There's more to life than the monomyth: multiperspectival approaches to teaching narrative and story in university film and media departments

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Published online: 18 Apr 2024.

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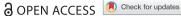Judith Aston 📙

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ABSTRACT

This article critiques the ongoing dominance of the Hollywood monomyth in the film and television industry, at least in the UK if not more widely. It considers how this is impacting on the teaching of narrative and story in university film and media departments as they move towards stronger collaborations with industry. It argues for the importance of two-way dialogue to help equip students and their future employers for a world facing complex global challenges. Drawing on the author's extensive experience in teaching and practice-led research, it advocates for a creative problem-solving approach which decentres conflict-driven models of narrative development, such as the Hero's Journey, placing them alongside alternative models which engage with the relationship between conflict and harmony in a variety of different ways. Considering narrative structures such as Kishōtenketsu, indigenous storytelling methods and the author's own work with the Polyphonic Documentary project, the need for a genuinely inclusive and expansive approach is brought to the fore. A mixed economy is considered to be essential, with experimental and traditional approaches preparing students for current industry demands whilst also encouraging them to shape future storytelling landscapes. The argument is made that this is crucial to foster a nuanced understanding of narrative and story that can respond creatively and effectively to the demands of a rapidly changing world.

Introduction

In September 2022, the British Film Institute launched its Screen Culture/2033 ten-year strategy. The strategy states that screen culture, as 'the meeting point of audio-visual storytelling and the digital revolution' has become 'the dominant means of communication and information for Gen Z[1] and beyond, and a powerful means of expression, knowledge sharing and international soft power' (BFI 2022, foreword). Acknowledging that screen culture has a great deal of influence in society, the document places the

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need for equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and environmental sustainability at the heart of its strategy. Story is placed at the centre of this through the following statement: 'We believe society needs stories. Film, television and the moving image help us to connect and understand each other better. We share the stories of yesterday, search for the stories of today, and shape the stories of tomorrow' (10).

This article addresses the question of how we should be teaching narrative and story in university film and media departments, not just in the UK but potentially elsewhere too. I argue that, in spite of many of our best efforts, our practices are falling back on formulaic[2] approaches at a time when intersecting global challenges demand a more flexible and fluid approach. Drawing on over twenty years of teaching in the Film Department at UWE Bristol and on my practice-led curatorial research with i-Docs, the RAI Film Festival and the Polyphonic Documentary Project[3], I argue for the benefits of a dialogic approach. With reference to the monomyth of the Hero's Journey (Campbell 1949; Nield 2013), I question the idea that conflict is the engine of all good stories. I argue that harmony is also important and that we should be exploring the dynamic between the two, in order to develop approaches that are fit for purpose in a changing and uncertain world.

Framing the issues

In her Nobel Prize for Literature acceptance speech, Olga Tokarczuk said that we are seeing too many attempts 'to harness rusty, anachronistic narratives that cannot fit the future to imaginaries of the future, no doubt on the assumption that an old something is better than a new nothing' (Tocarczuk 2018). Her intervention was not just calling for new approaches to content but also to form and to process, based on her work as a novelist who experiments with narrative structure. I see her point as being equally applicable to film and media, it being important to allow our understanding of narrative and story to evolve in response to changing circumstances. We should not shy away from asking: what if the way in which we are responding to intersecting and ongoing global challenges through our storytelling is part of the problem? In order to do this, we need to adopt a creative problem-solving approach to our teaching, looking at what we can learn from wider shifts in culture and at the imaginative frames of mind that we bring to our own understanding.

With regard to the imaginative frame, what sort of narratives should we be encouraging our students to create? Should we focus on enabling them to reach as many people as quickly as possible with tried and tested approaches? Or should we also be exploring transformative approaches to narrative and story that can help to reframe the way we think about and experience our lives? What role can different approaches and different platforms play in this process? Are there universal continuities for narrative which transcend time and space, or does this vary across different contexts and cultures? And what new business modules might we need to enable this interrogation of narrative to extend beyond the traditional niches of experimental film practice? It is important to keep asking these questions, bringing in new insights as we explore them with our students.

Defining narrative and story

I approach narrative and story from a poststructuralist position which questions structuralism's reliance on fixed centres and binary oppositions, positioning narrative and story as

being embedded within a complex network of relations (Cobley 2014). This allows for an expansive approach which is responsive and open to different frames of understanding, as opposed to being fixed. Whilst the terms narrative and story are often used interchangeably, I refer here to story as being 'all the elements which are to be depicted' and narrative as 'the showing or telling of those events and the mode selected for those events to take place' (Cobley 2014, 4).

My use of narrative and story is based on the constructivist premise that stories are actively made as opposed to passively found. This builds on Jerome Bruner's work which suggests that 'we organise our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on' (Bruner 1991, 4). I argue for the value in connecting narrative and story to concepts such as assemblage and entanglement, and for taking a mixed economy approach to how we teach our students in university film and media departments.

Moving beyond the monomyth

Whilst acknowledging that myths and the hero archetype are common to many, if not all, cultures across space and time, I draw on Bond and Christensen's critique of Joseph Campbell's work on the Hero's Journey. This critique sees Campbell's work as being a particular take on myth, constructed in a post-World War II North American context, focusing on one character and serving the interests of a singular point of view (Bond and Christensen 2021). The idea that this monomyth was picked up by Hollywood and turned into screenwriting rules for tapping into so called deep-seated human universals (e.g. McKee 1997) is well-rehearsed and has been critiqued elsewhere (e.g. Hambley 2020). However, what has been less discussed is the impact that this is having on university film and media departments at a time of, in the UK at least, increasing collaboration with industry partners. My contention is that this collaboration needs to be a two-way process, in order to avoid privileging commercially successful models like the Hero's Journey over wider debate incorporating other approaches.

My belief in the need to establish productive dialogue between academia and industry has led me to story consultant Jeff Gomez's work, which makes a compelling case that the individualistic aspects of the Hero's Journey are no longer fit for purpose. Instead, Gomez advocates for placing more emphasis on what he calls the 'Collective Journey' (Gomez 2017a). This represents 'a new type of story which in less than twenty years has taken us from the networked circle of the Hero's Journey to the instantaneous and hyper-energised dynamic of the lightning bolt' built on 'the kind of story where any audience member can suddenly alter at any point, start commenting on, participating in, or redirecting the narrative' (Gomez 2017b). It offers 'a narrative engine that lends itself to our non-linear, networked, omni-perspective digital age' (Gomez 2017a).

According to Gomez, 'we are living in a vast, living communal narrative' and 'our livelihoods and even our lives depend on us understanding this' (2017a). He argues that this new model for storytelling is coming into prominence 'because self-expression, self-organization, and mutual empowerment have become the most dynamic hallmarks in (the) digital age' (Gomez 2019). For him, the Collective Journey is an *evolution* of the Hero's Journey, as part of a progressive agenda through which we are learning, or re-learning, to move beyond individualism and work within communities towards the

collective good. With this comes a renewed interest in indigenous knowledge and a desire to connect the past, present and future in ways that can help us to focus our attention away from 'a hero defeating an antagonist' towards 'systems in need of repair' (Gomez 2017c).

Whilst I very much appreciate Gomez' search for an alternative to the Hero's Journey, he places this new model within the idea that digital media is now omnipresent, thus creating a technology driven approach to storytelling. I am also suspicious of the grand narrative of progress that underpins this, having been taught to be wary of teleological approaches to history which suggest a linear view of progress. Donna Haraway's work, on the other hand, provides an alternative to the Hero's Journey rather than an evolution of it. She argues that it is essential to move beyond anthropocentrism at a time of ecological crisis and that we need to decentre the human to create a more multispecies approach to our storytelling (Haraway 2019). As with Gomez, she argues that we need to go beyond narratives centred on a single heroic character triumphing against adversity to consider more communal approaches to collective problem solving.

Haraway's perspective embraces thinking about complexity drawn from quantum physics (Barad 2007), focusing on the entanglements of being *of* the world instead of the separation involved in being *in* the world (Haraway 2019). In spite of her interest in science fiction, we need to in her words 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway 2016) because 'the trouble' is not going to go away and, most importantly, there are no easy answers. This involves 'making kin' (2016) not just with our own kind but with the non-human as well, as a necessary and urgent act, as addressed in the documentary about her work *Storytelling for Earthly Survival* (Terranova 2016).

Haraway has been deeply influenced by the novelist Ursula Le Guin's work on *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (Le Guin 2019). In this essay, Le Guin disputes the idea that the spear was the earliest human tool, proposing that it was actually the receptacle. Instead of focusing on the spear's phallic, murderous logic, she tells the story of the carrier bag, the sling, the shell, or the gourd. For her, the idea of the spear coming before the vessel does not make sense. This is because 'sixty-five to eighty percent of what human beings ate in Paleolithic, Neolithic, and prehistoric times was gathered; only in the extreme Arctic was meat the staple food' (25).

Whilst the amount that was gathered over hunted is open to debate (Pontzer and Wood 2021), *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* helps to shift the way in which we as storytellers might look at humanity's foundations. It moves us away from just focusing on myths, which perform a very specific function, towards giving equal weight to other narratives of gathering, holding, and sharing. Unlike the spear, which follows a linear trajectory towards its target, the carrier bag is a container for a 'big heavy sack of stuff' (Le Guin 2019, 25). This 'redefines technology and science as primarily cultural carrier bag rather than weapon of domination' (36). It departs from the idea of history as a long line of victories instead buying into a view of history as told 'from below' (Lefebvre 1973), enabling stories to embrace the messiness of everyday life in all its diversity.

Experimental film traditions

In a Western context, experimental film is where such ideas have the most traction but this sits outside of the accepted business models for commercialised film and media

(Rees 1999). Whilst we may increasingly be seeing a general shift towards embracing diversity, by affording heroic qualities to a woman or to someone outside of the hetero-normative narrative (Warner 1991), it is also important to keep questioning our ongoing obsession with causality, conflict and drama. In order to do this, I believe that it is necessary to keep experimental storytelling approaches alive and well on university campuses, at a time when such approaches and traditions risk being undermined by the increasing commercialisation of higher education.

For example, Vietnamese experimental filmmaker Trinh T Minh-ha, explicitly challenges the conflict driven model of storytelling in her work. Her essayistic documentary *What About China?* (2022), which received the RAI Film Festival 2023 President's Award, takes the notion of harmony as a site of creative manifestation. In a personal conversation with her at the Festival, she confirmed that she sees harmony as being a much under-represented state in Western narratives. Drawing from footage shot in 1993 and 1994 in Eastern and Southern China, the film explores how traditional Chinese culture views conflict as something to be avoided because of the turmoil that it brings (Huang 2016). This again challenges the conflict driven model of narrative and suggests that it is less of a core universal trope than proposed by Campbell's work on The Hero's Journey.

Kishōtenketsu – a story told in four parts

Another example of a more nuanced approach to storytelling is the four-act structure found in Asia known as Kishōtenketsu. This is used in classical Chinese, Korean, and Japanese narratives, reinforcing Trin T Minha's ideas about harmony, as Kishōtenketsu is often mentioned as an example of a story structure without conflict. This does not mean there is no conflict, more that, in contrast to the Hero's Journey, it is not central to the development of the story. Kishōtenketsu instead relies on exposition and contrast to generate interest. The anticipation of the reader is encouraged 'less through expectations about future events and more toward an appreciation of the current situation' (Fernandes 2017, 5). The first act is **ki** signifying introduction, the second is **shō** signifying development, the third is ten signifying twist or complication, and the fourth is **ketsu** signifying conclusion or reconciliation.

Several commercially successful films directed by the Japanese filmmaker, Hayao Miyazaki are good examples of this – for example *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989) and *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988*)*. Both films contain elements of conflict but it is by no means the central force that drives the narrative forwards. Instead, the films focus on relatively harmonious relationships between humans, their environment and an enchanted magical realm. This again suggests that the Hero's Journey is far from being a universally applicable model and shows that there are different cultural approaches to storytelling which can be equally successful commercially. It is surely essential to make our students aware of these different approaches and to discuss their suitability across different contexts, even if they do not match the models which are ingrained in much industry practice, particularly within a Western context.

The contemporary commissioning landscape

Whilst these examples very much challenge the universality of storytelling templates, my observation is that the general commissioning landscape for film and television, at least in

the UK, mainland Europe and North America, is in danger of becoming ever more formulaic, in spite of the push towards EDI. In the documentary storytelling world, which I know most about, the emphasis by commissioners on using the three or five act dramatic structure to create engaging stories is more prevalent than it was in the past. With this in mind, I want to reference a special issue of the *Journal of World Records* on 'Beyond Story', which reinforces this point and asks 'since when did "story" become king?' (Juhasz and Lebow 2021). By 'story', the editors were very specifically referring to that of classical narrative and the three, five act dramatic story. The special issue contains articles from filmmakers who have been commissioned in recent years to make short films and have found the whole process extremely frustrating.

To quote one filmmaker who is included in the collection:

> I tend towards durational filmmaking … I am as much interested in communities and landscapes and animals and microbes and ecosystems, not just in individuals and their heroic journeys. Having gatekeepers tell me over and over again to change my approach to fit the extremely narrow and limiting formula of a film centering around a human being, on some kind of quest or undergoing some monumental life change full of conflict has deeply affected my way of thinking about the way to make films. (Carbonell 2021)

Given that Carbonell is keen to develop and explore approaches that are fit for purpose at a time when global warming concerns us all, we should surely be ensuring that we make sufficient space for this type of work in our university film and media departments.

Teaching students

What I have found in my undergraduate teaching is that there is an interest and openness amongst our students to alternative ways of thinking about narrative and story. However, this needs to be surfaced by lifting the lid off the box and giving the students permission to challenge the dominant narratives that are being pushed onto them. In my experience, our students are not used to being given this kind of permission, as their school curricular prior to coming to university are becoming ever more directed and prescriptive. This links to Ken Robinson's work on how our schools are killing creativity (Robinson 2006), whereby it is becoming ever more challenging to build the relationships of trust needed to give our students the space to question and think for themselves. This is troubling and runs counter to what I believe we should be doing in our university departments, which is enabling our students to make their own critically informed decisions about how they want to work with narrative and story.

I have taught experimental film within the first year of a three-year undergraduate filmmaking course for several years and my students have often commented on how interesting they found it and how many of them had never thought about film in this way before. However, whilst I have observed that specific techniques often find their way into their drama and documentary work, they rarely follow it up by exploring alternatives to tried and tested narrative structures. I think that this is influenced by what the gatekeepers from industry are telling them, with several students having said to me that, if they could make money doing it, they would definitely explore a wider range of approaches to their work. At a time where new business models are beginning to emerge, focused on sustainability and circular economics, we surely should be opening

up opportunities for dialogue with industry through a mixed economy approach to how we teach narrative and story.

This highlights how much the Hero's Journey, and other such attempts to find universal models for storytelling, have become inextricably linked to the commercial side of filmmaking. I wonder where this will settle in relation to the type of work that our students produce in the future. Will the industry evolve to once again accommodate a broader range of approaches or will it be business as usual? And what about audiences – will they be agents for change, in terms of broadening our understanding of narrative and story, or will they be happy to stick with the dominant structures which are all too often based in a particular reading of myth, whether steeped in individualism or adapted for more collective approaches?

I feel strongly that we have a responsibility as educators to navigate a path which teaches our students skills that will make them employable in the here and now whilst also entering into dialogue with them about the future. At the very least we should be looking at the specific post-war cultural context out of which Campbell's take on The Hero's Journey monomyth emerged (Bond and Christensen 2021), in order to consider a broader range of approaches to dramatic narrative. I am, however, in favour of going one step further than this, by raising awareness among our students of other non-dramatic approaches as well. This would give them a broader range of options and enable them to make their own active choices, perhaps even helping to shape the industry contexts in which many of them will find themselves working.

Anthropological perspectives

Another way into these issues is through anthropology, which is my specialism. The anthropologist Levi Strauss' influential thinking around deep and surface structures can be said to have contributed to the rise of the monomyth, through his focus on binary oppositions. These reinforced ideas of heroes and villains, good and bad, winners and losers and so forth. In his structural analysis of myth, he proposed that there is a universal reality in the unconscious regularity of the human mind that transcends cultural specificity. He proposed the idea of surface and deep structures, whereby the surface structure is the cultural approach to the narrative and the deep structure is the more fundamental explanation of that narrative (Levi-Strauss 1963).

Whilst I am not suggesting that commonalities felt at a deep level do not exist, what I am suggesting is that we should be wary of privileging these ideas about deep structures over all other ways of thinking about narrative and story. Big corporations such as The Walt Disney Studios and Warner Brothers are doing exactly this, creating set storytelling structures and styles that dominate our cultural landscape and limit our thinking. Whilst these approaches have their place, it is important to understand them for what they are and to make spaces for other approaches too. In an increasingly multipolar world (Peters 2023) it is important to acknowledge the rise of powerful alternatives to the Hollywood studio system, such as Hengdian World Studios in Dongyang and Ramoji Film City in Hyderabad.

The 'ontological turn' within anthropology (Holgraad and Pedersen 2017) is contributing to this debate through its call to move beyond a representational framework in which cultures are treated as systems of belief that provide different perspectives on a single

world. Rather than just looking at multiple points of view, at surface structures which reflect a common deep structure, the ontological turn proposes that worlds themselves and not just worldviews may vary. An example of this is Edwardo Viveiros de Castro's work on Amerindian perspectivism (De Castro 1998) which addresses the way in which humans, animals and spirits see themselves and one another in Amazonia. His research suggests the possibility of a redefinition of the classical categories of 'nature', 'culture' and 'supernature' based shifting perspectives or points of view.

This connects to the related concept of the 'pluriverse' (Escobar 2018) which allows for the co-existence of plural meanings and connotations. Instead of looking at truth as a noun, for example, it can be considered as a verb – as something which shifts through a constant process of 'becoming'. In Iroquois culture, the 'being' in human being is an active verb whereas in the discourse of Western science and rationality it is seen as a noun. The former suggests that humans are constantly in flux and opens up a porosity or continuity between the human and the non-human, whereas the latter is a more fixed way of looking at humanity – focusing on inner essence or core personality, which separates us out from the non-human. This reveals multiple ways of being that are not based on binaries, providing further evidence that the hero's journey is not a universalising principle for narrative and story.

That said, in the spirit of being open to a mixed economy approach to narrative and story, I do not believe that it invalidates it. The *Star Wars* franchise (1977-), for example, is an extremely popular and commercially successful example of the Hero's Journey and I have nothing per se against that. If, however, commercial imperatives are allowed to dominant our university departments, then this will start to stifle other equally, and in certain contexts more pertinent, approaches. For me, it is entirely possible to both accommodate classical dramatic narrative and to critique it. This involves taking an 'and and' approach to ideas, as opposed to an 'either or' approach, and is the thinking behind 'metamodernism' which works on a philosophy of addition as opposed to replacement (Hill 2020) that I have elaborated on elsewhere (e.g. Aston 2022).

Our responsibility as educators

I believe that it is important to take a metamodern approach with our students whilst situating this within the varying degrees of employment opportunities that different approaches may afford. This entails giving our students the skills to navigate their way not just through getting their first jobs but through making active choices as they move through their careers. We should not just be saying 'this is how it has always been done, this is what you need to do to get work in the industry' which, after all, is also in flux and in need of this dialogic approach too. This flux is due not just to cultural and environmental changes, with demands coming from a renewed interest in indigenous cultures, as well as the *#MeToo* and *#Black Lives Matter* movements, but it is also coming as Gomez clearly states (Gomez 2017a) from technological changes.

One only has to look at a much-studied platform like YouTube (e.g. Mostafa, Feizollah, and Badrul Anuar 2023) to see that narrative and story are playing out in ways that are different from what we see in the cinema or on television. My contention is that narratives on platforms like YouTube are more lateral and relational than linear and dramatic. YouTube playlists enable ideas to be broken down into a series of shorter films which

build on each other not necessarily in a linear way, making the sum bigger than its parts. YouTube afficionados can spend many hours moving from one video and indeed one playlist to another. I would strongly suggest that they do not need dramatic narrative to keep them engaged, as there is something else about the mediality of the platform and their intrinsic interest/curiosity in the content that is keeping them engaged.

Given this, I think that YouTube is not just a platform which is contributing to a reduction in our attention spans (Mark 2023) but is also a platform where lateral and relational thinking are being developed. I believe this to be particularly relevant to our current Generation Z students, who have grown up with this platform. How this will play out over time and in relation to other platforms is impossible to say but it is worth noting, not least because it flies in the face of dramatic narrative and Hero's Journey theories. As previously stated, this is not about replacing one platform or approach with another but is more about creating a mixed economy in which different approaches can flourish and indeed feed into each other.

The polyphonic documentary project

As someone who has always taken a dialogical approach to their teaching, I have set up a project on Polyphonic Documentary[4] with a like-minded colleague from my work with interactive documentary, Stefano Odorico. What we are doing with this project is working collectively with members of the i-docs community[5], many of whom are university teachers themselves, who have signed up to join us on the social media platform Discord. We are exploring together interactive documentary methods and practices though a series of collective reading sessions and small-scale projects. These small-scale projects are exploratory and are designed to increase our understanding and awareness of possibilities, as well as our literacy with the tools. We are working with the core idea of polyphony – to see what evolving platforms and tools can bring to debates about multiperspectivity within the documentary field, also bringing the ontological turn and ideas about the pluriverse into these debates.

In particular we are looking at what kinds of narrative and storytelling these tools and platforms can afford, as well as at instances where a non-narrative or anti-narrative approach is more appropriate. This is within the context of our belief in the need to create approaches that are fit for purpose in the light of climate emergency and increasing ideological polarisation. We are drawing directly on literary theory in this project by working with Bakhtin's ideas about heteroglossia and the polyphonic novel (Bakhtin 1984). This in turn opens our work up to consideration of the multiple and to contemporary thought about assemblage, building on Deleuze and Guattari's seminal text, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987).

Within this project, there is much discussion about the relationship between narrative, story and assemblage. Some within the group say that assemblage is not compatible with narrative and story, building on Miles' work in computational non-fiction (Miles 2016), whereas I argue that much of this debate is grounded in a very specific view of story which is based on classical narrative. I take issue with the idea that all stories simplify and are structured according to a closed causal system. This suggests that storytellers always need to have a rational worked out understanding of plot when, in fact, there are any number of narratives and stories that are much more open-ended than this.

Can we really say, for example that *Othello* (Shakespeare c 1603) or *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevsky 1866) are simplified causal stories or that oral storytelling forms and indeed many television soap operas do not engage with messy entanglements? Indeed, Keats wrote about 'negative capability' in relation to Shakespeare's work describing his immense ability to 'accept uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Keats 1899, 277). Likewise, Bakhtin wrote of the 'polyphonic novel' when analysing Dostoevsky's work which he described as being 'constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness … but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other' (Bakhtin 1984, 18).

I have written about Bakhtin's work previously explaining how polyphony challenges the monological authorial voice. I have explained how the polyphonic novel is 'able to draw the authoritative into question, allowing what was once considered certain to be debated and open to interpretation' (e.g. Aston 2022, 11). This aligns well with the principles behind my approach to interactive documentary, which is 'to promote openness and resistance to causal linearity' (11). Given this more nuanced approach to narrative and story, I align with the idea that 'assemblage theory points to complex, catalytic interactions that might open up further key lines of enquiry to narrative analysis'. This offers the prospect of 'further elaborating the key processes by which human social assemblages are composed and decomposed' (McHugh 2018, abstract).

Applying these ideas to teaching

The question is how to incorporate these ideas into teaching in a way that prepares our students for employment and gives them good awareness of the ever-changing landscape within which stories are developed and told. If anything, the pace of change is accelerating, with artificial intelligence being the latest disruptive technology affecting the industry. I also think that we will be hearing a lot more about different approaches to narrative and story led by different cultural perspectives, not only from within minority communities but also from emerging centres of power. I think that this will continue to challenge the hegemony of the monomyth and that it is incumbent upon us as teachers to continue to embrace this through our collaborations with industry, in order to promote curiosity around different approaches.

With this in mind, I am currently working on how best to bring my work with polyphonic documentary back into my teaching. During lockdown, I set up a project for my undergraduate students on our experimental film module to work with the interactive narrative authoring tool developed by the Bristol-based start-up, *Stornaway*.[6] This was a departure from the students' usual focus on what Janet Murray calls uni-sequential formats (Murray 2018, 12) which play through in a set order from beginning to end. It has not always been this way, as our Filmmaking degree used to be a degree in Filmmaking and Creative Media and prior to that a degree in Time-based Media, which put a dialogue between uni-sequential and more assemblage ways of working at the heart of our teaching (Aston 1999).

Times change, however, with the film and television industry having shifted in recent years away from all things interactive towards more of a focus on immersive technology

which is more about presence than agency. This is shifting again, however, as interest in choice-based interactive narrative among the film and television industry is once again growing. Netflix's work on *Bandersnatch* (2018*)* has been influential here, as is the growing trend towards multiperspectival storytelling which has more than one main character (Gomez 2017c). Although currently developing my work with interactive narrative primarily through my research and my PhD students, I still keep my hand-in on the Filmmaking BA Honours degree. The project with Stornaway[7] is a good example of this, along with bringing my thoughts about evolving storytelling practices into one of the main narrative modules.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to reinforce my point that the monomyth of the Hero's Journey is a particular take on dramatic narrative, which has received a lot of traction within commercial film and media production but is by no means the only model. I have argued that, whilst film and media storytelling consultants are starting to embrace new thinking around collective storytelling, much of this is still in response to Joseph Campbell's work on myth. Though packaged as being universally applicable, it is culturally specific. There is much to learn from taking a more expansive approach to narrative and story, as I have argued through my engagement with debates in anthropology and literary theory. I have used these debates to argue for the importance of exploring evolving practices and cross-cultural contexts with our students at a time when I believe that the global challenges that we are facing urgently demand this.

Whilst I am all for collaboration between academia and industry, my view is that it needs to be grounded in dialogue and two-way collaboration. Without this, we risk becoming servants to short-term industry needs, closing off possibilities for more blue-sky thinking. This would undermine years of creative work and independence of thought nurtured in university film and media departments, which I believe to be an important part of our cultural and economic landscape. Such practices are very much needed in times of flux where creative problem-solving skills and an openness to a variety of approaches to narrative and story is surely becoming ever more necessary.

Notes

1. Defined by the Pew Research Center as being anyone born from 1997 onwards: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/
2. Certainly in the UK, if not elsewhere
3. Co-founder of i-Docs 2011- (i-docs,org), Chair of RAI Film Committee 2021- (https://www.therai.org.uk/committees/film-committee), Co-convenor of Polyphonic Documentary Project 2020- (polyphonicdocumentary.com)
4. polyphonicdocumentary.com
5. An international community of researchers and practitioners interested in the evolving practices of interactive and immersive documentary established through my work as Co-founder of i-Docs (i-Docs.org)
6. https://www.stornaway.io/
7. This collaboration is summarised here: https://www.stornaway.io/press-release-uwe-bristol-partners-with-stornaway-io-to-teach-students-interactive-filmmaking/

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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