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Storytelling in design for social innovation and politics: a reading through the lenses of Hannah Arendt

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Abstract: The German philosopher Hannah Arendt believes that storytelling can be used to reopen the idea of public space and to facilitate dialogue/action amongst citizens aimed at attaining a more participative society. She regards storytelling as the only real political action, as it opens up the idea of public space where everybody is invited to take part in the discussion in which decisions upon the *polis* – the common realm – are taken together. Arendt goes back to Aristotle’s definition that man is a political animal, “zoon politikon”. To participate in the construction of the common realm and to be an active component of societal life is what defines the most profound human vocation. Arendt sees this as the meaning of the word “hero”; not a superman, but rather one who contributes to the construction of the public sphere.

This paper further expands on the political implications of storytelling in social innovation, by taking into account the writings of Arendt as well as some experimentations of use of storytelling in social innovation taken place at international level.

Keywords: Storytelling, politics, social innovation, philosophy, Hannah Arendt

1. Case studies

This paper starts by describing two different experiences of invention of stories in the realm of design for social innovation: one in Seraing, Belgium, where we employed traditional puppets to make visible the ideas emerged from our workshops with citizens about the future of the town; the second in Bovisa and Dergano, suburban areas in the north of Milan, Italy, where for three years we have conducted activities producing contents for a Web TV on social media, in collaboration with local associations, citizens, artisans and the public administration.

1.1 Tchanchè and the White Fairy

Seraing is a town near Liege, Belgium. After a glorious industrial past, now Seraing faces the closure of all the factories, a stellar unemployment and the lack of public spaces. (Figure 1) Invited by the local municipality, our group of designers had the objective to study, listen and observe the neighborhood. We had to try to understand the problems and difficulties, build opportunities for interaction and dialogue between citizens, associations, local administrators. In a place often perceived as hopeless, we had to imagine possible futures.



Figure 1 - Images from the explorations in Seraing.

We soon discovered that the house of the local associations, where we prepared meetings and dinners, was also the place of a small but very active puppet theater.

Every Sunday the theater attracted around forty children and adults, in lively and noisy representations, where Tchanchè, a puppet dressed in blue and red as a factory worker, was fighting monsters and devils with his incredible strength (Figure 2).

In the region of Liege puppet theatre is still very popular. The puppets from Liege work in the same way of the Sicilian puppets; their characters are from different memories: from Charlemagne, to devils to factory workers. In that still very much alive tradition, the hero par excellence of is Tchanchè, an anarchist and brave worker. The character, invented more than a century ago to entertain the spectators during breaks, become very soon the most popular of the local theatre.

Our group, after working in co-design sessions with citizens and associations, decided to use the puppet theatre to represent the ideas about the future of Seraing that we collected and invented. We worked with Marc Crouvette, one of the local puppeteers, very active in local associations. We built a new puppet made only from wooden cubes, a sort of hero to be built, and a portable theatre, to allow performances in different places. Once the stories from co-design sessions were collected, (Figures 3) they have all been passed to Marc, who built independently a canovaccio for the performance (Figures 4).

At the first performance, Tchanché fought with the devil (representing corporations that have made disappear the local labor) and met a white fairy (we naive and out of place designers). The arrival of

the white fairy scene freed all - citizens, activists, we designers - in a laughter that allowed us to recognize ourselves in our limitations and defects.

The puppet show inspired by stories from the future invented during the co-design sessions was repeated and evolved after time; other co-design sessions and workshops were led in Seraing, bringing there students and designers from outside, while the portable theater and its stories were performed in different places, also out of Seraing.



Figure 2 - Seraing, Jan 2015 / Marc and his friends playing with marionettes at the Maison des Jeunes in Ougrée, Seraing. Every Sunday morning they stage two stories with Tchanchtes, Charlemagne, Banane, Nanesse and other characters from the liegeoise puppet tradition for an audience of about 50 people, made up of children and their parents. The representations are very interactive: the audience is an active participant in the play, knowing all the songs by heart and cheering loudly at all of Tchanchtes' quests and battles.



Figure 3 - Seraing, May 2015 - Codesign sessions



Figure 4 - Seraing, May 2015 - Images from the puppet play.

1.2 Plug Social TV

The project takes place in a suburban area of Milan, where the university campus is located. It has a strong identity, connected to its historical industrial background, and a new emerging character: former workers are now co-inhabitants of the area with first and second generations of foreign citizens, and the new community of out-of-town students. In this context, it is necessary to set up projects and activities that are able to reflect the new complex identity of the neighbourhoods, crossing cultural and generational boundaries, facilitating community relationships and driving reciprocal exchange dynamics. A lot of associations and citizens organize and promote social initiatives and we, as a group of design researchers and students, have got in relationship with them and have started to collaborate having workshops, bringing people inside the university campus and going outside in the neighbourhood. Since 2013, we collected a lot of stories about citizens, places and activities: on one hand, the ones that took place there in the past (mostly when fabrication and manufacturing were the main activities employing people); but also the manifold experiences and actions taking place nowadays in order to face everyday life issues and share the public space together.

Over the years, Plug Social TV has developed an original transmedia storytelling approach based on design practice (Ciancia, 2016) in order to engage communities in a participative process. We refer to the word 'social' with a double meaning: social media (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter) are the main platforms through which contents of local interest are delivered to citizens. Moreover the social aspect of this project can be identified into the creation of a tool for self-expression and self-narration (Collizzoli, 2010; White, 2003). The final output is a community TV, which fosters a feedback loop among stakeholders, helping people for sharing common visions about identities and values. People, who are already active in real life, become then the main characters in fictional worlds. Transmedia strategies design the collaboration between the actors to be involved, building and nurturing strong relations between the academics (professors and students), the citizens, the associations and the local institutions.

All the stories published on Plug Social TV are part of narrative worlds, designed by the groups of students on the base of the exploration activities (collecting stories and iconographic repertoires, interviews, etc.) they lead over the years, according to a practice-based approach. Our aim is

engaging the local community experimenting transmedia practices and prototyping social interactions both online and offline.

This case study mostly concerns the idea of “making things visible and tangible”, “reconstructing local identities” (Manzini, 2015). What’s more, we are experimenting ways for engaging non-experts in participatory video and storytelling processes developing specific tools for collecting and re-framing stories, producing narratives and storytelling formats (Anzoise, Piredda, Venditti, 2015). The final result is the production of transmedia systems for Plug Social TV, including on one hand brand new contents for social media and digital storytelling (web series, video pills, graphic novels, serial novels, twitteratura, ecc.) and spin-offs that developed new story lines through pages and profiles. The narrative worlds depicted throughout manifold digital contents represent Secondary Worlds (Wolf, 2014), that means fictional worlds with fictional characters based on the real stories of the real people of the neighbourhood (Primary World). On the other hand, the transmedia system includes the Plug Social Workshops (Figure 5 and 6), which took place in specific locations of the neighbourhood in collaboration with the local partners, in order to enact the Secondary Worlds and prototype civic engagement through narratives. In fact, exhibitions, co-design workshops and creative experiences created actions in the districts and involved specific audience/targets/players sharing moments with the local community and collecting feedbacks. The designers played different roles in every single project: they were actors on the stage, interpreting fictional characters; they were the gatekeepers to the Secondary World; they provided co-design tools for envisioning and sharing a new idea of wellbeing for the neighbourhood; they facilitated new relationships between the stakeholders according to the narrative system they figured out. The fictional characters, inspired by real people from the local community, are conceived as everyday heroes, enacting the fictional and the real world.



Figure 5 – Plug Social Workshop “Bovisa 2115. Cartoline dal futuro” (Postcards from the Future), Milan, 30th January 2016.



Figure 6 – Plug Social Workshop “ArtiGianni. Dal lavoro manuale alla stampa 3d” (From handicrafts to 3D printing), Milan, 30th January 2016.

2. Everyday Heroes: a key concept

The word “hero” commonly reminds to the main character provided with virtues, the leader possibly capable of saving the planet. Narratively speaking, we would better refer to the structure of the myth and to the Hero’s Journey (Vogler, 1999), which starts when the hero gets the Call to the Adventure making him or her leave the Ordinary World and face manifold adventures in the Special World, engaging fights with the Enemies, meeting the Mentor and the allies until he/her can come back to a renewed Ordinary World: at that point, he/she has grown and many things are changed into a new state of equilibrium. Many stories from the contemporary Western culture (movies or novels) are based on this narrative structure. What’s more, it represents a model, which is based on ancient archetypes that restore themselves over and over again and inform most of the narratives across times and cultures (Campbell, 2012). Narratives have a transformative power: stories offer examples on how we can face and manage conflicts in everyday life and generate processes of change.

The idea of daily life was born within the realm of the social sciences as opposite to specialized activities. According to the Situationist International, it stands for the alienation of individuals and has a negative nuance, but it also refers to the potentialities and the richness of everyday willing and imagination that make us able to feel the subversive power of the political and collective dimension (Bandini, 1977). Debord (1963 and 1967) proclaims and practices the “trivialisation of art” as it is the end of specialized acts and the integration of a revolutionary and social creativity into the daily life: aesthetics is politics (Bandini, 1999) as poetry (*poesis*) is politics (*poiesis*). Design should contribute to

the elicitation of creativity as the art of everyday lives setting a common ground in expressive and communication tools for sharing knowledge.

De Certeau (1990) avoids the opposition between counterculture and the mainstream, depicting three kind of practices according to the relationships that users engage with production tools and devices: usage and consumption; everyday creativity; forms of practices. Those relationships refer to tactics (behaviours) and rhetorics (representations) as “secondary images” produced by and from the margins of our society, according to a process of continuous transformation and trans-codification of meanings. For example, in the field of media design and communication, repertoires, contents and artefacts are materials to be edited and used by people to foster identities, disseminating knowledge and building networks of practices. The case studies introduced in this paper all share the fact that designers work at redefining the idea of public space by means of their use of storytelling. This perspective is consistent with a community-led approach, which is set in a local dimension, with a specific cultural background to be taken into account and which represents the real treasure to be widespread and made relevant to others.

This brings us to the idea of design as the strategic asset for managing the aesthetic power of social practices, aesthetics of everyday lives coming from people’s experiences and stories towards a symbolic dimension that enables the unlocking and the wide spreading of new meanings: a mythology of everyday life. In that sense, narratives come from multiple perspectives and with the contribution of different users that are taking part into a collective meaning-making process, as they are playing the role of the “choir”. This finds a match with what the German philosopher Hannah Arendt says about storytelling and the public space (Arendt 1958 and Arendt, H. in Benjamin 1969).

3. Arendt, storytelling and the political

In the past two years within the framework of DESIS Philosophy Talks “*Storytelling & Social innovation*”, we have been researching how the idea of storytelling in the philosophy of Arendt can be used as a lens through which to interpret the meanings generated in our society and how storytelling can be a design tool in design for social innovation. This is particularly the case when one looks at the idea of politics. At present we are witnessing worldwide a shift of meaning in the idea of politics, which is increasingly more considered as open, participative and active. Design for social innovation is now contributing to the current shift of meaning. Storytelling can be considered as a peculiar design tool towards an open and participative idea of politics. According to Hannah Arendt, storytelling can be considered as a peculiar design tool that has a history in contributing to generate a more democratic, inclusive and active idea of politics.

Arendt believes that storytelling can be used to reopen the idea of public space and to facilitate dialogue/action amongst citizens aimed at attaining a more participative society. To her, storytelling is, in essence, the act of recognizing what is hiding outside the mainstream and to be able to read it, to translate it and to tell its story. She regards storytelling as the only real political action, as it opens up the idea of public space where everybody is invited to take part in the discussion in which decisions upon the *polis* – the common realm – are taken together. This act of telling stories brings together the act of telling and the act of making. To her, storytelling is an action taking place through words: a political action.

In the *Human Condition* Arendt says that in ancient Greece storytelling was used as the principal way of constructing the public sphere. There citizens could experience how to create a common voice by means of debates taking place in the Agorà. Through this dialogue - that was often characterized by agonism - citizens could form a collective voice, also therefore characterized by many tones and

shades. These dialogues were then translated into concrete actions, thus giving shape to the common realm.

This process of sense making taking place by means of storytelling was made evident in the Greek theatre. There the citizens' voice was embodied by the figure of the "choir". Citizens could recognize in the choir their action of construction of the public sphere in the daily activity of the dialogue in the Agorà. The choir allowed citizens to acknowledge that they were not only individual voices: together they formed a body where the views of individuals were taken into account, and where decision making was a societal process involving multiple points of view. The Greek theatre ought therefore to be considered a magnifying lens, through which it was made possible to understand the political value of storytelling in the Agorà.

This process is dynamic and allows citizens to construct the common sphere. The discussion, as in the Agorà, is never a speculation for speculation's sake. Decision making thus coincides with speculation that, in turn, coincides with a performative action shaping the common sphere. Every discussion translates into action. This participation in the common sphere enables the citizens to find their own happiness. "*Eu-daimonia*" - the Greek word for happiness is "*eu-daimonia*" - literally means "*good daimon*". If one finds one's good *daimon*, one's original vocation, then one has the possibility to access "*eu-daimonia*". The *daimon* is the real image of the self, and is often overshadowed by the expectations of others, conforming or lack of reflection. It is who we really are: the original nature of human beings. By what really means to be a human being?

Arendt goes back to Aristotle's definition that man is a political animal, "*zoon politikon*". To participate in the construction of the common realm and to be an active component of societal life is what defines the most profound human vocation. He, who finds his civic vocation, or his intrinsically political nature, is he who finds his good *daimon*, his real self. As he has found his role in society, he has also found his happiness. Arendt sees this as the meaning of the word "hero"; not a superman, but rather one who contributes to the construction of the public sphere. In the theatre it is the choir who tells the stories of those heroes and allows the role of the hero – i.e. who assumes responsibility in society – to emerge. By means of those stories being enacted, citizens were also able to recognize their own vocation, their own happiness within the common sphere. They too could be a hero in their daily life and assume their own responsibilities in the common realm.

These thoughts are close to what at first glance appears to be the aims and meaning of practices of storytelling in design for social innovation. If one views design for social innovation practices through the lens of Arendt's line of reasoning, when we tell stories of social innovation we potentially contribute to opening up the public realm. Like the choir in ancient Greece, we designers may facilitate discussions and actions that empower single citizens to participate in the construction of the common realm. The stories of social innovation may point to the fact that there is happiness for those who find their own active role and responsibility in society.

When we act as storytellers in this sense - telling the stories of social innovation - we potentially (but not necessarily) have a political impact on society, as we might – citizens amongst other citizens - enable a collaborative construction of the public realm.

4. Discussion. Storytelling and design for social innovation

We can read the design processes for social innovation in narrative terms:

in the case of Tchantché, the devil and the white fairy, the archetypal hero fights the enemy through different historical periods and becomes a metaphor for the social condition of the community. These archetypes are universal (Campbell, 2012)) and recur in different cultures and different eras. In the case of the stories of Plug Social TV, the heroes face a transformative path (The Hero's Journey, Vogler, 2010), encountering enemies and helpers. Plug's stories are mostly stories of discovery declined in different genres. The goal was to enhance the existing good practices, connect the past and the present for a desirable future. All stakeholders and citizens from Dergano and Bovisa were asked: "If Bovisa was a tale, what tale would be?" The answers were: "A Sleeping Beauty that must be awakened; a small village; a forest or an underground place inhabited by strange characters, that we have to cross to reach our destination." The Enemies were the public administration (obstructing instead of facilitating private initiatives), the degradation, the shopping malls and the large retailers that are a challenge to small shopkeepers and craftsmen; as "helpers" were the elders who teach their crafts to the young; the "heroes" the shopkeepers who are 'resisting' and the young students. Here we practice social innovation projects by providing tools and figures of narratology, that are in support of the project itself. In designing and co-designing social innovation projects with communities, we use the transformative power of stories to fuel the imagination.

The reflection on the value of the philosophical idea of hero for design practice is not for us a theoretical framework we apply to our work, or the other way around. The reflection comes from our practice, and informs further actions. The context of Seraing led us naturally to look for ways in which to allow citizens - who were particularly discouraged regarding the common realm - to feel that they can also be "heroes" in their everyday life, and in their own context. This is the reason we experimented there in the creation of "theatres" to enact the role of the hero in everyday life, and also looking at the political character of "theatre" in ancient Greece. In the same way, Plug Social TV was a natural testing ground for many intuitions and ideas related to storytelling.

Arendt sees storytelling as a powerful way to open up the public space to participation, possibly empowering a fully democratic process of active citizenship to take place. These thoughts are close to what can happen with the use of storytelling in practices of design for social innovation. By telling stories of social innovation, we potentially have a political impact on society; we *can try* – as citizens among citizens - to enable a collaborative construction of the public realm.

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Virginia Tassinari combines her research on Philosophy with that on Design for social innovation. This translates in her research projects that she carries forth with her students at LUCA School of Arts, as well with her writings and her research project DESIS Philosophy Talks, where she creates around the world arenas for discussions on issues coming from design research from a philosophical perspective.

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