theories of the commons offer such a prospect.

Toward the Commons

Esposito argues that modernism constitutes identity as property within a political economy of the proper which recognizes only that which can be appropriated and owned (Bird & Short, 2013). In this normative environment the story is currency. The value of digital storytelling is that it creates an opening for those without identification to produce a consumable identity. It is therefore undeniable that within normative structures storytelling has a value for many DST participants. However as these are grounded within the totality of the proper instead of challenging normative structures they tend to reify them. Rancière (2009) terms this the 'impotence of critique' in his appraisal of critical theory.

The micro work of creating a space for those deemed marginal or excluded is problematic as it discursively positions the problem as one of proximity to the centre (Byrne, 2005). (The reference to the marginal and excluded directly relate to the conference presentations and the DST literature cited above). The storytelling process plays off the liberal rights-based agenda to be heard with the communitarian teleology of collectives being able to create their own inalienable notion of the good. This is the well-worn approach of identity-based rights movements that defend modes of identity generated through discrete belongings which establish rights to share in political process. Most of these movements have generated momentum through the storytelling power of the arts in its many

guises. However the contemporary blurring of identity exposes the limitation of identity politics to address concerns including the growth in conflicts that breach national boundaries, exponential migration, and environmental threats. These demand an alternative understanding of commonality that exceeds identity and property.

Esposito (2010) proposes that which is common is not property but debt. What is common is therefore not what can be appropriated as a fulfillment of identity but 'loss, removal, or expropriation'. Being in common is the dissolution of identity, as that which is common, is always becoming. Attempts to enclose and immunize against loss are in fact violence against life. Esposito uses the example of the biopolitics of the Third Reich. He portrays its attempts to protect identity as an autoimmune disorder which ultimately destroyed that which it sought to protect. There is no less urgency in our current political situation where privileged nations shore up and protect their perceived rights to wealth at the expense of others. It is on this premise that there is a need for a different type of storytelling, not one of enclosure built on ideas of human privilege but one which centres complexity and multiplicity.

Maan's (2007) postcolonialism finds abundance in the terrain which the centre deems marginal. He states that alienation should not be overturned but used as creative resource. This demands forms of affirmative fabulation which do not re-instantiate divides through negation but rupture through the generation of new possibilities. Rancière (2009) argues that the political potential of art is not to generate an alternative worldview through a teleology of poesis but through an aesthetic of disruption. The problem of art used to generate a political end is not new. In his elaboration of eighteenth century performance Rancière establishes the links between making, representation and reception as a moral endeavor, where, 'the stage, the audience and the world were comprised in one and the same continuum.' This model implies the use of art as moral progression that we still 'cling' to. Instead he argues the 'aesthetic sensorium' rests in a rupture with destination marked by dis-identification. For Rancière this is a practice which does not seek to persuade but to disturb in order that the yet unknown might be called into presence. Biesta (2010) develops this line of thinking through a critique of educational practices which claim to be emancipatory as they seek to generate equality for those positioned as unequal. Biesta's careful analysis forcefully argues that this is impossible and that a disruption in the status quo necessitates an assumption of equivalence as a starting point. While Freire offers an incisive critique of education as knowledge transfer or the 'banking model' of education, Biesta goes much further. His argument lends itself to a pedagogy which dissolves the distinction between learner and teacher. This challenges the intention of artists who enter the life of a perceived, oppressed other to achieve social transformation and poses questions of how to create within the commons. Harney and Moton's (2013) work attends to this through a refusal of recognition while gesturing toward

the commons as a cacophony of a 'wild beyond'.

Some of the most poignant examples of creative commoning come from contemporary theatre practice. Manchester's Quarantine Company collaborates with people (who, significantly, are paid) who director Richard Gregory describes as 'experts in the everyday' to create work which 'challenges the concepts of "theatre and truth"' (Kirwin 2014). This work is not blind to the hardship which collaborators might experience but places it beyond a progressive moral discourse through a starting position of shared curiosity in the yet to be known. Examples which use digital media include Petra Kuppers' (2008) navigation of cripple culture through participatory films such as Tiresias. This work focuses on the body as a site which unsettles categories of disability/ability through troubling the notion of individual ownership of the body. Patricia Clough's (2015) collaborative multimedia performance Ecstatic Corona embodies the material/immaterial cacophony of place as an entanglement of relational rhythm which promises nothing but the immanent wilds of the present. These different approaches do not challenge the scope of 'normal', but destabilize normative categories altogether. They replace progression of our existing world with a need to create new worlds. They find the joy of possibility where others find marginality and instead of an orientation toward a more just world they find an aporia. These share sensibility with Esposito's communitas and Rancière's 'crippled beheaded divinity … which has not arms nor legs to carry out any action' (Rancière, 2009). The position from which all discernable directions are impossible is the site of rupture, the place from which new possibilities might emerge. For DST practitioners this is an invitation to relinquish an outcomes ambition for those deemed marginal and instead focus on the potential of more than human relations based in an ethics of uncertainty.

References

Agamben, G. (1993). The coming community, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 105.

Alexandra, D. (2008). Digital storytelling as transformative practice: Critical analysis and creative expression in the representation of migration in Ireland. *Journal of Media Practice,* 9(2), 101–112. http://doi.org/10.1386/jmpr.9.2.101_1

Amin, A. (2012). Land of Strangers, Cambridge, Polity.

Belfiore, E. (2004). 'Auditing culture'. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 10(2), 183 — 202 DOI: 10.1080/10286630042000255808

Biesta, G. (2006). Beyond Learning, Democratic Education for a Human Future, London, Paradigm.

Biesta (2010). Learner, Student, Speaker: Why it matters how we call those we teach. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 42:5-6, 540-552. http://DOI: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00684.x

Bird, G. & Short, J. (2013). Community, Immunity, and the Proper   an introduction to the political theory of roberto Esposito, Angelaki, 18(December 2014), 1–12. http://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2013.834661

Bishop, C. (2012). Artificial Hells, London, Verso.

Blunden, A. (2013). Contradiction, Consciousness and Generativity: Hegel's Roots in Freire's Work in Paulo Freire's Intellectual Roots: Toward Historicity in Praxis Robert Lake (Editor), Tricia Kress (Editor). London, Bloomsbury, 11-28

Burgess, J. (2006). Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling. *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies,* 20(2), 201-214.

Byrne, D. (2005). Social inclusion, Maidenhead, Open University.

Clough, P. (2015). Ecstatic Corona. Presentation at the Summer Institute in Qualitative Research, Education and Social Research Institute, Manchester Methropolotan Uiversity.

Couldry, N. (2008). Mediatization or Mediation? Alternative Understandings of the Emergent Space of Digital Storytelling. *New Media & Society*, 10(3), 373–391. http://doi.org/10.1177/1461444808089414

Cook, B. & Khotari, U. (2001). Participation: The New Tyranny, London, Zed Books.

de Freitas, E. & Curinga, M. (2015). New materialist approaches to the study of language and identity: Assembling the post-human subject. *Curriculum Inquiry,* 49(3), 249-265

Dunford, M. (2014). We live in the shadow: Inner-city kids tell their stories through photographs. *Visual Studies*, 29(1), 123–124. http://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2014.863037

Esposito, R. (2010). Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community translated by T Campbell, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Fichte, J. G. (2005). The System of Ethics, according to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre, translated and edited by D. Breazeale and G. Zo¨ller, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Freire, P. (2011 [1970]). Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. Ramos, M. B., London UK, Continuum.

Fyfe, N. (2005). Making Space for 'Neocommunitarianism'? The Third Sector, State and Civil Society in the UK. *Antipode* 37 (3), 536–557.

Giroux, H. (2009). Paolo Freire and the Politics of Postcolonialism, in Breaching the Colonial Contract, A. Kempf editor, Springer.

Gubrium, A. (2009). Digital storytelling: an emergent method for health promotion research and practice. *Health Promotion Practice,* 10(2), 186–191. http://doi.org/10.1177/1524839909332600

Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2011). Commonwealth, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Harney, S. & Moton, F. (2013). The undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study, New York, Minor Compositions.

Hegel, G. (1977). Phenomenology of Spirit, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Hull, G. & Katz, M. (2006). Crafting an agentive self: Case studies of digital storytelling. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 41(1), 43–81. http://doi.org/10.2307/40171717

Ingold, T. (2011). Being Alive, Oxford, Routledge.

Joseph, M. (2002). Against the Romance of Community, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Kester, G. (2011). The One and the Many, Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context, Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

Kirwin, K. (2014). Summer- The Reviews Hub, accessed at http://www.thereviewshub.com/summer-regent-trading-estate-salford/ on July 2016.

Kuppers, P., Marcus, N. & Steinman, L. (2008). Cripple Poetics, San Francisco, Homofactus Press.

Lambert, J. (2006). Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community (2nd edn). Berkeley, CA: Digital Diner Press.

Latour, B. (2005). Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Levinas, E. (1969). Totality and Infinity, Pittsburg, Duquesne Press.

Lynch, H. (2008). The Art of Collaboration, Saarbrücken,Verlag.

Lynch, H. & Allan, J. (2007). Target practice? Using the arts for social inclusion. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 8(12).

Maan, A. (2007). Narrative Authority: Performing the Postcolonial Self. *Social Identities,* 13:3, 411-419, DOI: 10.1080/13504630701365700

Merli, P. (2002). Evaluating the social impact of the arts. *International Journal of Cultural Policy,* 8, 107-118.

Rancière, J. (2009). The Emancipated Spectator, London, Verso.

Polk, E. (2010). Folk Media meets Digital technology for Sustainable Social Change: A Case Study of the Center for Digital Storytelling. *Global Media Journal*, 10, 17.

Swain, J. & French, S. (2000). Towards and Affirmative Model of Disability. *Disability & Society,* 15(4), 569-582.