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Reflexive and participatory practices in digital storytelling: the legacy of documentary methods

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While sharing commonalities with documentary practices, digital storytelling has not developed simply as an extension of existing documentary genres. Recognizing digital storytelling's unique qualities, it is still worth considering how genres commonly associated with ethnographic film inform its practice. Filmmakers Robert Flaherty, Dziga Vertov and Jean Rouch laid the foundations of reflexive and participatory methods that are also found in digital storytelling. New technologies, such as database documentaries, continue to present possibilities and questions concerning the reflexive roles of authors, facilitators and audience.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, documentary filmmakers have employed reflexivity as a means of audience engagement and of addressing issues beyond the historical world (Nichols, 2017). Rooted in ethnographic traditions and the methodologies of anthropology, reflexivity in documentary film is widely practiced, on the screen as well as through external channels (Rouch, 1974; Ruby, 2000). Similarly, digital storytelling embraces reflexivity in both personal and interpersonal forms. Both genres continue to explore new possibilities of evolving technologies and media forms.

Digital storytelling distinguishes itself in actively seeking to amplify the "ordinary" voice, making a direct comparison with existing documentary methods difficult (Burgess, 2006; Keep, 2014). In considering digital storytelling as a situated form of social action, Hessler & Lambert (2017) suggest that:

Digital storytelling arose as a genre because participatory media needed to happen. Everyday people - whose lives were increasingly influenced by media - needed to see their own stories on the screens...They needed the opportunity to compose and communicate and replicate and challenge the stories told to them through videos and other media. (pp. 21-22)

The qualities of personal empowerment ingrained in digital storytelling set it apart from other genres, however, much of its foundation is built on the conventions of cinema. Digital storytelling shares an emphasis on reflexive experiences with documentary genres. It is conceived of as a practice in which participants can speak directly for themselves in a reflective way to others. Within the digital storytelling process, video editing becomes a means of reflection, in which images and sound can be manipulated and explored, promoting a deeper understanding on the part of the creator. Lambert (2002) suggests that this process works as a reflective practice in a complex way. While the practice of reflective writing is well-established and apparent in digital storytelling, it is less obvious "how video editing, particularly with the addition of photographic manipulation and special effects, is in itself a powerful new set of reflective tools" (p. 106).

A similar set of tools has enabled documentary practitioners to integrate reflexivity into their work. Digital storytelling can be seen as a continuation of filmmaker Jean Rouch's vision of a "shared ciné-anthropology." In his 1974 essay "The Camera and Man," Rouch traces the evolution of reflexive and participatory filmmaking through the first century of cinema. Emphasizing the importance of the early contributions of Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov, Rouch also considers how the evolution of film technology has acted as a democratizing force for the medium. This has allowed the means of production to pass from the hands of a select few to "those who, until now, have always been in front of the lens" (Rouch, 1974, p. 44).

REFLEXIVE AND PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES IN DOCUMENTARY FILM

Reflexivity as practiced in documentary filmmaking is rooted in the methodologies of anthropology, and has been apparent since the days of silent film (Rouch, 1974; Ruby, 1977). Over the last century the meanings and forms of reflexivity have remained fluid, making classification difficult. Genres frequently overlap, and in some cases contradict, however, reflexivity has become a widely accepted practice. Chapman (2009) argues that reflexive techniques are so widely used today, it is more productive to focus on the implications for audience appreciation and awareness, rather than attempting to force categorization within the confines of genre. Ruby suggests this as a definition:

[Being] reflexive means that the producer deliberately, intentionally reveals to his or her audience the underlying epistemological assumptions that caused him or her to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, to seek answers in a particular way, and finally, to present his or her findings in a particular way. (Ruby, 2000, p.156).

In thinking about reflexivity in anthropological film, Ruby (1977) uses Johannes Fabian's model which recognizes the dialectical unity of producer, production and product. These components of reflexivity interact as coherent parts of a whole. Ruby expands on Fabian's model to include the reflexive role of the audience:

producer -> process -> product -> reader/viewer (audience)

Ruby (1991) contends that documentarians bear ultimate responsibility for the meaning derived from their work, and as such are obligated to make the basis of their point of view explicit to the audience. This may be accomplished outside of the film itself through external writings. Filmmaker and theorist David MacDougall (1998) labels this external reflexivity, but points out that it does not go far enough in meeting the filmmaker's responsibility to the subject and audience. Lucien Taylor (1998) contrasts external reflexivity with what he terms MacDougall's deep reflexivity, describing it as being "not simply an aesthetic strategy; it is also an ethical position" (p. 18). In order to be faithful to his subjects, MacDougall believes reflexivity must be embedded in the work itself:

If I am self-reflexive, that self-reflexivity must be about the relationship between us, not a way of speaking behind my hand to some foreign audience. But if I have done my job well, that need may be irrelevant. Those things will already be in the film. (MacDougall, 1998, p. 91)

Writing in 1977, Ruby credited a growing public self-awareness in the 1960s as influencing the development of a new genre of self-reflexive autobiographical films, including

Jerome Hill's *Film Portrait* (1972), Miriam Weinstein's *Living with Peter* (1973) and Amalie Rothchild's *Nana, Mom, and Me* (1974):

In subject matter, they violate the norms of traditional documentary in that they overtly deal in an involved way with a personal interest of the filmmakers. Because many of these filmmakers come from a documentary tradition they do not employ the conventions of the personal art film, rather they use a documentary style. In other words, they have the look of a documentary even though the subject matter is exotic to the genre... These filmmakers have created an autobiographical and family genre which cannot be comfortably fit into either the art film or the documentary. This creation which employs elements from both genres has the effect of making us self-conscious about our expectations. In addition, these films are clearly self-consciously produced and often quite overtly reflexive. (Ruby, 1977, p. 9)

In some contexts, it is easy to confuse reflexivity with autobiography or self-consciousness. According to Ruby, there are important distinctions between these terms:

In an autobiographical work, while the producer - the self - is the center of the work, he can be unselfconscious in his presentation. The author clearly has had to be self-aware in the process of making the product (i.e., the autobiography), but it is possible for him to keep that knowledge private and simply follow the established conventions of that genre. To be reflexive is to be not only self-aware, but to be sufficiently self-aware to know what aspects of self are necessary to reveal so that an audience is able to understand both the process employed and the resultant product and to know that the revelation itself is purposive, intentional and not merely narcissistic or accidentally revealing. (Ruby, 1977, p. 4)

Since the 70s, forms of autobiographical documentary have become more prevalent in film and television. Filmmakers Ross McElwee (*Sherman's March*) and Michael Moore (*Roger and Me*) exemplify a reflexive approach that essentially cast the filmmaker as protagonist in their own story. Chapman (2009) characterises reflexive documentary as taking "into account aspects of self that will help the audience understand the process employed and the product that has emerged" (p. 127). By drawing attention to the elements of production, reflexivity can impact the audience's perception of truth and reality in a film. If a work is overly self-referential or too reliant on autobiographical content, however, there is a possibility that the audience will be left without the necessary context to reach this understanding. The filmmaker can appear narcissistic, self-glorifying or intellectually elite (Barbash & Taylor, 1997; Chapman, 2009). Ruby (2000) recognized that it is difficult to find this balance:

The author clearly has had to be self-conscious in the process of making the autobiography, but it is possible for him or her to keep the knowledge private and simply follow the established conventions of the genre.... Knowing how much of the self it is necessary to reveal is the most difficult aspect of being reflexive. When successfully mastered, it separates self-indulgence from revelation. (pp. 154-156)

While reflexive practices emphasize the filmmaker's engagement with the audience, participatory methods focus on the collaborative relationship between filmmaker and subject. De Groof (2013) holds that reflexivity in ethnographic film laid the groundwork for the development of participatory cinema. Reflexive and participatory practices evolved in

tandem as reflexivity encouraged participation of subjects in the filmmaking process. As reflexivity became part of film language, filmmakers began to consider ways of including the perspective of the other: how they would represent themselves and how they would represent their community (Ruby 2000).

VERTOV, FLAHERTY AND ROUCH

Ruby (1977) considers that the development of reflexivity in documentary can be traced to two films: Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and Jean Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961). Ruby found most of the significant issues of reflexivity were readily apparent in these seminal works.

Born Denis Kaufman in 1896, Dziga Vertov's adopted first name recalls the sound of a hand-cranked movie camera (dziga, dziga, dziga...). Working primarily as a Soviet newsreel producer beginning in the 1920s, he was also a prominent early film writer and theorist. His concept of the kino-eye sought to move cinema towards depicting "a world of naked truth" while recognizing the inherently synthetic and subjective nature of film editing:

Kino-eye plunges into the seeming chaos of life to find in life itself the response to an assigned theme... To edit: to wrest, through the camera, whatever is most typical, most useful, from life; to organize the film pieces wrested from life into a meaningful rhythmic visual order, a meaningful visual phrase, an essence of 'I see.' (Vertov, 1984, p. 88).

The process of editing was at the core of kino-eye, with the manipulation of space and time, use of variable speed and transitions and the juxtaposition of sound and image employed in the effort to present kino-pravda (film truth). In his most famous film, *Man with a Movie Camera*, Vertov lays bare the production process, presenting the producer-product-audience paradigm directly on screen by cutting between the cameraman and editor at work (producer/process), the film itself (product) and shots of viewers watching the film in a theater (audience) (Manovich, 2001). Vertov was in part motivated by Leninist principles to reveal the filmmaker as a worker (Ruby, 2000). Chapman (2004) also suggests that Vertov attempted to raise his audience's awareness as consumers of visual media:

Whereas fiction was entertainment fantasy, pictures of the everyday events of ordinary people could be transformed into meaningful Marxist statements by revealing the process (not the producer), in order that audiences might develop a critical attitude. Man with a Movie Camera combines a dual roll for reflexivity: as a contribution by Vertov towards a larger political struggle and as a techno ideological tool to enhance audience awareness of production skills. (pp.120-121)

Originally trained as an engineer, Jean Rouch began his career as an ethnographic filmmaker in 1940s West Africa. In films such as *Jaguar* (1967) and *La Chasse au lion à l'arc* (1965), Rouch collaborated closely with his subjects, involving them in the production through a reflexive feedback process as they co-constructed storylines. Despite this participatory approach, Rouch felt his primary motivations were personal:

For whom, and why, do I take the camera among mankind? My first response will always, strangely, be ... "For me." Not because it is some type of drug whose habit must be regularly satisfied, but because I find that in certain places, close to certain people, the camera, and especially the sync camera, seems necessary. Of course it will always be possible to

justify this type of filmmaking scientifically (creating archives of changing or disappearing cultures), politically (sharing in the revolt against an intolerable situation), or aesthetically (discovering the fragile mastery of a landscape, of a face, or of a movement that is irresistible). But in fact, what is there is that sudden intuition about the necessity to film, or conversely, the certainty that one should not film. (1974, p. 42)

Working decades after *Man with a Movie Camera*, Rouch's reflexive approach to documentary focused on the personal rather than the process. According to Ruby (2000), Rouch "is also interested in form. But questions about the formal aspects of structure come from his concern with the self more than from Vertov's concern with the process" (p. 171). MacDougall (1995) makes the point that Rouch's presence as filmmaker is always felt in his films, even if he is not seen. This is in part an effort to "move documentary away from its earlier anonymity toward a more personal and authored cinema" (p. 86).

Chronicle of a Summer (*Chronique d'un été*) was a 1961 collaboration between Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin. The crew included cameraman Michel Brault, who had helped pioneer the use of lightweight 16 mm cameras with the National Film Board of Canada. The film foregrounds Rouch and Morin's reflexivity throughout as the filmmakers appear frequently on camera discussing their process, beginning with Rouch and Morin debating whether it is possible to capture truly sincere performances by real-life citizens of Paris. The camera follows several of these individuals through their daily routines, exploring a variety of questions including their views on happiness and attitudes on race and current affairs. Near the end of the film the individuals are brought together for a viewing and on-camera discussion. Morin and Rouch add a final layer of reflexivity as they discuss the outcomes of their experiment while strolling through the Musée de l'Homme, lamenting their perceived failure to achieve cinema-truth. As the two filmmakers part, Morin observes "Nous sommes dans le bain," an idiom meaning to have one's hands in things, to be implicated, to be complicit (Rouch & Feld, 2003, p. 329).

In *Chronicle of a Summer* Morin and Rouch were pioneering cinema vérité, or truth cinema. Sometimes referred to as observational cinema (Nichols, 2017), the cinema vérité camera follows life in an improvisational manner as a "fly on the wall." Prior to *Chronicle of a Summer* Rouch had used similar techniques in Africa:

The great merit of Jean Rouch is that he has defined a new type of filmmaker, the "filmmaker-diver," who "plunges" into real-life situations. Riding himself of the customary technical encumbrances and equipped only with a 16 mm camera and a tape recorder slung across his shoulders, Rouch can then infiltrate a community as a person and not as the director of a film crew. He accepts the clumsiness, the absence of dimensional sound, the imperfection of the visual image. In accepting the loss of formal aesthetic, he discovers virgin territory, a life that possesses aesthetic secrets within himself. His ethnographer's conscience prevents him from betraying the truth, from embellishing upon it. (Morin, 1960, pp. 230-231)

This trust in conscience places a significant ethical burden on the filmmaker. In reflecting on criticisms of reflexivity, Barbash & Taylor (1997), point out that the potential for "betraying the truth" is always there:

Reflexivity does not provide the unassailable assurance of the filmmaker's morality or sincerity that some viewers might hope for. ... There's nothing to stop you from scrupulously

setting up a Vérité-style scene featuring yourself on-camera, listening to apparently innocent bystanders talking, supposedly spontaneously, about anything under the sun. You might even get away with it. (p. 32)

In reflecting on *Chronicle of a Summer*, Morin thought of cinema vérité as an emulation of Vertov's *kino pravda* (Ruby, 2000). Vertov's influence on Rouch's reflexive approach to filmmaking can be seen in the way that Rouch considers editing. The director-cameraman who shoots direct cinema is his own spectator, composing and selecting the shot in the camera's viewfinder. "All of his bodily improvisations (camera movement, framing, shot lengths) finally result in editing while shooting" (Rouch, 1974, p. 41). Rouch sees this idea of the cameraman as the first spectator/editor as embodying Vertov's idea of the *ciné-eye* (*kino-eye*). Vertov considers the subsequent manipulation of the film as a continuation of the process in which the editor is the second spectator. To this Rouch adds an additional participatory stage of presenting the edited version of the film to his subjects/collaborators for feedback, which is integrated into the final film. "For me, their participation is essential" (p. 41).

Along with Dziga Vertov, Rouch credits Robert Flaherty as the co-inventor of ethnographic documentary, even though neither thought of themselves as ethnographers. Rouch characterised his own work as "an attempt to combine the personal and participatory concerns of Robert Flaherty with an interest in process derived from Vertov" (Ruby, 1977, p. 3). Vertov and Flaherty did, however, share a goal of creating cinema "reality":

Ethnographers and sociologists who were inventing their new disciplines in the very midst of these two incredible observers had no contact with either of them. Yet it is to these two men that we owe everything that we are trying to do today. (Rouch, 1974, p. 38)

While filming *Nanook of the North* (1923) in 1915-16, Robert Flaherty was pioneering participant observation and feedback forty years before these practices were broadly accepted. It was an important part of his process to develop his film in the field and screen daily rushes with his subject/collaborators in order to inform the direction filming would subsequently take:

It is the only way I can make a film. But another reason for developing the film in the north was to project it for the Inuit so that they would accept and understand what I was doing and work together with me as partners. (Flaherty as cited in Ruby, 2000, p. 88)

While Flaherty's portrayal of the northern hunters has been criticized for a number of factors, including subjecting the cast to great physical risk (Barnouw, 1993), his approach of engaging the Inuit as co-creator was innovative. Their feedback was key, as they actively critiqued the accuracy of the film and suggested subsequent directions for the story. Rouch saw Flaherty's collaboration with *Nanook* as the instant that "participant observation" was created, a concept that Rouch and other filmmakers would return to decades later:

If Flaherty and Nanook were able to tell the difficult story of the struggle of man against a thriftless but beneficial nature, it was because there was a third party with them. This small, temperamental, but faithful machine, with an infallible visual memory, let Nanook see his own images in proportion to their birth. (Rouch, 1974, p. 38)

After *Nanook of the North*, several decades passed before participatory documentary fully emerged as a distinct genre and practice. This was in large part made possible by

technological developments that freed filmmakers of the constraints of large crews and cumbersome equipment. The availability of 16 mm sync sound in the 1960s allowed filmmakers to interact with their subjects rather than merely observe them. "Questions grow into interviews or conversations; involvement grows into a pattern of collaboration or confrontation" (Nichols, 2017, p. 137). Looking forward, Rouch foresaw the potential for new technologies to move cinema toward a more democratic form:

"And tomorrow? ... Tomorrow will be the time of completely portable color video, video editing, and instant replay ("instant feedback"). Which is to say, the time of the joint dream of Vertov and Flaherty, of a mechanical cine-eye-ear and of a camera that can so totally participate that it will automatically pass into the hands of those who, until now, have always been in front of the lens. At that point, anthropologists will no longer control the monopoly on observation; their culture and they themselves will be observed and recorded. And it is in that way that ethnographic film will help us to "share" anthropology." (Rouch, 1974, pp. 43-44)

DATABASE DOCUMENTARIES

Along with the ongoing evolution of media technologies comes the challenge to consider how these new capabilities can be applied in new modes of storytelling (Keep, 2015). Nichols (2017) suggests that with the development of new media technologies, the participatory mode has also "come to embrace the spectator as participant" (p. 138). One example of this is what Nichols terms "database documentaries." These interactive projects consist of collected digital material that viewers can navigate and make meaning from independent of the filmmakers' construction.

Database documentaries can be explored in a nonlinear fashion, allowing the audience to navigate and search material largely independent of an author's direction and intent. As a forum for external reflexivity, database documentaries allow opportunities to co-locate related contextual materials with digital artefacts. While some context may be present in the organization of the database, much of the work of making meaning from the materials is open ended. This presents the possibility of engaging the audience as collaborators at a deeper level: "[I]f there are limitations to the promises of interactivity, there is also the fact that users participate more directly in the process by which that information is communicated. They are, to some degree, co-editors of the documentary" (Spence & Navarro, 2015, p. 157). In curating and contextualizing the content, however, the author/facilitator of this new form still influences the audience's experience:

Because the filmmaker or database artist retains ultimate control over what gets into the database and how it can be accessed, the overall experience will possess aesthetic and rhetorical qualities that exceed those of a general archival depository, but the participatory emphasis shifts from the interaction between filmmaker and subject to the one between viewer and assembled material. (Nichols, 2017, p. 138)

Placing this in a historical context, Manovich points out that in some ways, Dziga Vertov can be thought of as a "database filmmaker." "Man with a Movie Camera is perhaps the most important example of database imagination in modern media art" (Manovich, 2001, p. 239). In the film, the editor is seen retrieving footage racks of film - the "database" of recorded material. We see the editor assembling the film, creating new relationships and

new meaning. Vertov's collaborator and brother Mikhail Kaufman describes the role of the editor:

He joins these phenomena with others, from elsewhere, which may not even have been filmed by him. Like a scholar he is able to gather empirical observations in one place and then another. And that is actually the way in which the world has come to be understood. (Kaufman cited in Manovich, 2001, p. 240)

Database documentary presents a potentially powerful forum for external reflexivity, available to author, facilitator and audience alike. An example can be seen in the Mill Stories project (millstories.org, 2018). The project website acts as a repository of oral histories collected from former steelworkers and community members following the closing of the Sparrows Point steel plant (once the largest in the world) in 2012. Initially, long format video interviews were conducted at a Baltimore union hall by the project team, consisting of faculty and students from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). The recorded interviews were then edited into short stories and shared for feedback with the participants at a series of community events. The stories along with full interview transcripts, photos and other digital artefacts were made publically available on the site. As the project grew, the site encouraged others in the community who wanted their stories included to come forward. Inspired by the community's interest and the commonalities in their stories, the project team created a half-hour documentary based on the collected materials. Contextual interviews with historians, archival images and video of the plant's eventual demolition were incorporated into the project. (Bickel, Shewbridge, Hüber & Oskoz, 2018). The documentary was screened for the community and eventually shown at world-wide festivals and conferences by the project team and community members. As a reflexive exercise, the website database was invaluable in fostering an ongoing collaboration between the community and facilitators.

REFLEXIVITY IN DIGITAL STORYTELLING

When comparing forms of personal and interpersonal reflexivity in digital storytelling with those found in documentary, it is important to consider digital storytelling's unique qualities. Keep (2015) suggests that even though digital storytelling borrows certain aspects of the documentary form, its emphasis on personal narratives and therapeutic practices places it outside the scope of the documentary genre. Burgess also notes that:

[Digital] storytelling can be understood not only as a media form but also as a field of cultural practice: a dynamic site of relations between textual arrangements and symbolic conventions, technologies for production and conventions for their use; and collaborative social interaction (i.e. the workshops) that takes place in local and specific contexts. Digital Storytelling as a 'movement' is explicitly designed to amplify the ordinary voice. It aims not only to remediate vernacular creativity, but to legitimate it as a relatively autonomous and worthwhile contribution to public culture. This marks it as an important departure from even the most empathetic 'social documentary' traditions. (Burgess, 2006, p. 207)

As reflexive and participatory practices continue to evolve, what potentials are emerging for digital storytelling? In digital storytelling, the subject-filmmaker-audience relationship found in documentary becomes one of author - facilitator - audience. While the intermediary role of the filmmaker is readily apparent in a reflexive documentary, the role

of the facilitator in a digital story workshop is less obvious. In many contexts, the facilitator acts as the second spectator, and in some situations, a second editor. The question can be asked: do facilitators have a responsibility to be externally reflexive about their roles and impacts on the stories they help others create? Given the primacy of the participant's ownership of their own story, is reflexivity on the part of the facilitator always relevant? If so, how should it be presented? As with so many issues in digital storytelling, context would seem to be a large factor in considering these questions.

Dortner (2008) points out that "as with all analytical endeavours, we should be careful to be as self-reflexive about our practices as we are of the practices we study" (p. 76). Reflexive filmmakers acknowledge that introducing the camera into a situation fundamentally changes that situation. Digital story facilitators similarly should consider how their presence and guidance molds the outcome of the workshop process and impacts the "personal" stories of their participants. In contexts where stories are subject to evaluation, such as the classroom, factors like prompts, grading rubrics and examples can impact the author's deep reflexivity, as they navigate what and how much of themselves to reveal. The participant's story is very much a product of the process. As such, our reflexive processes must acknowledge this relationship.

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