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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Cruz, M. T., & Miranda, M. (2022). Storytelling as Media Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue in Post-Colonial Societies. *Media and Communication*, 10(4), 294-304. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i4.5814>

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Article

Storytelling as Media Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue in Post-Colonial Societies

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Submitted: 19 May 2022 | Accepted: 8 September 2022 | Published: 28 December 2022

Abstract

This article reflects upon digital storytelling and collaborative media practices as valuable tools for reassessing memory, questioning identity discourses, and unveiling the cultural diversity of contemporary societies. The digital age allows for a constant re-reading and re-mediation of cultural archives by ordinary citizens, namely by younger generations, and for the production and dissemination of alternative narratives about the present. These are crucial opportunities for post-colonial societies to overcome silences around difficult memories that hinder a collective reappropriation of the past, confront some of the current issues on ethnical diversity, and discrimination and reimagine a more inclusive identity. However, taking advantage of this opportunity implies fully recognizing the role of media technology in shaping memory, social individuation and establishing networks, making media literacy and media education crucial aspects of cultural dialogue. Based on the experience of a citizenship project about the post-colonial condition and Afro-European interculturality, this essay reflects on digital storytelling, and co-creative practices as relevant literacy and education strategies for furthering interculturality in contemporary societies.

Keywords

afro-european dialogue; desktop cinema; media literacy; post-colonial societies; storytelling

Issue

This article is part of the issue “Inclusive Media Literacy Education for Diverse Societies” edited by Çiğdem Bozdağ (University of Groningen / University of Bremen), Annamária Neag (Charles University), and Koen Leurs (Utrecht University).

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1. Introduction: The African-European Narratives Project

The reflection shared in this article concerns an ongoing European project initiated in 2018 under the Europe for Citizens Program. This project aims to gather narratives on the African-European interplay of cultures present in the life and memory of European citizens. This interplay is based on social life and everyday experience, cultural roots and family history, and the long historical relationship between the two continents. We produced a digital storytelling application made available as a collaborative web platform on the internet: African-European Narratives | Sharing Stories (www.africaneuropeanarratives.eu). During the project, we also fostered various contexts of conversation and

public debate around some of its central topics: colonial memory and post-colonial condition; African roots and African descent; racializing and discrimination discourses and practices; the need for alternative narratives and more diverse visibilities; and the goal of a more inclusive European identity, boosted by cultural dialogue and educational strategies. In preparation for the project’s methodology and tools, we collected testimonies and carried out a series of digital storytelling workshops in collaboration with various African roots organizations and communities as well as other universities and schools in the participant countries (Portugal, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom). One year after its launch, the project’s collaborative web platform featured around 200 multimedia stories, using specific or combined media of text, illustration, photography,

video, sound, and music. These stories can be viewed and browsed using the metadata proposed by the authors of the stories themselves. After this first stage, the project carried out yet another experience around storytelling and mediation practices. Some of the participating authors produced a collaborative documentary film featuring and remediating their specific set of stories (Miranda, 2021).

The work carried out in the African-European Narratives project shares common assumptions with other research proposals and activist practices concerning the necessity of fostering cultural dialogue in contemporary societies: firstly, the assumption that we live in diverse, or even hyper-diverse, societies, and secondly, that micronarratives, co-creative practices, and digital networks are interesting tools for showcasing this diversity, voicing minorities and discriminated groups, and fostering intercultural dialogue.

However, concentrating on the African-European cultural dialogue adds a particular historical and social complexity to this kind of working program since the relationship between the two continents is marked by the colonial histories of several European countries, whose imperial regimes lasted until the middle of the 20th century. Cultural dialogue in post-colonial contexts is not only hindered by estrangement and othering. It establishes itself over the false familiarity of the other, shaped by a history of colonial violence and exploitation, including, in the case of the relationship with Africa, a long history of slavery. This historical background implies deeper-rooted issues of ethnic discrimination and racism and more complex social, and cultural tensions. Probably, no other construction of identity and otherness is so deeply rooted in the idea of race than that of the European discrimination of African identities. Moreover, the contemporary history linking the two continents is one of conflict and war (preceding and sometimes following the decolonization processes), a history of African diasporas and migrations, and European citizens' homecomings. Although recalled among communities and families, this vernacular memory has remained largely absent from collective representations and national identity building. On the one hand, it includes an "unsettling difficult heritage" (Macdonald, 2010) buried under traumatic silence, and on the other, it cannot fit into a coherent image or a consensual narrative. On the other, it testifies to multiple tensions, opposite views and affections, and even different senses of non-belonging. The only archives of colonial times are those of the colonial states themselves, which cannot, for that very reason, be appropriated as collective memory either. However, their re-opening and re-reading have been crucial for the present to emerge as post-colonial existence, disclosing new discrimination issues and new conflicting stories, such as those of Afro-descendants and mixed identities, but also a more open and vibrant interplay of cultures. The post-colonial condition sets forth a much longer task of decolonization (the decolonization of institutions, dis-

courses, practices, and minds) and the task of reimagining the European identity.

2. Reflecting on Contemporary Media Literacies in Post-Colonial Societies

Through the academic breakthrough of post-colonial studies (following a rich lineage of African authors in essay and literature and the role of social, and activist movements), there is finally a set of new perspectives on colonialism, the acknowledgment of persisting discrimination and racism in European societies and new claims of identity and representation. It is important to acknowledge the role of pioneers in the intertwined fields of politics, essay, and literature, such as *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie Nègre et Malagache*, edited by Léopold Sédar Senghor (1948), *Discourse on Colonialism* by Aimé Césaire (1950), or *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon (1952/1967), and the persistent influence of Edouard Glissant with *Monsieur Toussaint* (1960), *Poétique de la Relation* (1990), *Traité du Tout-Monde* (1997), as well as the social and activist movements on racism and civil rights. The resonance of such references in Portuguese post-colonial cultural debates appeared around some projects such as the website BUALA, (<https://www.buala.org/en>), or the work of Griot Theatre (<https://en.teatrogriot.com>). #BlackLivesMatter as a global movement raised local awareness and new actions and groups across the cultural and social agenda.

The complexity of postcoloniality is frequently approached through the segmentation of colonial memory, contemporary identity claims, and primarily, ethnicity, ultimately "falling into the trap of racialization" (Mbembe, 2008, p. 3) to empower just and necessary fights over the backdrop of failed "color-blind" promises. However, some contemporary debates related to race theory are a relevant addition to the insufficient efforts of the critique of western reason, especially of its claims to universality and humanism, proclaimed by a self-centered European culture and carried out as projects of domination, such as the imperial nation-states. The aim of "provincializing Europe" (Chakrabarty, 2007) can be seen as part of the critical task itself, centrally undertaken by contemporary European thought. In fact, European critical thought is particularly marked by the aim to think of the outside, the repressed, and otherness. This critical affection also translates as a permanent sense of "crisis" and, specifically, a crisis over the identity of Europe, as in Esposito (2016). However, this kind of negativity has been of fundamental importance to deepening European democracies and a citizenship project based on universal human rights. In the words of Mbembe (2018), post-colonial critique of universalism is also not "an end in itself." It, too, "stresses humanity-in-the-making" and nurtures "the dream of a new form of humanism, a critical humanism...the dream of a polis that is universal because ethnically diverse" (Mbembe, 2018, p.12). The same could be

noted concerning Paul Gilroy's defense of a convivial multicultural world despite all the forces ready to declare its "death at birth": "resurgent imperial power," "xenophobia and nationalism," "institutional indifference and political resentment" (Gilroy, 2005, pp. 1–6).

Precisely because of all these adverse forces, it is essential to build a rich and nuanced post-colonial vision of Europe that speaks to all and avoids forgetful and revisionist versions of history, especially among the younger generations. It is crucial to explain colonialism not only to those who endured it directly (without portraying them as victims) but rather to speak to all and build a collective enunciation space where everyone can become a subject and not an object of discourse. The participatory engagement of ordinary citizens of different ethnicities and generations is of great importance, with schools playing a key role as partners insofar as they aggregate themselves as communities, families, and generations with whom they share an educational, social, and cultural responsibility. This kind of partnership enables an environment that reflects the complexity of the post-colonial condition in a context of post-memory and new cultural diversity.

The idea of citizenship continues to imply, as in its modern constitution, participation in a constructed universality, although we are now more aware of the historical forces that shape it and the diversity that composes it. In any case, the notion of citizen remains a political and legal abstraction whose function is also protecting our corporeality and preventing a (bio)politics of the flesh. However, this construction is currently less abstract as it includes a set of particularisms to equally protect and value a diversity that expresses itself on various levels (gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or religion). These particularisms tend to restore the importance of the ethnological in human individuation, although technology plays an equally central role in this process. Anthropology (from Lévi-Strauss and Leroi-Gourhan to Simondon) has shown that human individuation takes place in an "associated milieu" (Simondon, 1958/2017) which is fundamentally technical and symbolic. This techno-symbolic milieu mediates all human experience, ensuring its retention and transmission as an external memory, shared by all individuals but distinct from genetic memory. According to Bernard Stiegler (1998), all media technologies are, in this sense, mnemotechnics and constitute the basis of culture, i.e., the human form of intelligence, action upon the world, and relationship with others. Media or mnemotechnics is central in the processes of individuation of the "I" and the "we," as well as in the processes of social transformation that Stiegler designates as "transindividuation," for they require a co-individuation in which both the "I" and the "we" are transformed through one another (Stiegler & Rogoff, 2010). The ethnological and technological dimensions of individuation are therefore associated, and this has become increasingly clear in the civilizational processes, culminating today in the process of globalization.

Belonging to a culture and participating, in the form of citizenship, is to be introduced to a set of mediations and cultural techniques. In most modern societies, citizenship implies a minimum of schooling and familiarization with reading, writing, and performing numerical operations. "Citizenship and literacy are inseparable" Babo (2003, p. 7): Just as learning to write and read was understood as a central element of civic consciousness formation, citizenship is now a central element of school education. Thus, the new media and the new digital environment demand new literacies and educational strategies, on which the new possibilities of transindividuation and citizenship will largely depend.

New information technologies and digital networks are increasingly planetary, but they do not by themselves guarantee the advent of global citizenship or the prevalence of cultural dialogue. The fact that we are more connected than ever does not necessarily amount to more inclusive societies. In fact, digital media have been taken as much as the virtuous instrument of global networking as a toxic avenue for polarization and othering. According to Bernard Stiegler (1998), media technology is constitutively ambivalent, a kind of *pharmakon*—both remedy and poison—the concept Plato used to describe writing because it enables both memory and forgetfulness. That is why our relation to media technology cannot dispense with critical reflection, experimental practice, and educational strategies. Media lie at the core of our ability to share experience, cultivate, and take care of our mode of existence as humans, demanding political and educational thought. In the words of Achille Mbembe, "ours is a time of planetary entanglement" but also a time of "contraction," "enclosure," and "borderization," with a drive towards "sorting" and "categorizing" (Mbembe, 2018). Therefore, maybe we need a media education and politics that can foster "co-individuation" (Stiegler) or "co-constitution" (Mbembe) more than we need a politics of identities.

One of the goals of the African-European Narratives project is to contribute to the research and practice of such a politics of mediation in the age of new information technologies, challenging a mere self-evidence of "digital activism." Media education and literacy can foster the kind of cultural processes and engagement that Stiegler characterizes as the "long circuits" of individuation, in opposition to the "short-circuit" produced by processes of mobilization, viral sharing, and reactivity. These other forms of engagement authorize a constant disruption of experience, disposing it to abstraction and transitivity by the algorithmic economy, and preventing the individual and collective investments necessary to invent new ways for its re-organization as in Stiegler (2010, 2019). On the contrary, the involvement in "long circuits" of individuation allows forms of attention that favor "transmission," the deepening of memory, intergenerational relations, and learning, which are fundamental for a critical view of the present and the projection of a future.

According to Stiegler, the “great institutions of transmission (‘family education,’ ‘academic education,’ and ‘cultural education’)” are being “short-circuited” by a particular media regime that does not favor transmission, i.e., a “relationship to time and human experience” (Stiegler & Rogoff, 2010) nor, consequently, critical use of media in cultural production. Social networks and the archival capabilities of the digital lead to an often superficial appropriation of experience, and the constant display of Doxa and reactivity, although this does not invalidate other highly relevant and transformative aspects of digital culture. Neither does this invalidate other much more relevant and transformative uses of the digital. Storytelling is resumed in this project as a persistent practice throughout the history of humanity and, at the same time, in productive transformation in the digital age. A practice that encourages transmission and the kind of “long circuits” of individuation that Stiegler speaks about: research-based engagement with archives, creative articulation between memory and imagination, the connection between collective history and individual stories, and the exploration of collaborative practices.

3. Storytelling: A Tool for Intercultural Dialogue

Referring to the modern origin of the western nation, rooted in romanticism and the metaphysics of history, Homi Bhabha (1990) speaks of an intrinsic relationship between Nation and Narration, explaining how “it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historic idea in the west” and how “narrating the nation” (Bhabha, 1990, pp. 1–7) is, therefore, in itself, the foundational act of national states. Therefore, to counter their mythical horizon, their logic of inclusion and exclusion, identity and otherness, requires the production of alternative narratives. In a more or less intuitive way, all liberation movements seeking to escape the oppression of a political destiny look for a counter-narrative. And so too in cultural experience at large. “The danger of a single story” finds the most effective antidote in storytelling itself, as novelist Chimamanda Adichie so effectively points out through her own exemplary story (Adichie, 2009). The resurgence of storytelling, a central practice from the very early age of human culture, is playing a significant role in fostering critical self-awareness and the creation of counter-narratives in post-colonial societies. The relevance of self-authorship and the way it influenced the perspective of participants in the African-European Narratives Project was noticeable in various activities and feedback from audiences, as documented on its website (<https://africaneuropeanarratives.fcsh.unl.pt/feed-back>).

The crisis of modern experience was characterized by one of its leading interpreters, Walter Benjamin, as a crisis of storytelling. Describing the structure of modern experience as one of fragmentation and acceleration, he anticipates that “the art of storytelling is com-

ing to an end” (Benjamin, 1936/1969, p. 83). However, we are witnessing the persistence of narrative, whether in the dominant genres of the cultural industries (populated by countless narrative archetypes), hypertextual and multimedia formats, or accessible and derivative formats of micronarratives. In *The New Digital Storytelling*, Bryan Alexander (2011) points out the expansive meaning of “story” in digital culture, which is used to identify a great variety of meaningful objects as opposed to mere data. In the digital world, therefore, it seems to be easier to define what “is not a story”: “data, especially data without meaningful patterns,” lacking “intrinsic meaning” (Alexander, 2011, p. 4). The persistence of stories in the era of big data reveals their cultural significance as an “overload-coping mechanism,” as a “tool for generating meaning and context,” a necessary aspect of “our modern information ecosystems” (Alexander, 2011, p. 215) and, to that extent, a relevant dimension of psychic and social individuation processes.

The ability to tell stories has existed at least since the Paleolithic birth of images and seems to correspond to an anthropological dimension that cuts across all cultures. At the individual level, and according to the cognitive sciences, it is linked to the emergence of self-awareness or “the autobiographical self”—an event “in brains endowed with abundant memory, language, reasoning and narratives” (Damásio, 2011, pp. 203–204). Moreover, as modern literature has often revealed, the subject’s ability for self-referentiality and self-interpretation is only possible through their othering. The French poet A. Rimbaud famously described himself as “I is another,” and F. Pessoa, the Portuguese poet who invented several literary heteronyms, spoke of “othering oneself.” The auto-biographical self already arises from multiplicity and co-individuation. Telling stories helps make sense of the world and whom we are by intertwining memory and imagination, fact and fiction, identity, and otherness. That is why stories are such powerful artifacts against dominant narratives and ideology. They allow us to rediscover history’s complexity, relate personal experience and collective memory, and open a space of trans-individuation. These aspects explain the anthropological centrality of stories and why comparative literature or world literature have become key disciplines in cultural and post-colonial studies, contexts of negotiation between humanistic universalism and its questionings. They force us to enquire about the “translatability” of stories, their “competing conceptions of the world,” or even their “alternative universalities” (Vanhove, 2022, pp. 8–11).

One of the starting questions of the African-European Narratives Project was determining whether post-colonial stories could, despite their diversity, be told in the same space. Could their plurality and tensions be brought together in a joint report? What would have been impossible to achieve through the unifying medium of a book is making its way as a digital object through multimedia storytelling and contributory content production

and tagging. The African-European platform is a narrative Atlas, co-created by its participants without erasing the differences and tensions between the individual stories that compose it. It is also a digital network and a multimedia environment that transcend national, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries and foster the diversity of cultural expression, enabling, at the same time, their contamination. Its archive supports multiple cartographic readings and reveals new intercultural geographies while safeguarding the integrity and accessibility of each story.

The engagement of participants through storytelling practices is also an educational and media literacy proposition. "Traditional mass media seemed to be able to do without any kind of specific proficiency" (Gentikow 2007, p. 81), not only because their presence became familiar and habitual but because we were intended primarily as receivers (Gentikow, 2007). Therefore, media education has been primarily focused on reception studies and content analysis, a task that is now taken up by traditional media themselves (as an aspect of their competition with new media), calling our attention to the dangers of the information society and digital networks (providing "fact-checking," denouncing "fake news" and information bubbles, etc.). However necessary this kind of practice may be, digital media education requires more than content and reception analysis.

The idea of "changing literacies" (Livingstone, 2004, p. 10) has accompanied most of 20th century culture, mainly in what has come to be described as its "pictorial turn" (Mitchell, 1992), giving rise to visual studies (Elkins & Naef, 2011; Mirzoeff, 1998) and the need for a new formal, technical, and ideological critique of images. The acknowledgment that "the 'reading' of pictures has to be learned" (Gentikow, 2007, p.7 9) sets itself as a parallel aspect to the familiarity with "selected canonical works of literature" that is expected from a "literate education" (Frechette, 2002, p. 23). Moreover, modern media environments (radio, television, cinema) demanded what Tyner has called "communication multi-literacies" (Tyner, 1998, p. 113) as well as rethinking the idea of a definite overcoming of orality by the literate cultural regime McLuhan, (1964/1994), Ong (1981/1992). However, it was primarily digital media that brought along a more general discussion around what counts as literacy, and cultural competencies, and deepened the anthropological dimensions of this discussion. With the emergence of digital programming languages and software, we are reminded that all writing and reading systems have been associated with specific skills and technologies such as handwriting and the alphabet (from which the very concept of literacy derives), typography, and the printing press. "Writing is completely artificial": It is "a technology, calling for the use of tools and other equipment" (Ong, 1981/1992, 81–82).

The comprehension that the symbolic is not an innate human ability but rather constitutes itself as the mastery of specific cultural techniques (such as writing, reading, and counting) raises the question of know-

ing what will be the new operations and competencies corresponding to the digital age of the "symbolic machine" (Kittler, 1997). On the one hand, the emergence and impact of the digital induce a comparison with the leap that occurred with the first generation of symbolic recursive (self-referential) techniques, introducing us to a cultural experience of great sophistication. On the other hand, the generalization of numerization, the automation of calculus, and the simulation (by this means) of human intelligence seem to point to a generalized automation of human practices and a corresponding deskilling process. However, we are still far from an explicit configuration of the computational apparatus, leaving us with the task of responding to its challenges and maybe influencing its course.

The idea of "cultural techniques conceived of as operative chains that precede the media concepts they generate" (Siegert, 2015, p. 11) seems particularly interesting to think about digital culture and the literacies it may be eliciting, despite the conquest of machines capable of performing certain "intelligent" operations. As Sessa points out, media technologies will always end up raising a media literacy, understood as "the socially widespread deployment of skills and capabilities in a context of material support (that is, an exercise of material intelligence) to achieve valued intellectual ends" (Sessa, 2000, p. 19). One of the interesting aspects of writing/reading symbolic systems (which is also the case of the computer) is that they constitute "reading as practice" (Babo, 2003). "Seen through this prism, reading is not decaying but rather in a process of enrichment and complexification, appealing to an aesthetic perception and the development of a creativity and interactivity indispensable to immersion in the digital environment" (Babo, 2008, p. 13). Determining what skills, we need to develop at the level of interaction with computational systems, whether we should generalize the learning of programming languages and software mastery, how we can participate and influence the design of systems and interfaces, and how we can deepen and expand textual, visual, and audiovisual production in the digital post-media environment have become urgent cultural and educational questions.

4. Co-Creation and Multimedia Practices in the Making of a Collaborative Documentary

Developing a documentary film in the project relates to the goal of creating a space of intersection between two forms. Creating a space of intersection between a collaborative methodology and a panoramic view of the number of stories and cultural diversity, accumulated as a result of the digital and multimedia structure of the base platform of the African-European Narratives project.

Thinking about a documentary film that would integrate this methodological amplitude was based on responding to three different challenges: the relationship with the multimedia and digital interface of the

accumulated collection of stories; the relationship with the authors of these stories in an encounter between the present order of the film and the reactivation of their testimony within the materials shared on the platform; the experimentation of the film media, in an intermedial return to the mosaic and scroll mode of the digital. How to return to linearity with such a collective object and contemporary form of the fragment?

Concerning the genre, the film was organized based on the argument that the documentary is not a cinematographic cutout of reality but rather a relationship with this reality that surpasses it and subsists within it. In this case, the documentary is an unfolding of realities—the platform and the set of shared authors, narratives, and multimedia materials. In such a perspective, “‘the end’ is merely a threshold to the ever-varying processes in which we and the world around us take shape” (Hongisto, 2015, p. 12). This reality with which the film engages is also a process of mediation or remediation, redefining an engagement that as a “new materialism emphasizes the ‘lively powers of material formations’ that coexist with discursive configurations. Here, the matter is not a dull substance for vibrant interpretations but ‘an exhibiting agency’ that co-composes” (Hongisto, 2015, p. 12).

Anchored in the matter of this mediation, the methodology of the film takes on a processual, medial character both in co-creation and as an object on this interface, itself an interface of literacy and cultural encounter—technologically mediated. It is a process between the actual and the virtual, where representations and the genre’s potential “engage in a productive dialogue with the world in its becoming.” (Hongisto, 2015, p. 13).

The development of the documentary went through several phases, where these levels of interaction and questioning were present, and new questions and solutions were solved or added. Its final form occupies a mass of moving images and sounds that are a temporal and contingent outline of an initial architecture—the

platform—and seeks to shape that formally, in correspondence to a linear film. Its proposal is not exhausted in the testimonies or stories chosen, it is rather a mold to potentially highlight other stories from the platform, expanding its potential, with each contribution opening new moments between the digital immediacy of the platform, the persistence of the recorded narrative, and the imaginary landscapes that a film can constitute.

With this framework, the film’s development was a reflection and consequent construction of a sustaining structure, where the political-cultural arc that the platform puts in its objectives could also be projected, the “long circuits” mentioned before. Most of the stories introduced were investigated on different axes: their narrative, historical and cultural potential, and media potential. In this case, meaning the media format introduced in the platform: sound, videos, and images—which could be visual materials of different orders such as photographs, illustrations, or others. The link between the different materials was the text to which each story was linked, the storytelling core purpose of the project. Few stories were introduced whose text was not central. The vast majority of the platform’s contributions, even when crossed by other media, were shaped by narratives.

Dealing with such a volume of textual contributions, the balance with the diversity of other materials required a cinematographic montage to be created with new visual research within the platform and workshops’ audiovisual materials. The chronology of post-colonial European societies punctuated a historical arc and an initial thread to the creative work. On the one hand, the narrative structure of the stories, often shared in moments of training or events with schools, concentrates an important part of the contribution of each participant, and in these cases, the other materials, photographs, videos, and even music, like the one shared as a memory (Figure 1) are an accessory part of the centrality of the text.

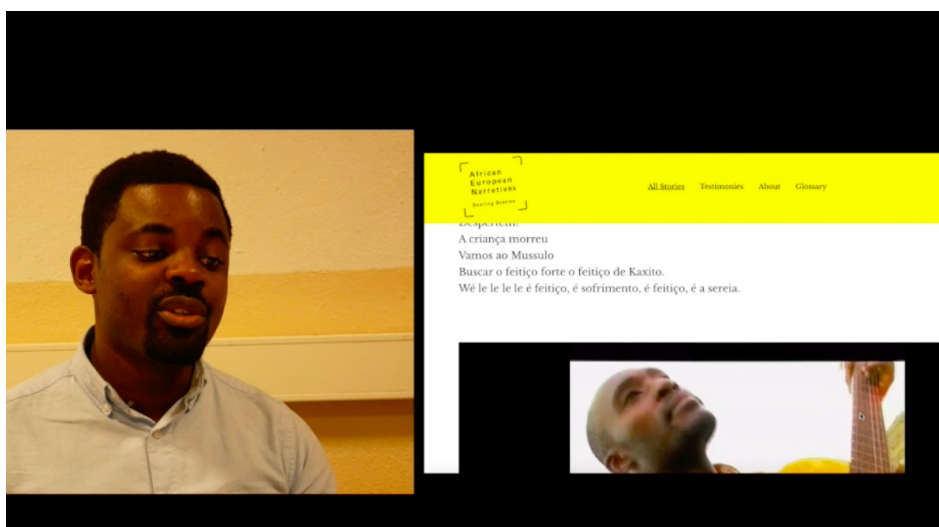


Figure 1. Film still from “From Here and There.” Source: Miranda (2021).

By beginning a process of textual montage, the film did not evolve into an audiovisual or multimedia montage, nor did it bring its strategies closer to a digital mediation such as that which organizes the platform. Thus, the next strategy organized the selected moments of each participant from the diversity of materials used, photographs, videos, and sounds that would support an audiovisual grid as the film axis. Despite this, this tactic created an illustrative appearance, which displaced to a compacted audiovisual form the rhythm and the heterogeneities present in the platform liveliness, diminishing the discursive space of the mosaic in composition. The range of questions that came across the process situated in a contemporary debate that interrogates digital mediations around the concept of “desktop cinema” and its cinematic and even literacy potential:

What does the formal system of a desktop film tell us about visibility? As a product fully embedded within contemporary visual culture, what does its meta-reflexive operation suggest to us about this visual culture, or—more broadly—about contemporary media culture in general? (Ugenti, 2021, p. 177)

This corresponds not only to interrogation, that of the place of the screen and the mediation devices but also in a cultural perspective; the place of the author and the interlocutor, the place of individual experience through the tactics and the gesturality of this media environment. A perspective is where the mediated everyday experience emerges as a more prominent form of perception rather than merely the experience of digital-visual culture. The cultural encounter as an argument for literacy also happens in this dimension. Where the screen and the interface, in their global communicability, bring together the horizontality of the digital platform and the heterogeneity of identity and post-colonial and Afro-European configurations. The place of film, and

hence the form of “desktop cinema,” interrogates the social and intercultural reality of the digital platform, assuming that its mediation is not transparent but rather structural in accessing the possibility of composing this mosaic. The platform interface is an autonomous zone of interaction (Galloway, 2012), here assumed as intercultural and shared, from which documentary film mediates new connections, as Catarina’s close-up where she interacts with the screen (Figure 2):

Historically, cinema has brought multiple realities to the screen, adapting them to the nature of the screen itself by means of the ‘specificity’ of film language. In the case of desktop films, cinema brings to the screen a reality that is already ‘screenic’ in itself. (Ugenti, 2021, p. 180)

The solution, where different moments of capturing images were integrated, embeds a hybrid organizing principle of the film, a new summoning of the authors of the stories of the platform for the second moment of co-creation, interpellating them with this contribution, making them reflect on it, re-creating a new space of interaction for the documentary. A renewed moment of dialogue—medial and cultural: from the platform to the documentary, involving a cultural and citizen proposal to the subjective imaginary of each individual. The attention to this unfolding presents itself as a formal and aesthetic proposal in the documentary as well as a space for dialogue in the field of digital literacy.

This means that assuming digital mediation not as a transparent border of mediation but as an experience in itself, as “the analysis of forms of interaction with other people and the surrounding environment today cannot disregard the many forms of interaction with the media devices inhabiting our everyday spaces and structuring our everyday practices and gesturality” (Ugenti, 2021, p. 179). Thus, for the interaction between media, the



Figure 2. Film still from “From Here and There.” Source: Miranda (2021).

proposal was to take the platform as a documental reality in itself, stating that the materiality of the digital object was brought into the film as part of the audiovisual experience. The surface of the screen and the gestures of the interaction with the platform were filmed as an integral part of this mediation experience. The editing was built upon this gesture of incorporating the desktop visuality or the screen as part of the film's diegesis. The manipulation, the platform scroll, the interaction within the screen, the editing within the frame, and the cutting or reoccupying of different places on the same screen were formal strategies and aesthetic options where the documentary genre was porous before the nuclear digital mediation of the platform. The film took the path of meeting the platform's dominant cultural technique, and its database architecture as its cultural form as in Manovich (1999)—digital and multimedia, immediate and fragmented, individual and collective, simultaneously. The film is composed as this refracted mirror, and from this level, it develops its engagement strategies, both in the flow of kaleidoscopic and collective montage and in the tactics of co-creation:

The desktop film thus appears to stage a kind of inverse relocation, inasmuch as the film appears as an audiovisual space that welcomes the replacement of new digital media to reconfigure on the screen certain peculiar traits of the experience deriving from their use. (Ugenti, 2021, p. 178)

It is at this level that the reflection on the grammar of the documentary and its hybridism is also placed, questioning itself from the contact with its authors' gestures: "The settings we regularly move around are distinguished by a substantial presence of technological media with which (or should we say, more precisely, within, or through which) our daily gesturality interacts and by which is partially reshaped" (Ugenti, 2021, p. 179).

As described above, the language to be used was transversally built by the encounter with digitality and multimediality of both the structure of the platform and the reenacting of the narratives by digital formats. A second approach to the subjects and their participation, namely in a new contribution, reactivated the participants' relation with their own stories in a new dynamic. This composition had two parallel strands: a collaborative but autonomous co-creation and the use of vernacular technologies by the authors. Concretely, each participant engaged in a new phase of creation for the film, filming their daily moments with their daily gadgets. The proposal was that each one would read their shared story, create a voice-over of it, take a silent close-up with their cell phones, and film a journey of their daily trajectories.

What followed was an articulation of these different materials, outside the scope of the platform, where each protagonist returns to their story and constructs a set of images and sounds that frame and reveal part of a double commitment through the close-up of the face. The voice-over also introduces a new thread to connect with the *narrative principle*, as developed earlier, also in the performance of storytelling.

In a sequential diversity, we pass through different scenes where cellphone images share the computer split screen, its texts, and web pages in a remediation that unfolds each scene and each language. The voice-overs and the silent close-ups of complicity and consent intertwine with the everyday paths filmed by each participant, sharing a screen between the individual, the platform, and the narrative. Gilberto confesses the importance of education to him with his mobile phone (Figure 3). The film itself "becomes an interface capable of generating a complex interaction between cinema and digital media, accessing a definition of the very concept of interface: one that might broaden its sense" (Ugenti, 2021, p. 180).

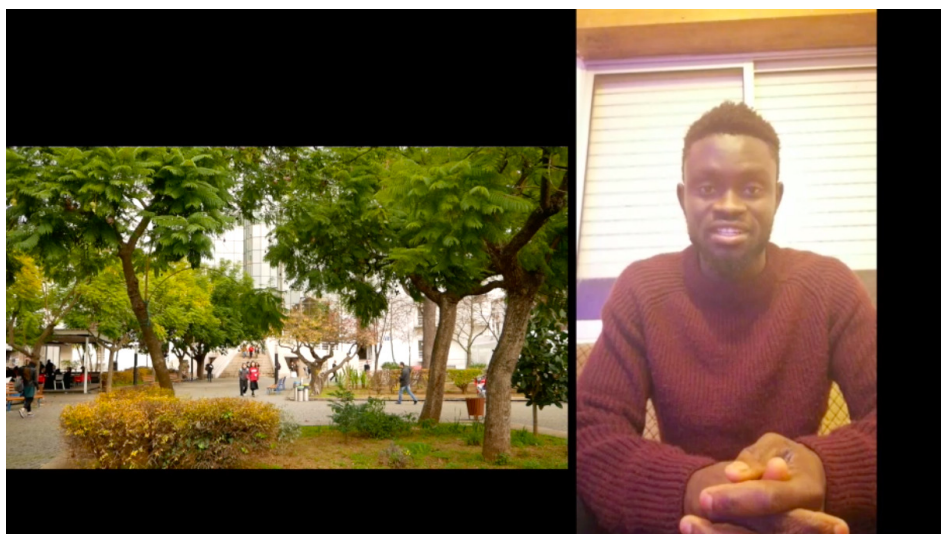


Figure 3. Film still from "From Here and There." Source: Miranda (2021).

Thus, two structuring levels of the film are combined, its intermedial character, in the formal construction, and the collaborative co-creation of meaning. The first ties itself to the contributions of the platform, and the second, within it, reveals a landscape of relevant protagonists in the framework of the project—young people of African descent in Europe, the Afro-Europeans—in the space of the project itself, the university. In a gesture of visual political meaning, to place a black visuality in the university and their Afro-European students as privileged interlocutors of this necessary ongoing dialogue. This was a fundamental issue as an output, once the film places other origins than the stigmatized peripheral neighborhoods, also present in different films, to position these characters, symbolically at the end, in the university. The chosen landscape was also, by the structure of the project, the place of school, and by being at different levels of education, questioning what education stands for today, in its practices, mediations, and contemporary cultural interplays.

5. Conclusion: Critical Perspectives on Digital Literacy

We need to put aside the myth of “digital natives” natural ability to the digital. Alphabets and writing have been invented for over 3,000 years, and we still have to learn and practice them at school for several years before becoming proficient writers and readers, just as we learn our mother tongue through family transmission during our early years. The European Union study “EU Kids Online” (Smahel et al., 2020) shows that, although almost half of the teenagers in nineteen European countries spend at least two hours a day socializing through digital media and networks, their digital skills have not risen to a level higher than that of users. Some of the basic digital tools, such as text editors or spreadsheets, are largely unknown to a significant number of them until they learn how to use them at school. Image and video editing seem more familiar but mainly through basic tools embedded in social media or game applications.

As the computational apparatus sustaining the “meta-medium paradigm” develops (Manovich, 2005), the earlier expectations around the plasticity, interactivity, and connectivity of the digital and the breakaway from 20th-century mass culture give way to a new set of concerns and critical themes: dependencies affecting wellbeing and happiness (Dorsey, n.d.), neurologic consequences such as attention deficits (Hayles, 2012), neoliberal exploitation and governmental surveillance through platformization and the data economy (Zuboff, 2019), AI and machine learning techniques “making us ‘subjects’ of code” (Chun, 2011, p. 177) and algorithms. Instead of an impulse to creativity and knowledge—digital culture may be enclosing us in what we already know and want and culminating in the automation of aesthetics, desire, and taste (Manovich, 2017; Stiegler, 2004/2014), leaving little space for symbolic re-invention and free-will. Subjectivation is becoming an analytical

operation performed for us by recommendation systems. As Horkheimer and Adorno (1947/2002) already described, the aesthetic is the core affair of the cultural industry that seeks to perform its total “schematization.”

This is why Chakravorty G. Spivak (rereading Schiller’s aesthetical and political proposal) calls for a “training of the imagination,” arguing that “perhaps the literary can still do something”—“not as a substantive source of good thinking alone,” she writes, but as “the task of the aesthetic education we are proposing: at all cost to enter another’s text,” another’s story (2013, p. 6). Therefore, not only writing but also reading requires imagination. It forces us to step out of our own world because “reading in its most robust sense” is a “displacement of belief onto the terrain of the imagination” (Spivak, 2013, pp. 6–10). In “An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization” (2012), Spivak expresses “concern for preserving the dreams of postcoloniality in the face of globalization” (Spivak, 2013, p. 34), concern for the erasure of difference by capital and data, and concern that “we really don’t know what to do with information” (Spivak, 2013, p. 1). That is why we need educational strategies and literacies that continue to provide the training of imagination required for intercultural dialogue in the information society. “Behind every ‘ethical’ use of the Internet, she adds, is ‘good’ education—familial, cultural, institutional—in our sense ‘aesthetic’. Without this pre-set good education...dreams of digital democracy...are all self-serving dead ends” (Spivak, 2013 p. 27).

Literacy, the literary, and its cultural techniques (reading, writing, translating, publishing) contributed deeply to the self-knowledge of individuals and cultures but also to expanding their horizons and transcending their national or ethnic narratives. They enable the dialogue of cultures and the emergence of “places where s/he speaks, unheard” (Spivak, 2013, p. 27). “In the context of the beginning of the twenty-first century, to learn to de-transcendentalize religion and...nation into the imaginative sphere is an invaluable gift” whose particular function “is important in a general and continuing way” (Spivak, 2013, p. 10).

The African-European Narratives project is a proposal to address these challenges by reconnecting with the ethical and aesthetic power of stories and fostering its continuation in the media environment of the information society. A proposal for connecting a diversity of voices and cultures, regardless of geographical, ethnic, and linguistic borders, and fostering media practices’ creative and collaborative potentialities. A proposal for knowing others’ (different or even opposite) stories and extracting yet others from historical silences or unheard places (Risam, 2019). In this sense, storytelling is in itself a literacy and educational tool. B. Alexander speaks of “story literacy” as a “tool for generating meaning and context,” “understanding complex subjects,” and even “making sense of a cognitive domain” (Alexander, 2011, p. 215), to which we could also add: a tool for intercultural dialogue and for navigating postcoloniality and globalization.

Acknowledgments

This work is funded by national funds through FCT — Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia under the project UIDB/05021/2020.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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