Digital Storytelling, Cinematography Narrative and Storyteller’s perspective

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Abstract

This paper presents a discussion on digital storytelling and narrative in the cinema from the perspective of the storyteller. We believe that these two forms of narrative are part of the process of the human communication and the transmission of knowledge. We will also explore the role of the receiver, the viewer and reader in "storytelling" in its various forms and expressions.

Keywords: Storytelling, narrative, digital storytelling.

Introduction

Even before the advent of writing, narratives - for being part of the culture - have evolved, but still remained alive, whether through speaking or writing as a resource for cultural transmission, or even through its practice in more contemporary technological means. We know that, as Zimmer states (1988 p.9), although many narratives come and go, some of them are reborn in different moments of history, renewed, in literary texts skillfully woven by poets and writers, in visual texts through the talent of painters, photographers, filmmakers and visual images. Such rebirth
occurs, supposedly because the stories contained in these narratives preserve and recreate timeless images, renewable senses that reinterpret themselves, involving and activating listeners and readers, inviting to pleasure, awakening a creative intuition and allowing a flow of creative reactions that present themselves to our imaginary understanding. Thus, the storyteller— as much as the media narrator and/or cinematographer will print in the listener/ receiver different influences in both, the reaction stage and the imaginary stage.

Based on this assumption, we will begin our study. For such, we will cast a look upon the narrative principles inherited from the oral tradition. Thence, we will deal with the forms of narratives that are adapted to the technical platforms and to materialize the imagetic, which at first was based on the transmission of knowledge stored in the memory, without disregarding the fact that the cultural fruition, FROM the oral narratives - or the primary orality (Lévy) - has enlarged the frontiers of the imagery. Later, we’ll dedicate our attention to literary narratives, movie screen narratives, and finally computer screen narratives. The relationship that once considered the binomial storyteller/listener, writer/reader, director/spectator has suffered changes due to computational advances, and have now moved to another level: a network/ database/creator. Narrative, then, has become a big image, fact which will demand constant negotiation with the reader/spectator/user/subject of communication. As we stand before this picture, we are forced to ask: what is the role of artists in this new scenario, what is the counterpoint among artists, creators, communicators, narrative professionals and its consumers”? This unease permeates our thinking and makes us move forward and search for answers. To this end, we will rely on several theories. Based on Santaella, Paul Singer, Walter Benjamin, Gosciolla, Adorno and Pierre Lévy we will walk the narrative ways since the ancestors storyteller to the creators/ receivers of contemporary narratives.

The hypothesis that has guided me is that, in times of change, there is a need to be close to artists. Simply because, paraphrasing Lacan, they know
without knowing they do. In this line, it is worth mentioning Goethe: “there exists a delicate empiricism which makes itself utterly identical with the object, thereby becoming true theory”. It is, in fact, a kind of non-verbal and poetical theory that artists create through their sensitive approach to the enigmas of the real. So, I am moved by the conviction that at this beginning of the third species’ evolution cycle (Donald’s argument, 1991), we must pay close attention to what artists are doing wehe human. I can sense that they are creating a new image of human beings in the vortex of their current transformation. Artists are the ones who have put ourselves face to face with the human face of technologies. (SANTAELLA, 2003 p31)

We must not forget that the possibility to tell, retell a story, or reconstruct a cultural fact through the movie and/or documentary implements and challenges the contemporary storyteller. While, in the past, the storyteller gathered his stories from the direct experiences (lived on trips, or in his daily life), or even from the collective memory through orality; nowadays, with easy access to the internet and other means of communication, the process takes a different turn. Before, if the resignification aroused from the presence of the storyteller/listener, in the current scenario there is a paradox: presence/absence, presence/virtual.

We know that in the fiction film, the narrator is also a character in the plot, his presence is hidden by the resources of the modern technical narrative. However, in the documentaries there are multiple narrators: each description is a micro-narrative, in which the narrator acts naturally in front of the camera as if he were that ancient storyteller before his people. Despite the fact that the means have been transformed and the relationship storyteller/user has equally changed, one basic principle remains: regardless the means - be them traditional or digital - or contemporary, the sure thing is that narratives continue to delight humanity. And, in this ravishment, there are the common man and the scholars, trying to reconnect the links of the past with the present.

**Between the Tradition and the Contemporary: Digital Narratives**
The narrative, which for so long flourished in a craft environment — in the fields, at sea and in the cities —, is itself, to some extent, an artisanal way of communication. It is not interested in transmitting "the pure" of the narrated content as information in a report. It plunges the thing into the narrator’s life so that it can take it from him afterwards, as it happens to the potter’s hand in the clay pot. (BENJAMIN, 1994: 205)

The human capacity of exchanging experiences, of telling them to others to make them experiment what has already been lived, has allowed men to develop the orality, the language, the memory, the imagery throughout the times. Even nowadays, there are stories which remained stored in the cultural memory groups of people until they were registered in the epics, in the songs, in the novels. According to Benjamin, “practical sense is one of the characteristic of many natural storytellers”, because according to him, “sometimes a narrative has within itself, in a very latent way, an utilitarian dimension. This dimension may consist in being either a moral teaching, in a practical suggestion, or a proverb or even a rule of life " (1994:200). This objective exchange of experiences, teaching and memories, has made narrative advance and transform itself.

When Benjamin reflects over the possible death of the narrative due to the emergence of novels, since the oral narrative - and the ones that are related to it, the fairy tales, the fables, and the epic that "incorporate the narrated things into the experience of the listener"-, he has pointed to a radical transformation in the narrative imposed by the novel: the phenomenon of the isolated narrator, the one who dipped into his own experiences works as the one who transmits information instead of wisdom. That is when, according to Benjamin, there is a deep rupture among the traditional narratives originated from the development process of productive sources. As Benjamin states:

In reality, this process, which gradually expells the narrative from the sphere of alive discourse and at the same time gives a new beauty aspect
to the one which is disappearing, has developed concurrently with all secular developments of the productive forces. (BENJAMIN, 1994: 201)

Adorno also analyses the narrative transformations from the modern novels and the offset of the narrator figure who traditionally remained as an outsider, at a full aesthetic distance and fixed on the receptor, whereas in the modern narratives, such distance "varies just like the positions of a camera in the cinema, and the reader is sometimes left out, sometimes he is guided by the commentary to the stage, to the backstage and to the powerhouse." (ADORNO, 2003: 61)

Despite the changes, the essential delineators still remain, since, until today the narratives are about events, action, movement. The classical narrative resources go through description, dialogue and the narrative itself. Such resources merge in order to express harmony and likelihood through the development of a context, character building and the coherent thread of time, space and action. "Narratives are, therefore, texts, discourses." (MOISÉS, 2002 p.355). Anyway, regardless of the means, the narratives were always expressed in texts or discourses.

What also matters here is to reflect about the word text which derives from the word weave¹: the weaving of threads, of the network of senses expressed in words in the construction of the discourse and that reflect the relationship of men and the realities that surround him.

A text is, therefore, a human development, a job. The work is the human action by which men, textualizing, signifying reality can signify themselves. On the other hand, this development is only able to find its wholeness as long as upon elaborating it cooperates, in other words it presupposes the other as a necessary pole of its significant action. Every reading involves collaboration, because a text is not read, the instrument is not read. Thus, every development presupposes the other, the co-llaboration. (SAMUEL, 1985 p.31)

¹ in Portuguese, the words are co-related: texto (text) and tecer (weave)
From this active development in the building of the narrative and collaboration, at the moment of reception; from this synergy, the situations emerge, the action, narrative movement. This relation of the building of the narrative itself, its relation with the receptor throughout history stratifies, while it reinvents itself according to the development of means, of the narratives and of reception itself.

In the stratification of the narratives two primary functions are put together such as accumulating remains of a culture (the myths), accumulating the plurality of the social and interpretative representations, like the ones we watch in modernity even those that settle themselves in the current constructions of simulacrum of multimedia and real time experiences of the 21st century.

Modernity has been marked by varied and multiples functional narratives studies. Paul Singer offers us a broad panel of the many overlapping ideas in relation to the term “modernity” that point to the hyper-stimulus and the multiplicity of a world “markedly faster, chaotic, fragmented, and disorienting than in previous phases of human culture.” (SINGER, 2004 p.96).

In this context of deep technological changes, the cinema announced the period of rapid changes, which was, in fact, a milestone marked by the appearance of an instrumental rationality and by a radical urban reorganization.

The beginning of the film making has led to this trend of vivid and intense sensations. From early on, the movies gravitated around an "aesthetic of astonishment", both in terms of form and content. The fast pace of the film and its audiovisual high impact fragmentation formed a parallel to the shocks and intensity of modern life (ibid., p 115).

It is important to note that the cinema is one of the arts that most closely matches the literature because words and images are fundamental elements for the filmmaking. Classical narratives, in fact, migrated from literature to cinema. In such transposition, the script is made to adapt the narrative form to cinematographic matter. The
screenwriter should be able to make such adaptation. According to Carrièrre (1996, p.95) “it is not only about knowing how to tell a story through the image. Not only should a screenwriter enjoy narrating, he should also love the image, love the images”.

The narrative experience of cinema in the modernity is analyzed in the publication released in 1916 of the book named The Photoplay, a Psychological Study written by the German psychologist Hugo Münsterberg (1863-1916). This book presents a psychological study of the essential features of spectatorial experience during projection: building an imaginary depth, perception of apparent motion; variability of attention, memory and emotions drive. The study expressed a need for understanding the relationship between the spectator and the cinema. The spectator mass would be just like an immobile traveler. Sitting, passive, transported, the train passenger quickly learns how to look, parading a framed spectacle, the landscape traversed. Train and cinema are transporting the subject to fiction, to the imagination. (Cursino, 2007)

The images are produced to suggest reality. It is the illusion of the movements which is built in them. The rhythm and the film fragmentation unite with that world in transformation. Benjamin (1994, p.174) suggests that the cinema be the art which helped the modern man face modernity, providing him with some kind of training to handle the stimuli, a kind of preparation for the super excitement of the new times printed on human subjectivity. Thus, the cinematography narrative externalizes what until then was internal: the imagery of the narrative leaves the imagery screen of the reader towards the external screen of the cinema. While, in literature, the individual internalizes and creates, from the narrative, an internal simulacrum, in the cinematography narrative he projects characters and action in the place. Immersed in the collective dark room under the beam of light to produce the narrative simulacrum, the individual experiments an uncommon sensorial world, and then, image and sound: the audiovisual form. The viewer expands himself to the outside, invaded by the narrative, immersed in the illusion of reality which is put together by the mirrors and technological sound working for the “knowledge for simulation”.
Nowadays the cinema develops its narratives according to the techno social development. There are fragmented narratives, with their cuts, inversions, lapses, flows, intervention, as well as 3D movies and virtual environments of games which create cinematographic spaces and time. Everything is done using the lively and vigorous tissue of the narrative art. Upon telling a good story with the most cutting edge resources and technological boldness, the narrative remains as the basis of the cinema which manifests it.

We can affirm that hermeneutically, in the Heideggerian way: the herein-being, in other words, the actor-director interprets the narrative through his cinematographic creation and projects his inner screen technically elaborated.

However, since the invention of the cinema, other means have been created: new technologies. According to Pierry Lévy and Lúcia Santaella, at the end of the XX century, after the computer and internet revolutions, we saw the birth of the digitalization process. This process opens the doors to new possibilities of file compression through the bits of information and, support to the operationalization of access to information in a non-linear way. The embryo of this process is in the history of technology itself, in the digitalization process and in the creation of multidimensional spaces. These spaces work just like the human memory which allows the user to select and store associative ways, therefore non-linear ones. This storage is in the unities and modules, accessible to the hyperlinks which are “the master key to these syntaxes of discontinuity, the connection between two points in the digital space” Santaella states (2008 p.62).

The handling of interconnected files, texts and data by conceptual connections or icons dock the concept of hypertext, which is the working by association through the network paths. These dynamic links lead to the massive loads of stored information. The access to these data and docs is not done sequentially. This way, the computer and the hypertext modify the relationship of the man with the text radically. In a digital world, there is no beginning, middle and end. The classical narrative structure of the beginning, middle and end melts when the readers structure the information in a way
that it makes sense to them. Their collaboration in the narrative tissue is a co-author. In the system of coauthorship, it modifies the context. Now the sense emerges and builds itself in the context. The co-author is a creator of contexts, but while the relation is dialogical, there are isolated textual elements, nucleuses of information, basic unities to what this co-author does not have access: they are the internal contents of the unities of information.

The digitization of sounds, images, sounds, animations etc. Not only the media stored in multidimensional spaces, but also the ones united to the hypertext expand the narrative concept. Until then, the hypertext has already promoted the nonlinear reading / writing, technically a set of nodes connected by links. After the digitization of media, hypermedia integrate "without data sutures, text, all kinds of images and sounds of all species within a single environment of digital information (FELDEMAN 1995 4, in: ibid p.)

Santaella (2008, p. 62) suggests that the hypermedia be more than a new technique. It is, above all, a new language, since it gathers a series of languages and gives them a new function. The mixing of sounds, images and texts raises the possibility of new ways of thinking, acting and feeling.

(...) events of an audiovisual work hypermedia tell a story, develop a narrative by which its uniqueness is achieved in a type of expression that uses different means and the exposes lots of contents which are interconnected and this is done simultaneously. (GOSCIOLA, 2003,p.18 in: ibid 2008)

The creation of significations in network, the “sharing of senses” which is developed broadly, the discussions about the navigation systems are so recent advents that they are still “springing up”, as Santaella says (ibid., op.cit, passim).

The audiovisual production takes hold of the hypermedia in even more restricted attempts: interactive films for the cinema and the web; systems of games, of 3D animations, etc. The cinematographic and the hypermedia narratives meet and talk
by means of the platforms of creation, which at present time are working for the subjectivities so that each viewer freely selects and moves through the icons/ways/windows which are the generators of sense.

Within the subjectivity and identity scopes, digital environments are by nature the possibility of fragmenting information into independent and switchable units, allowing various arrangements. Thus, they favor the modular concept of identity, consisting of independent and discrete modules, mounted so as to compose a set that is always provisional (SON; HERSHMANN, 2007: 143)

In this media composition, not only does the narrative count on the new technological tools, but above all on the unlimited obtaining of networks of significations achieved through the digitalization of data, as Moraes states:

It is a set of living meanings, in which everything is in contact with everything: hyperdocuments among themselves, people among people and also hyperdocuments with people. From hypertextuality the Web puts all of the memory in a loop a billion indexed pages.

Threads in hypertext, each actor fits their network identity into the net, as well as prepares its presence in the work of selection and linkage with areas of senses. (Moraes, 2001:68)

Final Considerations

As the narrative is a discursive process which is continually adapted and transformed, its means of transmission have progressively become more virtual and dialogical. Even though, in the classroom, the storyteller has its own place and in the squares, in the theater, in the cinema and in literature there are continually innovative ways of narrating, we cannot ignore the fact that, with the current technological advances, the individuals are hyper stimulated. This process was very fruitful, since that listener/reader/viewer/user has been gradually instrumentalized, in other words, he may create as well. There are countless homemade “films” on Youtube, various
narratives are published on blogs and on Facebook, besides the experiences shared through. Productions which are interconnected and go beyond borders and cultures. That “artisanal way of creation”, mentioned by Benjamin, seems to have been transformed into a virtual laboratory of unconditional narrative experimentation, in other words, there is not only the traveling narrator who tells on his stories, or that one who has the gift of relating his daily stories, all of them can be considered potential narrators, and the receptor is also a co-creator, giving way to possibility of the emergence of symbols of the current society. And this seems to be a draft of what we can reach as instruments of the improvement of social groups. The transmedia narratives work with these possibilities and here we can conclude that artists are those who, in the midst of the narrative sea created, can “give a new beauty to what is disappearing” (Benjamin) and produce not only a bridge between the narratives of ancestry, very explored in virtual games, but also cooperate to build an imaginary construction of a humanity's future: multireferential instrumentalized by dialogue, as postulated by Santaella.

If, as we stated at the beginning, the narratives are responsible for the transmission of facts, experiences, beliefs, traditions, feelings, etc., we should ask whether, in this media context, there is a manifestation of new symbols - whose definition is impossible to specify, since its capacity of suggesting and transmitting knowledge is inexhaustible. Or yet, if the convergence and expansion of memory and technical association make the ancient conductors of humanity recurrent in many cultures emerge, feeding and providing the resolution of the eternal conflict between man and the evil forces, which are in the ancient stories of humanity.

References


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