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'The university in transition: Visual Higher Education Studies'

Abstract

Within this podcast, Dr Dina Zoe Belluigi engages in a conversation with colleague Dr Sin Wang Chong about the ways in which visual and creative arts methods productively unsettle the dominant gaze and modes of representation of research on higher education. She retrospectively traces the detours and divergences that led her to appreciating the validity of creative arts research from her most recent project, Counter-Narratives of Higher Education (a collaboration with artists of Analogue Eye: Video Art Africa). The recording includes discussion of video papers; arguments made about the figurative in studies of higher education transformation; reflections on the praxis of methodological irresponsibility and specific arts-based methods; and an archive of non-empirical representations of the lived experiences of academia, to which she'd love listeners to contribute.

DB:

Hi Sin Wang, thanks so much for your generosity in asking me to talk today, and hi to those listening. I am Dina Belluigi, and it is my pleasure to trace some of the lines, detours, and divergences that have led me here, to talk today about why I have come to appreciate the validity of creative arts research, and visual methods in particular, for higher education studies. So I must warn you Sin Wang, this may be a little messy because the path has not been linear and nor is my thinking – so we may want to use the metaphor of a labyrinth today when we talk about the what, why and how of such research.

SW: Let us start at the most recent project, if that is ok with you. Recently you collaborated with video artists to engage with transitions in authority in higher education in South Africa, your own country, as well as Angola, Syrian and India. Can you tell us a bit about that project and why you decided on video art as method?

DB: This project has been very important to me, and although the planned showings at festivals and within universities were delayed due to Covid restrictions, I was able to show it within a colloquium in India and at workshops at a university there too. You might have noticed that some of the audience reception surveys interwoven within our analysis in the video paper. I cannot show it to viewers here – really tough having a discussion about the ocular with the sonic – so if it is okay with you I'll press play on some of the videos to entice those listening to us to watch and listen to them properly later, as the visual is the feast. I approached the curator of Analogue Eye video art Africa, as I realised that many of the analyses of projects I was involved with - about the topic of changes and transitions in authority and in the agency and the oppressions of authorship in the academy – were represented in forms which are not enabling of engagement with the full complexity and contradictions of the relations. They were also, importantly, critical studies empirically exploring gaps between policy and practice, rhetoric and experience, institutional aspiration and academic suffering.... Two projects in particular fed into this more figurative, video making project. One was about the South African transformation project in HE, particularly the programmes to redress the imbalance of academic staff from colonialism through to apartheid in SA, where till this day there is still over-representation of white staff and where African knowledge systems, even languages, are still delegitimated. My collaborator Gladman Thondhlana of RU and myself engaged in participatory research with some of the recipients of those programmes, from which we produced two

journal papers, and two forthcoming book chapters on this project, we also engaged in policy discussions at the institutional level and circulated the papers at government level – all approaches in an attempt to create impact from the findings. The other project is one about Indian universities, and again issues of injustices at the level of academic citizenry = you know, who has more decision-making power, more agency for choice and for affecting change, who is made to adapt, how those relate to socio-cultural injustices within that context, including caste, gender, religion and rurality. For that, the funders wanted quantitative data, which we deepened with qualitative insights. To some extents these processes dot the is and ts for the funders, and satisfy the claims of policymakers that ‘evidence’ is needed beyond the lived experience. However, I knew from experience of having worked in AD in SA, that to move people to push for change in universities, requires more than appeals to the rational, and this is when I returned to artmaking.

SW: So tell us a little about these artworks and what they allow that you think has more validity.

DB: Well, I guess I think this comes from many of us who are impatient with the slow pace of change within the academy, and also the issue of the disciplining of radical thought and action. I also need to say that I really like working ‘around’ an issue, something that I found an affinity with from Derrida’s work. The push which is prevalent in the EuroAmerican academy to which we are now most often subjected, in many places across the world, is to have a niche area and to use methods and means in linear ways. But I admit to coming from a different way of being, knowing, thinking, doing – a restless way, because I am not always that sure or convinced the one way is going to be that effective and also because I think that complex issues should engender complex, rich representations, questions and responses. So yes, I can produce narrative realism, such as is found in Anglo-American HES. Despite having a background in the arts and the *joissance* of dense writing of continental philosophy, I can do that sort of representation that is accepted and rewarded, that delivers and reports – that is communicative and at times a little didactic, sometimes to the point of disciplining meaning and thought. I have developed that literacy, and I can see value in it.

However, I am a child of a divided and divisive context, and from that I have a spirit of both suspicion and of critical hope, that makes me restless for forms of representation that will not conform, that have an agency beyond even that of their author or the context. And that demand an experience from viewers that are open-ended, exploratory, that provoke questions and that problematize engagements. Contemporary art, as we see in these 7 video works, does not seek consensus. It is not easy or seamless to watch, like pop culture; Hollywood film; an Instagram feed. They are uncomfortable often; they require thought and time. They are not trying to convince or sell a narrative. And this was important for this project, where in each context terrible historic events have occurred (such as war in Angola and still continuing in Syria) and where HE was entangled in the nation-state’s assertions and omissions in addressing its past injustices (such as with the so called ‘Scheduled Tribes’ in India). Each place has had its dominant narratives; on top of which, the higher education sector has strong dominant global and local narratives. Rather, you see in these videos, creative arts research approaches where the artists engaged with a life history account of an academic, one that was both individual, specific but also the story of many many others, and created art works that create ripples and resonances in the viewer’s reception. And so, by engaging in quite complex ways with coming to an understanding, from various methods (the ocular and figurative in the videos; the rational and linear in the journal papers), one does not delegitimise the one over the other, but they allow for complexity.

SW: You have written about this in papers of yours?

DB: Yes, in a way I have been asking questions about representation throughout my academic career. Let me tell you of one which we published in the lovely open access journal SoTI in the South – it was written with Andrea Alcock of Durban University of technology in SA, who had used photoelicitation in participation with FGS in a majority Black university; Veronica Farrell, who is conducting a study using

Anansi storytelling about student-teachers experiences of assessment in HE in Trinidad, and how the hidden curriculum is reproduced or resisted in their teaching practices; and Dr Grace Idahosa from the University of Johannesburg in South Africa, who uses metaphoric language often in her analyses of the agency of academics in that context; and myself, touching on a number of projects including those with visual narrative sequences and postcards. It was aptly called 'Mixed metaphors, mixed messages and mixed blessings: how figurative imagery opens up the complexities of transforming higher education' and in it we reflect, and make an argument, (I'll read the first paragraph as I think it is strong) our argument is that

Beginning by mixing it up

When studying the increments of transformation in higher education in the 'global South', we have found that understandings of the intersecting messiness of the lived experiences of the people who navigate the in/visible borderlands of higher education institutions are impoverished by the dispassionate narrative realism of educational research, and the word-based conventions of academic publications. This is particularly the case when representing the psycho-social nuances of misrecognition, delegitimation and microaggressions – which in many 'developing' and postcolonial contexts are pressing concerns when challenging legacies of oppression and attempting to address the disjunctures between the intended and the experienced.

In this text, we as the authors play with the affordances of this reflective SOTL arena to engage in generative international transdisciplinary reflections (Khoo, Haapakoski, Hellstén & Malone 2019) on

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the value of what may be called 'visual higher education studies'. We ground this reflection in our research practices, offering an intertextual negotiation between selected imagery authored by our participants in recent research projects. We do this to highlight how figurative evocation and processes of narration enabled insights into layered staff and student experiences of what is often unsaid in the hidden curriculum of higher education. In this process, we share our own awareness of

It is in this text that we coin the term 'visual higher education studies'.

I also wrote about another facet of this in a chapter which in its title alludes to methodological irresponsibility – a concern with rupturing the supposedly 'best' mound of the researcher-respondent relationship, where the researcher retains power as all knowing and somehow objective; and extracts from the respondent information for their own use. I discuss a few things in that chapter, but for our purposes today, talking about creative and visual methods, what I'd like to emphasize is the potential for rupture, for loss of power, for more dialogue between parties as all being participants of a process or of play. I think that methodology is about the conditions one enables, rather than the methods or instruments one chooses and then exacts on those involved. And creative arts processes are generative in themselves – with care, they can enable so much more psychosocial insights and also assertions of the author, who in that case is the participant, not you. The processes are unruly and they require humility for all involved, especially the researcher.

SW: Can you share some examples?

DB:
That is a great idea, especially since I have been talking too abstractly I guess. Let me share one method that I have been using, though of course it goes without saying that there are many others developed and utilised by others.

I worked with an artist-academic, Brent Mestre, using an ongoing visual archive he has created since 1998 as part of a photographic series called Malaise, where quite mundane well-trodden snapshots of details of everyday spaces, often domestic, were visualised. They had patina and sometimes had a feel or vibe about them – but they were also quite emptied out of specific information; and never had an actual person within them. Everyday images of a stain on a carpet, or a picture on a wall, an unmade bed, a book shelf. He had worked before we engaged with a psychologist (Dr Jan Knoetze), and from the images created what they called a non-test from these images – really an artwork about projective testing which they utilised to provoke questions from the psychology community of practice. Brent and I adapted it in 2008 to create an instrument to elicit insights into his students' experiences of their degrees at the time, and published the chapter 'after image' on the process; and then later I used it within a complex study about the hidden curriculum of a discipline in the academy.

As you may know, most research methods in education which utilise imagery are informed by psychoanalytic approaches which for the most part are concerned with either what an image conceals or reveals of unconscious impulses. But visual pedagogy, informed by critical theory, considers the tactics of reading and writing in the construction of visual narratives. Such visual arts research methods are helpful because they reinforce (to the reader, participants and in process) interpretivist notions that research and images **create** rather than discover. So, this design was informed both by such imaginative constructions and by projective psychoanalytic approaches, which purposefully utilise ambiguous imagery, so that the person projects themselves into the situation creating a story - a strongly anti-intentionalist approach to the use of these 'found images'.

I cannot really show you, but can I describe the method to you?

So, participants are given two sheets of paper with the same grid of over 30 images, each the size of a thumbnail or a large postage stamp. With that bank of images, they also receive a standard looking form, with three or four open-ended trigger statements or questions, underneath each is a line of three empty rectangular frames. Beneath that is empty space for writing or captions, which is further indicated by the typed text 'your words' and a colon. For a sense of ritual, I usually have an individual closed envelop for the person with these inside, and individual stationary – the things one needs to cut things out, glue them and add words.

People vary in how they respond to the three empty rectangular frames. Some cut out and fit the images neatly into the frames provided, and line their text up beneath them, almost like columned captions. Others have pasted the cut out images into one or two of the frames for effect; and others filled blank frames with a combination of image and text. For instance, one I can describe to you has a carefully cut out detail of an image with a blank landscape pasted in the first bloc; then the word No in the second block and then the word future in the last block. The written text underneath it varies too – from participants writing key words through to questions, exclamations, large punctuation, small and large text – in some cases just as a notepad; in others used for effect. Some are incredibly creative. I'll tell you about one participant - she a student who in her own words said that 'assessment brought out dark feelings and an overwhelming kind of dread, exposure and vulnerability'. To express that visually, she pasted parts of the images write across the three frames, making it into one long cinematic visual. Across that sort of panorama, she had a little airplane flying with its smoke trail (which she had hand drawn) moving across the frames, over dark forest like spaces, dipping down to an ornament of a white classical Greek figure and a bush, then p again over a landscape with the word 'funeral' and then dipping down, as if possibly about to nose dive, into the last image of two pizza boxes open with a slice of pizza missing. She explained that 'attending the assessment event was akin to attending my funeral, with a sense of inevitable disaster as if headed straight for like a plane crash'.

So what happens, in the process of making the visual narrative, is that the participants' imagination is accessed rather than their intellect alone, allowing for active construction and inclusion of affective aspects of themselves, providing ways to express "ephemeral experience", which for me is so important when looking at hidden curricula. Of course, one of the risks is that participants' constructions will vary in effort and approach, but the process is low stakes, its been described by participants as 'playful and engaging', and you'll see the next step mitigates against the risk of the visual narratives themselves not providing consistent enough or rich enough data.

Once the visual narratives are constructed, participants then share their stories with myself (and I've also used peer small group methods too), discussing their choice of images and text in relation to the experience they intended to

evoke. This discussion then becomes the first act of interpretation of the visual narratives, with the participant narrating their intentionality for the sequence. I then ask further questions to probe deeper (why this; why that); also (if the peer group is present) to enquire whether and how such experiences extended to others or differed to others; and to explore their perceptions of the significance of such experiences over time, which is also so important.

Once the discussion was transcribed and image scanned, I would then return to the participants a sheet per story, which has the image, a description of what they shared orally, and additional comments of peers. They are asked to member-check those and respond with more. Unlike projects where the data is an interview or questionnaire, I find good response rates to member-checking and often a strong investment in such projects – people asking for the final report and news of papers etc.

Analyses building on from that would use narrative, identity and critical discourse analysis - stories as layers of acts of narration, projection, memory and fiction, of subjectivity. The method acknowledges that those layers do not necessarily have to correspond, allowing for contradiction and complexity to arise, both during the making process and in the analysis.

SW: In terms of the tacit and hidden, what other projects or methods would you like to share?

DZB: A really meaningful project I started when working in the research-practice space of academic development in south Africa was the Higher Education Arts Archive. It is an open access online wall really, of fiction, drama, film, art works, all sort of figurative texts about lived experience of higher education. On the wall is a link to where the text can be accessed; sometimes a review that relates; a visual of it; and sometimes also a quote from the person who suggested it be included. It is a counter-library of sorts, because these are the aspects of higher education that are either under-studied, under-heard, or when studied, the complexities and depth of the issues and often the suffering are 'disciplined' by academic registers and epistemic lenses, whitewashed, sanitised. So it allows for a more rich experience by the reader; and does more justice to the issues and experiences at hand. It also – and this was the pedagogic reason why I chose to do it – it can sometimes enable more conducive conditions for those who are resistant, or have never felt those things, to experience through such texts, and come to a better understanding and hopefully develop solidarity. So I had it alongside a prof development formal course, a postgraduate course for educators at universities in South Africa, to provoke discussion and engagement, especially since so much of the engagement was about the relation to teaching and learning, and knowledge, to the transformation project of that country coming out of apartheid rule and settler colonial values. I am still adding to it – people are welcome to use it and share it, and to add to it. In fact, I wish I had more from other parts of the world, as it is definitely rich in South African and US sources.

In some ways, this returns us to the project we first spoke about today. While the HE arts archive displays existing texts in the public domain... I was aware that there was value in contributing to the archiving of current stories and finding links and connections across contexts. We don't need to be the same to realise we are under the same or similar systems of higher education; and these systems are undergoing important transitions. The transitions of authority, especially for liberation of Black people, of women, of the knowledge systems and ways of being oppressed, is still very much active in the world. I believe that creative arts research methods really allow for the rich, varied, pluralistic but also situated dialogue about such experiences and vantage points. I think the videos that the artists of Analogue Eye created allows us as viewers, who then become participants and witnesses, grounds for coming to an understanding that academic freedom is entangled with the racial, gendered, classed struggles for intellectual freedom and power; as well as material resources and geopolitics.