DESIGN – JOURNALISM



This post is in a series of commentaries on a class running at Stanford, Winter Quarter 2010 – "Transformative Design" ENGR 231 – [Link]

In class: Robin Gianattassio-Malle (Blue Egg Media, Producer KQED's Forum, with Michael Krasny). She made the case made for journalism being a field of design. It led to a fascinating discussion.

Journalism (the best): design with dialog and narrative (Robin said "with dialog and story"). Aim: to affect an audience, to elicit reflection, to generate insight and inspire change.

Narrative is a key component of journalism. If journalism is a pragmatic time-based and iterative process – design – it is crucial to distinguish narrative from storytelling.

Here's my personal take on the distinction, coming from narratology. It is by no means the orthodoxy, though my emphasis on performance is commonplace.

Narrative refers to a set of formal properties of an account of a series of events. These typically include plot, event, agency, characters, points of view, and narrative often involves some kind of analysis and interpretation, implied or explicit, of causation – why things happened the way they did. Narrative begs narratology, the study of the structure and function of narrative as a kind of linguistic and communicative form – the themes, conventions and semiotics of narrative.

Story is sometimes used to mean narrative. I would let the word keep its broader and often more informal references.

Storytelling, for me, refers to the mobilization of narrative; it is located, time-based, performative, a relation between storyteller and audience. The best storytelling is responsive to changing qualities of the performer-audience relationship, as the storyteller adapts story to the reactions of the audience. Audience play an active role in shaping storytelling; conversations frequently involve storytelling, as does monologue, recounting to ourselves the narrative of experience, memory, hope.

We all easily recognize basic narrative forms. I am very fond of Vladimir Propp's analysis of the formal properties, the basic morphology, the narrative components, of folk tales. Hayden White argued beautifully that there are only a few basic narrative forms in historiography. Tilley and I tried to do something similar for archaeology, showing that only a couple of narrative structures have been developed to account for changes in prehistory. (Just think of how often we recognize the plot and the characters in a movie or novel.) Narrative tends to lock things down in making sense of things, offering form in chaos.

Have all narratives been told? No – because storytelling introduces enactment and mobilization, the contingencies of specific connections between narrative form and the everyday experience. Storytelling often introduces doubt and reflection upon the neatness of narrative, the way narratives fail to cover everything. Good storytelling creates space for the listener to speculate and look for connections – it pulls you in, such that the story can become your own and shed new light.

Can there be new design solutions? Yes, because design is pragmatic and opportunistic, attending to local needs and desires in iterative and adaptive

relationships between designer, maker, and user. Just like storytelling.

Robin talked about interviews as improvizations. Questioning, listening, probing, synthesizing, asking questions again … . Improvization, performance, ethnography.

Consider the potentiality now of new media – the facility for co-created stories. The ways blogs are impacting traditional journalism.



Mike Pearson – Esgair Fraith 1996 – storytelling against narrative – Theatre/Archaeology