



Iowa Research Online
The University of Iowa's Institutional Repository

Department of Teaching and Learning Publications

4-14-2009

Graphic Historiography: A qualitative research project using Visual Art as a Method for Inquiry and Understanding

Rachel Marie-Crane Williams
University of Iowa

Copyright © 2009 Rachel Marie-Crane Williams

Hosted by Iowa Research Online. For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

A Graphic Historiography of the Detroit Race Riot of 1943

The purpose of this paper is to reflexively explore the process of combining images, stories, and research into a graphic historiography about the Detroit Race Riots of 1943 as a method for qualitative research. The questions I address are as follows: Is the graphic text an appropriate form for qualitative inquiry? How does the genre of graphic novels function to provide opportunities for readers to create new meanings and interpret historical events? How does this work fit under arts based research methods described by Sullivan (2004), Crouch (2006), Bell (2007) and Eisner and Barone (2006). What comparisons can be drawn between the uses of film, poetry, creative non-fiction, and graphic texts in qualitative research?

Perspective(s) or theoretical framework: Telling stories that matter

The framework for this research is taken from narrative theory, interpretive research, and feminist methods of qualitative research. In constructing the text about the Detroit Race Riots, I chose narratives from different participants in order to tell a story that uncovers why race matters and how the stories that participants in the events tell of the riot offer an opportunity to examine the social, economic, and cultural pressures that gave way to violence on the eve of the end to World War II and the beginning of the American civil rights movement. Within this project I have chosen accounts from a variety of residents in Detroit as well as responses to the riot published by scholars in the 1940s and later. Many of these sources are taken from the archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University.

According to Cheryl Glen (2000) and others,

Historiography's central question is not "true" or "false." Instead, historiography asks us to consider questions of knowledge (in what context is it produced and normalized? whom does it benefit?), ethics (to what/whom are these practices accountable? what/whom do they privilege?), and power (what practices might produce historical remembrances? what are the effects of such representations?). At the nexus of these questions reside issues of historical evidence: What counts? What is available? Who provided and preserved it-and why? How and to what end has it been used? And by whom? Thus history is not frozen, not merely the past. It provides an approachable, disruptable ground for engaging and transforming traditional memory or practice in the interest of both the present and the future. (p. 389)

Robert Rosenstone (1988), in an effort to reconcile the experience of working in film as a historian writes, "Despite the success of our new methodologies, I fear that as a profession we know less and less how to tell stories that situate us meaningfully in a value-laden world. Stories that matter to people outside our profession. Stories that matter to people inside the profession. Stories that matter at all" (p. 1175). He goes on to write, "Now it seems time for such a "shift in perspective," one occasioned by the opportunity to represent the world in images and words rather than in words alone, to touch history. Doing so will open us to new notions of the past, make us ask once more the questions about what history can or cannot be. About what history is for. About why we want to know about the past and what we will do with that knowledge" (p.1184). One of the goals

of this project is to heighten awareness of social history and transform the way that readers see culture and their place within a larger narrative of history. The use of a literary genre instead of a traditional research paper to do this can be affective. Schwab (2001) writes, "Literature facilitates the process of self-making (autopoiesis)" (p.163). She urges readers to consider a transformational model of literature that engages all of the senses of readers by providing evocative abstractions of experience. These abstractions have the power to transform an "inner object" (perception, experience, concept, or idea,) of the reader or even to create an "inner object" that did not previously exist. She names this symbolic resignification.

Art and Qualitative Research

As a researcher and artist I often experience a sense of "ontological insecurity" (Becker, 2002). In order to assuage this constant questioning I have turned to work that satisfies my need to conduct deep research spurred by meaningful questions and represent that experience through image, text, and story. These three elements are interrelated; they are interdependent and combine to create new meaning. Elliot Eisner wrote, "What artistic approaches seek is to exploit the power of form to inform" (1981, p. 7).

The form I have chosen to "exploit" is that of the graphic novel. Non-fiction graphic texts have been rapidly rising in popularity for the past ten years. Titles such as *Palestine* (Sacco, 2002), *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2004), *Macedonia* (Pekar, Roberson, and Piskor, 2007) and, and *King* (Anderson and Crouch, 2005) explore private and public history through a skillful weaving of image, story, and text. These texts are powerful and accessible documents, which tell culturally informed stories, explore complexity, and present new ways of understanding events. They allow readers to make choices about the way they read a text and offer more flexibility than line-by-line traditional texts. The aesthetic experience of viewing/reading images and writing within graphic texts can enhance the empathy of readers in ways that traditional qualitative research may not. Candace Jesse Stout, a professor at Ohio State University stated, "It is the aesthetic experience that makes possible "privileged moments" through which students can live new experiences and move beyond the limitations of self." (Stout, 1999, p.34)

Can this be considered legitimate qualitative research? If so how would I explain the rationale for my methodology? In the past twenty years a number of scholars in the arts and social sciences have sought to answer the question of how to name the intersection where art and research overlap. Some focus on the process of production, others focus on the outcomes of and the life of the "text" beyond the studio, still others are interested not in the ideas pursued through the text but the final product as an object or image, while others see the only way for visual arts to include art in qualitative research is through the work of scholars who *write* about the visual arts, not *make* non-linguistic work.

Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry

It would be easy to label this project arts based research, but like any label in the field of research methodology with naming comes a quagmire of definitions, methods, and motivations. Eisner and Barone (2006) contend that Arts Based Research (ABR), "is engaged in a purpose often associated with artistic activity." They go on to say that ABR

is primarily concerned with enhancing activities that are educational in character. The second criterion of ABR is that it is infused with certain aesthetic qualities related to the form it takes. Their second criterion refers specifically to using particular formats and language associated with genres other than traditional qualitative research writing. These are used to generate empathy, broaden readership, and provide varied perspectives.

Eisner and Barone (2006) also state their criteria for evaluation of ABR. First it must illuminate that which has previously gone unnoticed, second the work should be judged by the questions it generates. They specifically state that it must raise more questions than it answers. They both advocate for the work that pinpoints significant issues that are educational in nature. The final feature in ABR is the generalizability of the text. They ask, "Does the research have legs? Does it enable the reader to make connections that had not been made before?" (p. 102).

Graeme Sullivan (2004) makes a case that the visual arts are a form of valid research. He explains that while the arts do not follow the traditional positivistic method of social science research, that they in fact can achieve the same goals by following a different path. Desmond Bell (2006) as scholar from the UK in Media Studies, photography, and film, might possibly critique Sullivan's text by pointing out that it is similar in its approach to a number of academics who make art.

As we have argued, the research activities of artists and media makers undertaken prior to a creative project and integral to its successful realisation, has as its specific focus the development of that project. It is not primarily concerned with arriving at generalisable conclusions about art and design practice per se nor with the nomological concerns that motivate the natural sciences. Nor is critical reflection on artists' research activity concerned with elaborating context free methodological precepts, though it may be concerned, as Kathryn Grushta suggests, with facilitating the, 'emergent complexity of concepts, refinement of art making techniques and a unity within a shared aesthetic understanding' (361). (p. 89)

Bell also goes on to discuss two paradigms that academics have used to qualify their art practice as "research". One involves a harsh critique of David Newbury's approach using the deductive nomological model.

This philosophically discredited, historically ill-informed and ethically dubious model has been subjected to damning critique for fifty years within critical theories of knowledge. It is somewhat ironic that it is now being off-loaded in bargain basement form (with the deductive-nomological requirement softened) to the world of art and design research. (p. 92)

The second approach, which Bell highlights, is characterized as romantic. He uses an essay by Erik Knutsen in which Knutsen places an emphasis on the acts of creation and expression as the key components in the practice of art as research. Bell presents these two ideas side by side to show the spectrum of scholars who have justified the practice of art as form of research equivalent to the work of the academic counterparts in the liberal arts.

Christopher Crouch (2007), a scholar of cultural theory in Australia, proposes a "hybridized research system" in the visual arts that can offset the claim that creative research in the visual arts is essentially narcissistic because it "operates outside the

dominant institutional discourse” (p. 111). He calls for visual artists in academia to engage in praxis; specifically he points to the work of Habermas and his ideas of performative acts and the work of Anthony Giddens (1991) and his ideas related to reflexivity. He sees the process of creating art as an engagement in what Habermas would call a communicative act with emancipatory potential that is not only personally significant to the creator but also ethically and socially important.

In light of these examples it is difficult to label this particular work. On one hand I have used traditional qualitative research methods, the difference is in the data analysis and presentation. I sought common themes and patterns but also ways to express those patterns, describe settings, situations, and individuals using visual images instead of thick description. Through drawing I added context for the reader of the text by “fleshing out” the storytellers, their body language, setting, and appearance.

Most research involving comics is about comics and graphic novels and does not exploit the form to present findings. While this is not a new genre and the conventions have been established it has not been widely used as a method for the dissemination of qualitative scholarship. The questions raised in this paper are important to address as the academic community leans toward a more interdisciplinary approach to scholarship and addresses the ways in which our culture has been driven by the visual. In research the “Illustration is often used as an example of an idea rather than an expression of the idea itself” (Goin, 2001, p. 365). There is a good deal of potential to tell stories that matter in ways that are culturally and personally transformative for readers/viewers using interdependent images, qualitative research, and text. While many qualitative researchers may be intimidated by the act of drawing or making images, for some it may be a more effective way to tell stories such as that of the Detroit Race Riot of 1943.

References:

- Anderson, H. & Crouch, S. (2005) *King*. Seattle: Fantagraphic Books.
- Becker, C. (2002). *Surpassing the spectacle*. Boston: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Bell, D. (2006). Creative film and media practice as research: In pursuit of that obscure object of knowledge. *Journal of Media Practice Vol. 7 No. 2*, 85-100.
- Crouch, C. (2007). Praxis and the reflective creative practitioner. *Journal of Visual Art Practice Volume 6 Number 2*, 105-114.
- Eisner, E. & Barone, P. (2006). Arts-based educational research. In Green, J., Camili, G. and Elmore, P. (Eds.), *Handbook of complimentary methods in education research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Eisner, E. (1981). On the difference between scientific and artistic approaches to qualitative research. *Educational Researcher, Vol.10, No.4 (April, 1981)*. 5-9.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Glenn, C. (2000). Truth, Lies, and Method: Revisiting Feminist Historiography.

College English, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Jan., 2000), 387-389.

Goin, P. (2001). Visual literacy. *Geographical Review, Vol 91. No. ½. 363-369*

Pekar, H., Roberson, H., & Piskor, E. (2007). *Macedonia*. New York: Villard Press.

Rosenstone, R. (1988). History in images/history in words: Reflections on the possibility of really putting history onto film. *The American Historical Review, Vol. 93, No. 5 (Dec., 1988), 1173-1185.*

Sacco, J. (2002). *Palestine*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics books.

Satrapi, M. (2004). *Persepolis: The story of a childhood*. New York: Pantheon books.

Schwab, G. (2001). Cultural texts and endopsychic scripts. *SubStance, Vol. 30, No. 1/2, Issue 94/95, 160-176.*

Stout, C. J. (1999). The art of empathy: Teaching students to care.

The Journal of Art Education, 52 (2), 21-24,33-34.

Sullivan, G. (2004), *Art practice as research: Inquiry in the visual arts*. New York: Columbia Teachers College.