Fotonovela and Collaborative Storytelling:
Researching the Spaces between Image, Text, and Body

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In a CBC radio broadcast on July 26, 2005 the now deceased Jane Jacobs, an influential theorist on urban planning, spoke about the role that storytelling and anecdote play in social understanding. A writer with no degree or teaching position whose views on the livability of cities and on the humane responsibilities that come with affluence in society, Jacobs ideas have guided city planners and presidents. In the interview she suggested that the human textures and openness to interpretation typical of anecdotal evidence were often a far more effective vehicle for communicating complexities like 'city life' than were the distilled abstractions associated with scientific explanation. An important dimension of city life and societies generally today that has become especially pointed in the United States because of post-911 border anxieties is the experience of immigrants and refugees in their adopted country. This paper describes a convergence of people, media and creative research processes that focuses on the possibility of seeing the images and hearing the voices…of recognizing the embodied languages…of immigrant children in a Canadian inner-city school.

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The relationship between word and image is complex."Starting with its first words, [Aritstotle's] *Metaphysics* associates sight with knowledge", writes Jacques Derrida (1983) explaining how sight is given preference over the other senses and "provides us with more to know than any other; indeed it unveils countless differences" (*Diacritics*, p. 4). In calling up the possibility of "countless differences", Derrida gestures toward the impossibility of representing, through signifying systems, all the eye sees/knows. He is not alone in choosing a multi-layered ambiguity over a preference for a reductive linguistic model of understanding visual imagery. Jacques Lacan argues that the prediscursive "jouissance" still permeates the the visuality of the letter (Zizek, p. 38). Thinkers such as Stuart Hall, Norman Bryson, Roland Barthes, Victor Burgin, Susan Sontag, Walter Benjamin, Guy Dubord, Dick Hebdige and Michel Foucault are all to some extent concerned with how and to what degree images are understood as a 'language'. Foucault (1983) for instance, sees this tension between word or text and image as one of "the oldest oppositions of our alphabetic civilization, to show and to name, to shape and to say, to reproduce and to articulate, to imitate and to signify, to look and to read" (p. 21). In his book about René Magritte's painting of the famous pipe with the words "*C'eci n'est pas une pipe*" underneath but on the canvas, Foucault describes how the thing and the words cancel each other out in this *rendering* of a moment of misrecognition where one cannot complain that "the text is ruled by the image (painting where a book is represented) or the image is ruled by the text (books with drawings completing the message)": here one cannot say, "subordination is required" (Foucault, p.

32). He admits, however, that this hierarchy where either the figure submits to discourse or discourse to the figure is not a stable relationship. As W.T.J. Mitchell (1994) notes, "we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is…and what is to be done about them" (*Picture theory*, p. 13). While Debray emphasizes the visible is not readable: "an image is finally and forever enigmatic, no 'moral of the story' possible" (1995, p. 60). The essential ambiguity held suspended in the abyss between what one can "show and name, shape and say" becomes a space of possibility, a playground where "countless differences can be unveiled" and new ways of comprehension may be created.

Photography as the foundation for our contemporary array of imaging technologies as well as a key tool in arts-based teaching and research (Prosser, 1998) plays many important roles in communicating contemporary experiences of complexity. Since its beginnings as a convergence of chemistry, physics and an artful desire to supplement and represent human vision, photography has been a mixed bag and a mixed blessing. A minor publishing industry has been built around anthologizing the diverse thoughts of the amateurs and professionals, hucksters and altruists, artists and scientists who collectively make it clear that the tool of the camera has always been too much for one purpose[1]. If the last 100 years are the period when "modernist visuality wants nothing more than to be the display of reason, of the rationalized, the coded, the abstracted, the law" (Krauss, 1993, p. 22),(in essense, to be a language) then maybe photography has also been too much for modernity and the 20th century. Philosopher, Vilém Flusser (2000) sees photography at the center of a complex communication universe where "the relationship of the subject to the text (textolatry) and to the image (idolatry) [have each come to be] determined by magic and ritual" (Von Amelunxen 2000, p.91). In Flusser's new universe (Flusser, 2000, p.65) the technical image of the photograph serves as a post-industrial model for our necessary struggles between the magical, functional and conceptual as dimensions of meaning.

Into this complex landscape Fotonovela, the photo-based comic book with its 60 year history as a sometimes lurid, accessible form of popular literature brings together the elements of written text, photo-document and manipulated aesthetic object. Always a form of popular adult literature, the fotonovela is linked by some with historietas, illustrated cartoon retellings of popular novels, that have been available in Mexico since early in the 20th century. With the growth of film as a form of entertainment, fotonovelas, photographic variations of the historieta, appeared in Mexico and the rest of Latin America as well as in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Quebec (Levy Reed, 1998)(Curiel, 2001). Though fotonovelas are still vilified by some[2] because the subject-matter and style are designed for popular consumption, for many others they serve the multiple purposes of a rich visual-literary form. Among contemporary artists who have explored the form an exemplar is the work of Los Angeles-based Chicano artist Harry Gamboa Jr.(2006) whose fotonovelas blend identity, politics, relationships and philosophy in a sort of photo-graphic poetry. As with many pop or pulp forms, fotonovelas continue to be questioned as representations of gender and culture. For some the stories and gender roles reinforce problematic traditions (Ojeda-Cardenas, R. 1983), for others these same publications serve as a vehicle for supporting hispanic immigrant culture in the US (Avila, 1999).

If we take *rendering* in Zizek's (1991) sense -- as something that standing in contrast to the depicted – the message as form itself, not imitating or representing but *rendering* immediately the experience. We can apply it to re-view the fotonovela, an art form in the tradition of photo-narrative that Chellet (1998) calls "the most underestimated genus of graphic art" (p. 11). In her historical overview, Chellet acknowledges the shared claims of Mexico and Italy as originary places for the fotonovela. Tracing its rise and popularity from the forties through the nineties she observes some of the special qualities of this art form. Chellet writes,

> From the beginning the fotonovela resorted to photmontage as a graphic
> and narrative resource, which allowed it to seem photographically factual
> while simultaneously creating a fantastic and surrealistic atmosphere.
> (p. 11)

The surreal atmosphere arises from the interplay between photography, artistic alterations, and text. Each modality calling to be attended to as representative, interpretive, and communicative respectively produces a true "*mixta* style" (Chellet, p. 12) where readers must respond. The mobile weaving incorporates readers, enchanting and entertaining them at the same time as challenging them to interact and insert themselves into the visuo-literary event. Concluding, Chellet bemoans the disappearance of "FotoTelenovelas" in the mid nineties and "nearly all other subgenres" including the fotonovela and calls for further analysis and study of "this misunderstood creature". She states, "few semiologists, intellectuals, or researchers have studied it. Regardless of its commercial success and social importance in Mexico, it is still surrounded by ethnic and aesthetic prejudice" (p. 12).

In her 2005 book, *Places of learning: Media, architecture, and pedagogy*, Elizabeth Ellsworth finds "A new order of learning is emerging out of a convergence of 'oral, literate and video [or visual] conduct in our society'" (p. 121). This article describes a further dimension that has been brought to the fotonovela, its function as an important support for innovations in literacy and research. The work of Gamboa and other activist artists have been noticed by educators. The fotonovela is recognized as a mechanism for new literacy (Aparici, 1992)(Santos, 1991) as well as a vehicle for libratory social interventions: (Dow y Garcia Velarde, 1999)(Barndt & Cristall 1982). It is inspired, as well, by the work of Paolo Freire (2005) that drew from Marxist theory to argue the need for literacy and liberatory interventions to be guided by the people rather than the pedagogues.

Along with this diverse range of purposes, the research presented here is also significantly influenced by the growing ease in producing, manipulating and composing photographic publications. Though the children who collaborated with this research project came from diverse circumstances, all of them adapted to digital photography very quickly, if they hadn't experienced it before. This facility in giving their stories form made possible by digital technologies was significant on several levels. In terms of images, page organization and text, the kids were free to experiment, make suggestions and change their minds because the images could be changed so easily. In terms of feeling that the work they were doing was meaningful, graphically, the stories could stand beside textbooks and other commercial resources that are a foundation of authority in the classroom (Apple, 1991). Flusser (2000) writes about both the danger and the opportunities in contemporary technical images. He suggests that the flood of

photographs in the media are cheap texts that can serve to make us functionaries of the technical image. He also critiques the specialized language of the academy, calling it 'magic' and limited in its usefulness because of how isolated it has become. Somewhere in between the banal and the esoteric are the critical, but accessible meanings that Flusser feels are possible with photography. The fotonovelas produced by the children, below, create a critical tension between the technical, the photographic, the page as form and the text that forces the reader to balance simple consumption with important questions. These stories are both critical and accessible.

In a School

This specific fotonovela project began as a photography club for a grade 4 class. The children had the chance to borrow simple digital cameras during lunch recess. About 20 minutes of shooting with a variety of purposes (friends, interesting spots on the playground, games, fights, disgusting garbage, cool cars driving by, how many pictures can I take in 20 minutes? etc.) often satisfied the young participants. A small group of children, who became the core research team, self-identified because they kept coming back when the club was in session. These children were all recent immigrants to Canada. Some had lived in refugee camps, others had come from somewhat less complicated situations. Each of them had recent memories of entering an unfamiliar school with little or no background in the language of instruction. Once a group with extended interest in photography was identified they were invited to develop themes (life on the playground, me pretending to be…, etc.) to guide their image-making. The children learned to shoot with a purpose and to digitally print and organize their work. The idea of sequencing photographs was introduced as a game. Given a three-frame storyboard, a photograph of theirs was placed in the center frame and then they were invited to draw, write or photograph what happened before and what happened after[3]. Anna Kirova, as an early childhood researcher with special interests in immigrant children's experiences (Kirova, 2001; Kirova & Wu 2002), led this group through a conversation about their first day in a Canadian school. Part of the interview process involved taking roles and physically acting out that day as the new kid, as the 'veteran' students in the classroom, and as the adult parents and teachers. Using the remote capture feature of a Canon® digital camera and a computer so that everyone could participate in the 'studio' photography process, we created tableau photographs of those first day memories.

Between photoclub sessions I took the collaboratively created digital images and applied a simple (Photoshop® 'cutout') filter to them. The intention in doing this was twofold. I wanted to make the photos cartoonish so that the children would be able see them as iconic (that's the new kid) as well as indexical (that's me)(Emme & Kirova, 2005). I also wanted to protect the children's anonymity without losing the details of body language that were an important part of my colleague's research into immigrant children and the challenges of nonverbal communication in a new cultural context. When the kids next met they saw their photos laid out in the storyboard sequence they had experimented with. Each was given a sheet of cartoon thought and speech bubbles and was invited to write, cut and paste to give words and thoughts to anyone in the pictures. The results were fotonovelas that expressed some of the hopes and fears of these young photographers (see figure 1).

One of the consequences of this first fotonovela was a shared understanding among these seven children about the challenge of being so new in a Canadian school. When asked if they could imagine creating a fotonovela for the next group of new kids that might come to the school several themes were quickly suggested focusing on the lunch routine, making friends on the playground and bullying.

The second fotonovela began with the kids researching and documenting their own experience of food. They took digital cameras home and photographed their family food. In looking at each other's pictures and explaining their family meals, topics ranged from belief systems and eating restrictions, through the perception of food as beautiful or ugly, to the school rules on junk food. With all of this in mind, the group decided to tell the 'official' story of the lunchtime routine. A collective paper and pencil brainstorming session resulted in a very elaborate storyboard that guided the photographic process and resulted in an 8-page comic (see figure 2). This time a graduate student in Drama education was involved in the collective physical enactments of the tableau stage. Again the kid's were involved in cropping and laying out the pictures as well as adding thoughts, words and text labels. With this young group some of their initial text included critical comments about school food, but they did not want those comments included in their final collective work.

The final example included here was an exploration of playground life. All of the kids talked about the difficulty of getting into a game on the playground when you are new. Figure 3 shows a version of a story that several of the students (with support from a trusted elementary teacher and a drama instructor) produced on this theme in just two lunchtime photo club sessions. In this case, after the story was complete, Anna and I asked the students if we could present their fotonovela to another group of children. We did so after removing all of the text balloons. This new group of students was invited to look at the body language depicted in the photographs and to use their own added text balloons to show what they understood was going on. The resulting readings ranged from empathetic to quite harsh reflections on power and relationships on the playground. The range of these stories was a strong indication of the challenges created by non-verbal communication when students bring such a diversity of life experiences with them to school.

Conclusion

In human subjects research the notion of triangulation, of observing and recording from multiple perspectives, is offered as an antidote to researcher biases (Stake, 2005). Having served as the metaphor for human perception (Crary, 1993) and the model for the limitations of both the Enlightenment and Modernism (Stafford, 1996), images, and particularly technical images, are now understood as a mobile, complicating response to the limitations to the reductive effects of linear thinking. Whether introduced as visual phenomenology in the sciences (Ihde,1998); a reconceptualization of Critical Theory from the perspective of geography and spaciality (Soja, 1989); or the radicalization of educational research based on the complexity of the photograph (Lather, 1994)(Pink, 2001) the camera plays a part in introducing multiple perspectives to research. The fotonovela is an important form for exploring and communicating experience. By combining words with obviously manipulated photographs in a fotonovela, three literacies (the first millenial, premodern magic of the hand-made object; the second

millenial modern magic of the word/text; and the third millenial, postmodern magic of the technical image) function at once. Each form of expression adds to and critiques the other. The elements and structures of the photographic narrative format of the fotonovela, including color, perspective, framing, and composition can communicate meanings interdependent with and independent from the words. As a form of cultural collaboration between the researcher and the participants, telling researched stories using the fotonovela form does not merely translate verbal into visual representations but constructs a hybrid photo-image-text as a type of new knowledge that changes the way of seeing and has the potential to change the author's and the reader's self-understanding.

Endnotes

1. While the lived experiences of people with cameras is an unfathomably complex web of meanings and purposes, published reflection on that complexity ranges from original critique (Barthes, 1981; Lury, 1998), to anthologized samplings with a European focus (Phillips, 1989); and theory that investigates the technology as a metaphor that we have used to define ourselves (Coleman 198?) to theory that uses the metaphors of mirrors and light to destabilize our understanding of the medium (Miles, 2005); to histories that acknowledge the discrete and overlapping influences of the technical, documentary and aesthetic (Rosenblum, 1997) to a burgeoning collection focused on the unique impacts of photography on specific cultural contexts (Pinney, 1997)(Cousineau-Levine, 2003).

2. In August, 2005 the Denver public library removed a number of fotonovela series from its collection after complaints about inappropriate content. *Criticas* an English language librarian's guide to Spanish literature quotes Robert Logan of the Houston Public Library system that

> the issue here is one of unfamiliarity with the culture from which novelas come. I really do not think that anyone who is open to cultures other than his or her own could quarrel with the inclusion of novelas in a public library collection where popular demand for them exists. Novelas are foreign to prevailing Anglo culture, but the concept of cover art that promises more than it delivers is scarcely unknown in this country. The garish covers with their full-figured protagonists in ill-fitting clothes are generally the most racy part of the story. The story lines (except perhaps for the historical series) rarely venture beyond the 'girl meets boy/ girl loses boy/girl gets boy back' or 'goodies vs. baddies' situations.
> (http://www.criticasmagazine.com/article/CA6257851.html)

3. As an aside, one very quiet student who had recently moved to Canada from Korea, drew a very elaborate first image to accompany his photograph of a playground street hockey match. When asked in an interview about the drawing and the empty third frame the child kept his head down and said nothing. Recognizing this child's skill and commitment to drawing and obvious familiarity with comic book conventions, I decided to use my own background as an editorial cartoonist. I photocopied his storyboard and drew a cartoon version of me holding his image and asking a cartoon version of him how the story would end. The next day, without saying a word, I put the cartoon on his desk and watched a big grin appear. During the following photo club session he showed me

my cartoon with his final frame completed…   …the first educational interview conducted entirely in cartoon?

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