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**Narrative collage: the use of media images to develop filmic stories with young people in South African townships**

*Colagem narrativa: o uso de imagens de mídia para desenvolver histórias filmáticas com jovens em cidades da África do Sul*

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## Abstract

This article reviews the video project Narrative Collage which was developed as part of the Horizon 2020 PARTY (Participatory Development with the Youth) research project (2015-18)<sup>1</sup> with the objective to facilitate creative activities that enhance communication within and beyond groups of youth or young adults from various townships in the Cape Area in South Africa. It examines how methods of collage can inform filmic storytelling whilst considering how co-creative design involves not only the expertise of members of the design team but equally depends on the participation of stakeholders to create a reciprocal cycle of teaching and learning.

## Resumo

Este artigo analisa o vídeo Narrative Collage, desenvolvido como parte do projeto de pesquisa PARTY (Desenvolvimento Participativo com a Juventude) Horizon 2020 (2015-18)<sup>1</sup> com o objetivo de facilitar atividades criativas que melhorem a comunicação dentro e fora de grupos de jovens adultos de vários municípios da região do Cabo, na África do Sul. Examina como os métodos de colagem podem informar a narrativa cinematográfica, ao mesmo tempo que considera como o design co-criativo envolve não apenas a experiência dos membros da equipe de design, mas também depende da participação das partes interessadas para criar um ciclo contínuo de ensino e aprendizagem.

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1. "PARTY aims to endorse human development and assist in reducing youth unemployment by increasing the involvement and inclusion of young people in service development in South Africa and Namibia by using participatory and explorative service design tools. The project focuses on San youth and young adults (13–24 years of age), especially living in poor or otherwise marginal conditions who either are or face the risk of becoming marginalized. The project advances service design approach in the field of developmental research and at the same time develops innovative, participatory methodology and tools for developmental cooperation." (Miettinen and Rautiainen, 2018). Rautiainen, 2018).

## Introduction

The initial stages in the development of Narrative Collage were informed by my art practice, which often involves a juxtaposition of visual methods, such as painting, photography, video and artists' books<sup>2</sup>. The main aim was to enable a group of young people to develop ideas for a video project (or an alternative visual format) as a form of storytelling or narrative collage. The approach was to be low-tech with 'bricolage' effects using a range of visual methods to allow for flexibility in responding to whatever the group would like to prioritise.

As much as the project took its original inspiration from low-tech art processes, a crucial step in the developmental phase was the input from design researchers, whose contribution was essential in the planning and development of toolkits.

This discussion will reflect on the conception, planning, development and realisation of the project in collaboration with Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) and various researchers involved

in the PARTY project. It will also appraise its two versions: the first was in collaboration with AVA Action Volunteers Africa, and NGO working with young unemployed people from various townships in Cape Town (2017)<sup>3</sup>, and the second as part of a CPUT collaboration with NGOs holding a series of workshops with young people in the township of Grabouw in the Western Cape (2018).

When I joined the PARTY project in 2017, I offered my expertise as visual artist who works across media and uses video to reflect on notions of 'nomadic dwelling' and how particular moving and still images might shape our understanding of being in place and how we experience particular time-space relations as we move between places.

How then could I develop a workshop that facilitates<sup>4</sup> participatory engagement with youth and young adults?

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2. In the early planning stage, some aspects of the workshop were inspired by Noël Greig's book *Young People, New Theatre: A practical Guide To An Intercultural Process*, Routledge, London, 2008.

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3. AVA decided to accommodate our workshop 'Narrative Collage' within their volunteering scheme. The participants were young adults (unemployed or recent school leavers) between 18 and 25 years old – who did volunteering within small to medium enterprise.

4. Facilitators of the workshops in 2017 were Dan Brackenbury, Andrea Thoma, Leo Thoma-Stemmet, Valentina Vezzani and students from CPUT (PhD and MA) – and in 2018 Felix Dartey, Xolani Vanda and Andrea Thoma.

With the awareness that fellow PARTY researchers had held various meetings and workshops including storytelling activities at various other locations, it made sense to develop an approach involving the exploration of narratives with a slightly different emphasis.

This led to considerations of how media images might inform the social, collective and personal narratives of young people in the townships (and how these images could contribute to their understanding of self and their in/exclusion of society in wider remit).

This became a key method in applying a rationale where images of the exterior world as portrayed or imagined in the media, and in this context particularly in feature films, could facilitate the development of narratives through filmic clips about what is close to home.

Within practical considerations, one had to take into account that not all of the stakeholders would have mobile phones and might thus not engage with social media. However, most of the youth or young adults would have had access to television broadcasts and would have experienced some influence of media images on their understanding of self, community, and a wider national and international sphere. There would have been an exposure to various narratives and their emotional, economic and political implications through fictional stories, or live reality TV shows — stories of heroes and villains, of ideals, of violence, love and death, of material, emotional and spiritual desires.

## Deep Mapping through extrapolation

The design of the project aimed at generating discussion points that would allow for a (possibly deep) mapping of desires, frustrations, fears and hopes whilst addressing notions of self, community, challenges/obstacles and opportunities where role play enables an increased understanding of complex socio-cultural pressures and fears including gang violence, domestic abuse, lack of parenting and protection, rape and youth pregnancy — but which equally suggested opportunities through emotional and practical support by a mentor<sup>5</sup>.

Found media images were used as a vehicle to extrapolate potential narratives.

The project facilitated an engagement with personal or local narratives through a process of extrapolation where stakeholders (organised in small groups) would develop narratives based on media images. They were invited to select a small number of (printed) images of film stills, artworks or other illustrations, which needed to be arranged as a storyboard. A speaker of the group would then explain the imagined plot to the entire cohort.

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5. The initial 'narrative collage' workshops (2017) including toolkits were developed jointly by Dan Brackenbury, Andrea Thoma, Leo Thoma-Stemmet and Valentina Vezzani. 'Narrative Collage' was updated in 2018 in discussion with Felix Dartey and Xolani Vanda.



**FIGURE 1.** Development of Plot based on Media Images.



**FIGURE 2.** Selection of media images to develop a narrative.

Role models, fiction and desire reflected in film and other cultural artefacts were instrumental as mirrors for personal narratives. The media images available for the project included stills from mainstream science-fiction films such as *Star Wars*, comedy dramas, feminist films, surrealist films, or artworks, and also stills from post-Apartheid South African films<sup>6</sup>.

Interestingly, the majority of images chosen by all the groups (2017 and 2018) were stills of the films *Tsotsi* (2006) and *U-Carmen e-Khayelitsha* (2005). This should not have come as a surprise. *Tsotsi* is a filmic realization of the book with the same title by Athol Fugard (1980). Fugard describes gang violence in Johannesburg during Apartheid, whereas the film version is transcribed into a post-Apartheid context. It is filmed in the Soweto township. Manohla Dargis

explains, “[the director] Mr Hood shot his story of regeneration in a Johannesburg shantytown crammed with life and corrugated-metal shacks.” (2006)

Ian-Malcolm Rijsdijk appraises film in “post-democracy South Africa” with its opportunities and challenges where the “older generation is ineffectual and absent” but where younger generations can find a dynamic and encouraging cultural playing field. “While the characters of these films struggle with their fractured lives, many of them fatally, the films themselves are nevertheless evidence of vital new energies in South African film. A host of modestly budgeted, adventurous and confrontational films are finding young audiences and expressing unvarnished, personal views about the country’s youth.” (Rijsdijk, 2017, p.85)

6. When looking for film stills and other media images, I came across the now well-known reality of underrepresentation of minorities within main-stream cinema, art and media. I decided to select mainly material with a more balanced presentation of different ethnic groups, or set in a Black South African context, to allow for stakeholders to identify more easily with the characters.

## “We are us not other”

To further elaborate on a sense of recognition, of what is close to home, but might by mainstream cinema or art institutions be considered ‘other’, I would like to mention Lubaina Himid’s article “We are us not other”. (2012) The artist, curator, activist and educator refers to a quote by John Steinbeck who insists that stories need to have a universal appeal so that everyone can understand them, and that the “strange and foreign is not interesting, only the deeply personal and familiar”<sup>7</sup>. She then challenges Steinbeck’s observations arguing that for someone from West Africa artworks from that geo-cultural area very much reflect on shared aspects of identity and things that are familiar. She is concerned that (Western) curators and art institutions would consider art depicting aspects of life in West Africa as reflecting on otherness: “In the art place however, what may seem strange and foreign to some curators can be deep and personal to some participants.” (2012, p.29)

The stakeholders’ identification and selection of images depicting familiar socio-cultural but also geographical settings underlines the increased impact of filmic narratives when shot on specific locations (Figures 1,2). Lucia Nagib refers to André Bazin’s concept of realism and his emphasis on “realism at the point of production [original emphasis]”. (2017, p. 310) Nagib stresses the importance of the “near identity between the cast and their roles” whilst advocating a form of realism that gains its strength through its juxtaposition of real or actual location and how a “fictional thread (if existing) interweaves with documentary footage and/or approach.” (p.

316)

Interestingly, a favourite image selected for the workshop, depicted a young Black woman, playing a contemporary Carmen in Mark Dornford-May’s film version *U-Carmen e-Khayelitsha* of a South African production based on Bizet’s opera, sung entirely in Xhosa. The film is shot on location in the township of Kayelitsha, which is located in the Cape Flats (Figure 3). In particular for stakeholders of the 2017 workshop, there would have been an immediate recognition of a location that many of them called home, or it would have certainly reminded them of their own township – this assumption proved to be correct as a large number of stakeholders (both in 2017 and 2018) selected one or several images of those films.



FIGURE 3. Workshop scenes Cape Town (2017).

7. Lubaina Himid quotes John Steinbeck, “If a story is not about the hearer he will not listen. Here make a rule; a great and lasting story is about everyone or it will not last. The strange and foreign is not interesting, only the deeply personal.” (Himid, 2012, p 29)



## Narrative Arc and Storyboarding

Within the workshops (two days), the aim was to make a three-minute film based on a story or plot developed by a team of stakeholders (Figures 4 to 7). They would use a storyboarding toolkit to consider the main characters, any objects, actions, obstacles and final outcomes. There was emphasis on low-key bricolage techniques involving props, costumes, settings, filming and editing. The aim of the project was to engage with problem solving, to discover new ways of doing things and to enjoy and get to know the others and themselves within a group activity.

As much as we used film stills as building blocks for storylines and to prompt conversations, we also reflected on structural aspects within storytelling. The introductory presentation to the workshop (led in the first instance by Dan Brackenbury) included a graph of the narrative arc indicating the dynamic development of a story — exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. Furthermore, it pointed to archetypes or characters within storytelling such as the hero, the villain, and the mentor<sup>8</sup>. These archetypes have shaped many narratives within different historical, cultural and geographical contexts.

8. Dan Brackenbury led this part of the workshop and the presentation on the narrative arc.



FIGURE 4. Storyboard for video 'Red Silk'.

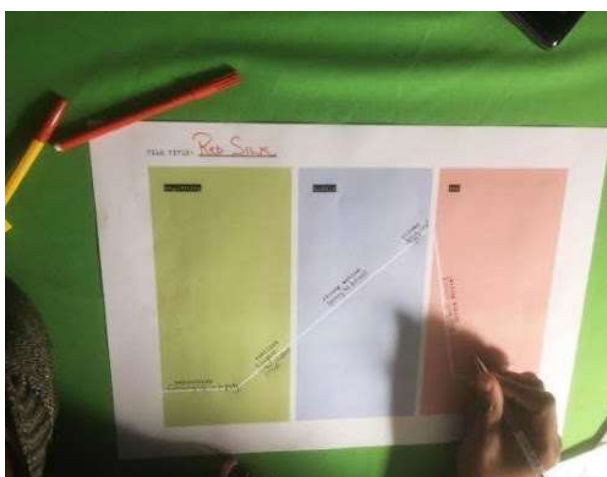


FIGURE 5. Developing narrative arc for 'Red Silk'.

Joseph Campbell is renowned for his work on mythology. He has explored the scope and depth of narrative archetypes such as the hero in various cultural contexts. He observes in relation to fairy tales:

History is the promise of Märchen [Original emphasis] realized through, and against the obstacles of space and time. Playful and unpretentious as the archetypes of fairy tale may appear to be, they are the heroes and villains who have built the world for us. (Campbell, 1990, p.36)

In order to highlight the structural aspect of narrative, the briefing referred also to oral traditions and mnemonic devices, such as the lukasa or memory board within Luba culture. Here, visual elements such as particular arrangements of beads in clusters, lines or sequences on wooden tablets would remind the orator of historical events such as wars, conquests, victories, defeats, and relations/antagonisms between kingdoms.

Juliet Moss explains,

“Special objects known as lukasa (memory boards) are used by experts in the oral retelling of history in Luba culture. The recounting of the past is performative and includes dance and song. The master who has the skill and knowledge to read the lukasa will utilize it as a mnemonic device, touching and feeling the beads, shells, and pegs to recount history and solve current problems.” (Moss, 2015)

These aspects of narration aimed to encourage stakeholders to develop stories that could evolve from

media or filmic, and also personal narratives.

## Teamwork and Community

A vital aspect of the group work involved the assignment of particular film-making roles — two or more actors, one prop/set designer, one camera person, one sound person, and so on. Individuals would volunteer for particular roles and the decision rested with each team. Facilitators would at times encourage someone to choose a role that they were less comfortable with — in one case someone saw themselves in gentle, softly spoken acting roles but ended up playing a villain, doing this incredibly well.

Through the importance of each individual role and their interaction and mutual support, each group experienced how teamwork enabled them to learn about professionalism, precision, structure, time management and the overall organisation of their project, which resulted in a recognition of their individual and communal strengths, but also of their fears and how they could support each other to find solutions.

A key skill involved in the workshop was problem solving and with it, the realisation that one can achieve more as a team within a group, and in its expansion, within a community.<sup>9</sup>

Don Pinnock had been researching over three decades gang crime in Cape Town “highlighting the plight of young people at risk” (2016, p 1). He stresses the importance of community and belonging to hold something against the devastating effects of poverty and violence.

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9. Community was not only at the forefront within the project, e.g. making of the film and narrative, but also in relation to the larger community – as stakeholders shared consumables such as food within the group and also took any leftovers to other, vulnerable people of the community.



“Humans are social creatures and belonging is the baseline from which personality develops. Two Xhosa expressions capture this. One is the notion of ubuntu – ‘a person is a person through other people’, and the other is the saying ‘all children are my children’... Belonging depends on how one is viewed by others. For this reason, being committed to the positive value of generosity and caring for others improves one’s view of oneself through the eyes of others.” (Pinnock, 2016, p 289)<sup>10</sup>

Within the workshops, the narratives of the small film clips – developed by the stakeholders – focused on and highlighted the strength of community and the importance of mutual support, as well as the ‘mentor role’ of the elders, family members or friends in situations of crisis, such as a family member becoming delinquent, or a relative resorting to prostitution as a means of survival, teenage pregnancy, abuse, victimisation and exposure to violence, often when pursuing a non-criminal trajectory such as preparing for entry at university, running a small business or similar.

The clips spoke of their fears and experiences of violence in their personal environments; they also spoke of their hopes and career aspirations, their ambitions for an education allowing them to build lives outside or beyond the cycles of violence in their (immediate) environment.

10. My friend Salim Essop has made me aware of an article by Maup van de Kerkhof who comments on the meaning of the two Bantu words within Ubuntu – ‘Ubu’ relating to the fact that “individuals are interconnected” and ‘ntu’ suggesting “the uniqueness of every individual”. Van de Kerkhof further explains how it is through lived experience that one can engage with the togetherness of community and understanding of self. (2024).



FIGURE 6. Filming at AVA premises in Wynberg/ Cape Town (2017).



FIGURE 7. Still from ‘Red Silk’ two former friends meet, one a successful businessman, the other a gangster (2017).



**FIGURE 8.** Still from Video 'Red Silk' - Attack (2017).

## Practicalities

The time frame of the project was tight. The stakeholders developed their story and film-clip over two days. This was quite a challenge for the groups and the facilitators. However, it called for the need to improvise, to use their imagination, to engage in problem solving in order to overcome technical limitations (both in terms of equipment and technical skills). It demanded a great sense of discipline, communication, resourcefulness and stamina. All groups greatly excelled beyond their and our expectations.

This led to the realisation of achievement, of pride, to the recognition of a great learning curve, which enabled personal growth, transferable skills, a sense of community and strength within a team and to personal self-esteem encouraging learning and career aspirations.

At the end of the workshop, we screened all the clips with the film title and credits of each member of the team. The viewing and sharing of the clips on social



**FIGURE 9.** Film stills and credits of video 'Family Feud' filmed in township of Grabouw (2018).

media were an opportunity for the stakeholders to celebrate their achievements.

## Impact

Running the narrative collage workshop with different groups of youth and young adults in two consecutive years – the first group from urban townships, the second group from a rural background – allowed to draw comparisons, to observe commonalities and to update the toolkit and methods in response to insights gained during the first workshop.

The participants (young people from various townships in Cape Town and in Grabouw) recognised the advantages of working in a team, the need to identify tasks and roles. They also appreciated the need of structure to develop complex projects.

The project boosted their confidence in their organisational, creative, communication and problem-solving skills. Quite a few of the participants discovered skills and abilities that they were unaware of.



**FIGURE 9.** Discussion with facilitator Felix Dartey in Grabouw (2017).

Selecting media images that reflected their own socio-cultural background enhanced a sense of belonging and of pride. The narrative developed by the individual groups were based on problems ‘close to home’, e.g. gang violence, abuse, alcoholism, family values, romance, religion, safety, identity, and career aspirations.

The first workshop with young people from townships in Cape Town was seen as a pilot for an ongoing collaboration between AVA and CPUT. The second workshop with youth in Grabouw was again seen as a pilot to feed into a programme of educational workshops given by CPUT in collaboration with various NGOs.

The toolkit can be taken into different contexts.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the narrative collage workshop has confirmed that a strategy where stakeholders develop narrative strategies inspired by media images will allow them through extrapolation to talk about what is close to home.

Retha de la Harpe observed that the toolkit could be developed and adapted for different stakeholders, such as providing support for Health workers in South African townships in collaboration with CPUT.<sup>11</sup> At the point of writing, the material has been adapted and is being tested for different stakeholders in South Africa.<sup>12</sup>

As much as the design of the workshop was developed within the context of the PARTY research project with communities in the Global South, its findings are transferable to different cultural contexts facilitating the development of filmic narratives as a way of exteriorizing the fears and challenges within the lives of marginal communities. The workshops can be seen within a larger context of projects with communities at the margin using participatory design methods to develop strategies of co-creation and community building.

This project has been very much based on the idea of designing with people. The stakeholders, designers and facilitators all brought their very own vision to the project.<sup>13</sup> It was particularly rewarding to see the enthusiasm of the young people to transform the toolkit into something tangible. With all the limitations, such as restricted time and few resources, their creative vision and teamwork created surprising results and the insight that a lot is possible if one puts one’s mind to it – together with others.

11. Professor Retha de la Harpe from CPUT mentioned to me in an email conversation that she thinks “there is the potential for a great contribution in the space of underserved and compromised settings.”

12. Some of the findings within these new contexts will still need to be reviewed and will allow to further expand this research.

13. D.J. Huppatz reminds us that discrepancies or ‘tensions’ in the process of co-creation can be alleviated through shifting perspectives as to what the role of the designer might be, “redefining the designer’s role as closer to a facilitator rather than a creator.” (Huppatz, 2020, p. 105). One could argue that the designers of the Narrative Collage project (2017, 2018) were also facilitators, the stakeholders were also designers and the facilitators/designers learnt from the stakeholders to further adapt and upgrade the project.

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