

Renewed methodologies¹ for social research: ethno-mimesis as performative praxis

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Abstract

This paper focuses upon renewed methodologies for social research in order to explore and re-present the complexity of lived relations in contemporary society. Renewed methodologies can transgress conventional or traditional ways of analysing and representing research data. This paper combines socio-cultural theory; experience (life stories); and practice (exhibition/performance) defined as ethno-mimesis to explore and better understand key themes and issues evolving from ethnographic work with female prostitutes. By focusing upon life history work with women working as prostitutes and by experiencing women's stories represented through live art we can further our understanding of the complexity of sex, sexualities, desire, violence, masculinities and the relevance of the body – the gendered body, the imaginary body, the performative body, the social body – within the context of post modern times, de-traditionalization, and what Stjepan Meštrović calls 'postemotionalism' and compassion fatigue. The paper incorporates stills from a video/live art performance, *Not all the time . . . but mostly . . .* performed by Patricia Breatnach, choreographed by Sara Giddens, sound by Darren Bourne and video produced by Tony Judge. The video/live art performance is a response to transcripts of interviews with women working as prostitutes and fuses dance, text, sound and video.

Introduction

This paper is located at the intersection of contemporary feminist theory, socio-cultural research and experimental/alternative forms of re-presentation/interpretation. The paper is concerned most centrally with the development of renewed methodologies as ways of working and writing in societies that are post-traditional but are marked also by the traditional; in societies that are dis-enchanted but are in the process of being re-enchanted; and, if we agree with Stjepan Meštrović (1997), in societies that are post emotional but also contain possibilities of and for authenticity.

For Meštrović contemporary Western societies are entering a new phase of development where 'synthetic, quasi-emotions become the basis for widespread manipulation by self, others, and the culture industry as a whole' (p. xi). What he calls 'Postemotional types' are able to 'feel' a vast array of emotions without necessarily being motivated to action. In the postemotional society emotions have not disappeared but rather – a 'new hybrid of intellectualized, mechanical, mass produced emotions have appeared on the world scene' (p. 26). Moreover, in the West we are suffering in part from compassion fatigue (p. 33). Postemotionalism, for Meštrović is a 'new theoretical construct to capture the Balkanization, ethnic violence, and other highly *emotional* phenomena of the late 1990s that are being treated mechanically – and not just in the Balkans but throughout the industrialized West' (p. 40). Meštrović draws upon Adorno's thesis regarding the growth and power of the culture industry in helping to create and sustain an almost totally administered society, where spaces to think and feel critically are constantly diminishing.²

In this paper it is accepted, to a degree, that our lived relations are in the throws of what Meštrović terms 'postemotionalism' as a loss of 'feeling.' However, this is not so widespread as Meštrović claims, for we are able to resist this tendency and do so in the politics of everyday life. The latter point is illustrated very clearly in this paper which provides a methodological context for the re-presentation of ethnographic work through participatory action research (PAR) with marginalised communities. It is argued that by re-presenting ethnographic data (life story interviews) in artistic form we can access a richer understanding of the complexities of lived experience which can throw light on broader social structures and processes. Such work can also reach a wider population, beyond academic communities, facilitating understanding/interpretation and, maybe, action/praxis in relation to certain social issues.³ The collaborative work presented in the case study section of the paper focuses upon the re-presentation of ethnographic interviews with women working as prostitutes through performance art.

Renewed methodologies

Methodologically speaking, the construction and reproduction of ethnographic print-based texts has in the main conformed to a particular set of traditional conventions, to the extent to which we can talk of a genre of ethnographic writing (Atkinson, 1992). The 'crisis of representation' in anthropology (Denzin, 1997; Atkinson and Coffey, 1995) is paralleled by an increasing debate and scrutiny of ethnographic texts questioning their intellectual status within sociology and the ways in which they claim to represent cultural phenomena (Atkinson, 1990, 1992; Hammersley, 1992). Consequently, texts produced and re-presented as the outcome of ethnographic fieldwork are no longer accepted unproblematically.

For example, ethnography is a gendered project (Trinh, 1992; Denzin, 1997; Clough, 1994). Feminist thought, queer theory and post colonial thought have challenged and de-constructed 'the oedipal logic of the heterosexual, narrative ethnographic text that reflexively positions the ethnographer's gender-neutral (or masculine) self within a realist story about the 'other' (Denzin, 1997: xiv). Ethnographers can no longer presume to be able to produce an uncontested 'realist' account of the individuals/groups/'others' experiences (Allan, 1995). The self-reflexivity inherent in the ethnographic process, alongside the crisis in ethnography and the 'linguistic' and 'cultural turn' in socio-cultural theory has led to demands for experimentation in the representation of ethnographic data, especially in relation to gender and race (see Trinh, 1991; Ugwu, 1995).

Drawing upon the work of Adorno and Benjamin it is argued that alternative re-presentations of ethnographic work can create multivocal, dialogical texts that can make visible 'emotional structures and inner experiences' (Kuzmics, 1997: 9) which may 'move' the audience through what can be described as 'sensuous knowing' or mimesis (Taussig, 1993). For example, Becker *et al.* (1989) developed a scripted way of reporting results from an ethnographic study which they termed 'performance science'. They offered performance science as an alternative re-presentational format which they believed overcame many of the problems associated with more conventional print-based articles and papers. For Becker *et al.* performance science,

... deprivileges the omniscient author and reduces the dominance of the analytic voice; it makes it easier to communicate emotion and mood as well as facts; and it acknowledges openly, instead of trying to hide or apologise for, the constructed character of social science data. (Becker *et al.*, 1989: 95)

Performance science makes more accessible the contested and multiple versions of reality, and the unheard voices and experiences of individuals who may consider themselves powerless. The 'audience' is brought into the action and invited/enabled to live through the experience 'as though they are having the experiences and emotions the performers represent' (Becker *et al.*, 1989: 93). Performance science relies quite heavily on visual re-presentation.

Another example can be found in the work of Jim Mienczakowski, particularly his work on the reconstruction of ethnography into theatre with emancipatory potential (1995: 360–75). Mienczakowski draws upon Bakhtin (1984), and Boal (1979; 1985) to reflexively show the educational use of ethnodrama to provide emancipatory opportunities and insights for clients attending a drug and alcohol detox centre, and relevant health professionals. The resulting ethnodrama, *Busting*, adapted verbatim accounts of informants developed through in depth interviews and participant observation during a four month intensive research study at the detox unit, into a scripted play performed in a variety of settings. The play was a 'means

by which disempowered health consumers would gain voice within the community' (p. 363).

For Mienczakowski, of central importance in the ethnodrama process is the creation of 'vraisemblance' (Todorov, 1968; Atkinson, 1990); 'the creation of "plausible accounts" of the everyday world' (Mienczakowski, 1995: 364). This is achieved through consensual agreement by all involved in the writing process (report); the physical interpretation on stage (through dramatic representation); and the use of authentic language, recognized and interpretable by the informants (Mienczakowski 1995: 365). What is also important for Mienczakowski is that the language used in the ethnodrama both informs *and* pursues 'mimesis'. Mienczakowski's use of mimesis is defined as 'imitation'. The polyvocality of the ethnodrama transgresses the stereotypical 'authorial voice' and the ethnographer is presented as a conduit through which informants' stories are channelled.

In the play *Busting*, the ethnographer engages in processes of participant inclusion with the informants and validation of their participation and 'voices.' Mienczakowski could be talking about participatory action research here but he does not use this particular label. What both Becker and Mienczakowski's work have in common (aside from the obvious genre of theatre) is a focus upon visual re-presentations. Going to see a play, or going to the theatre is an extremely visual experience. This combination of narrative and visual representation of life story narratives is an area beginning to gather momentum within socio-cultural research (see Evans and Hall, 1999; Emmison and Smith, 2000; Holiday, 2000; O'Neill, 2000).

Visual re-presentations

The visual in ethnographic research has generally not been used intrinsically for interpreting and representing ethnographic data and culture. In a recent book Emmison and Smith (2000) suggest that the problems in connecting visual research to social scientific enquiry lie in the tendency to use visual materials as merely illustrative, archival, rather than giving them a more analytic treatment. They argue that 'we live in a massively visual society, and researchers should become more reflexive about the visual; more methodologically skilled within it; and indeed, that this should enhance the quality of our research' (Emmison and Smith, 2000: x).

Emmison and Smith draw upon the work of Wagner (1979), Fyfe and Law (1988), Ball and Smith (1992), and Chaplin (1994) to problematise the lack of visual materials in social science research. They claim that social science has privileged verbal forms of communication over visual communication, despite the fact that the 'visual' is 'a pervasive feature not only of social life but of many aspects of social enquiry as well' (Emmison and Hall, 2000: 2). This they argue is largely due to the fact that sociology as a discipline has not encouraged visual exploration of society and, with the removal of the body in social theory (see Turner, 1984), so too went the eye (Emmison and Smith 2000: 13).

Their aim is to propose analytical frameworks for investigating visual data that amount to

- the generation of photographic stills through ethnographic work;
- the analysis of media products;
- the analysis of practices of visualisation (using diagrams, sketches in research and dissemination);
- and video recordings of ‘naturally occurring social interaction’ (Emmison and Smith, 2000: 25).

Focusing upon photography, Emmison and Smith (2000) claim that photographs can portray, describe or analyse social interaction through four major methodological frameworks. Firstly, photography can be used scientifically as part of the data gathering process in archival work on communities. Second, photography can be used as narrativisation, as in ethnographic films. In both of these cases the authors claim that the authority of definition lies with the sociologist. Third, photography can be used reflexively, in that the subjects share in the definition of meaning by assisting in the interpretation of the images. For example, when the sociologist takes photographs as part of the ethnographic work and then uses them to prompt subsequent in depth interviews to generate more verbal information. Finally, drawing upon Barthe’s notion of the ‘studium’ and ‘punctum’, photography can be used in a more phenomenological way to inform and elicit interest; or to inspire a more emotionally charged response or rupture our complacency. Emmison and Smith suggest that this phenomenological mode of useage opens ‘the question of how our data may play two roles. Photographs may literally describe but leave us unmoved; other images may inspire our emotions but not be useful (or even lie) sociologically. Some photographs may, however, do the opposite: that is communicate sociological insights in an artistically stimulating manner’(p. 30).

It is the phenomenological mode of useage that interests me here. In this paper I aim to develop an approach to renewing methodology that incorporates the transformative possibilities for re-presenting social research in artistic forms by re-presenting life story interviews in performance art within the context of participatory action research (working with communities to effect change). This approach I define as ethno-mimesis, a phenomenological, hermeneutic mode of exploring, analysing and seeking to transform social and sexual inequalities through artistic re-presentations of ethnographic research. Such an approach takes us beyond the four major methodological frameworks outlined here by Emmison and Hall.

Ethno-mimesis as performative praxis⁴ is reflexive and phenomenological but it is also critical and looks to praxis, as in the theatre work of Boal (1985) and Mienczakowski (1995); the socio-cultural research of Fals Borda (1988); or the filmic work of Trinh (1989, 1991). For Trinh, writing and filmmaking produce alternative re-presentations of women’s multiple realities and

experiences. In undoing the realist ethnography project she seeks to show that there is no single overriding vision of the world but rather multiple realities, multiple standpoints, multiple meanings for 'woman'. Trinh deconstructs the classic documentary film and her work provides a counter-documentary text which is reflexive, a site for multiple experiences and for seeking the truths in life's fictions.

In making a case for the development of interpretative and representational forms that transgress the traditional boundaries of ethnographic writing and representation, my own work is located within Denzin's sixth moment. 'Ethnography's sixth moment is defined in part by a proliferation of interpretive epistemologies grounded in the lived experiences of previously excluded groups in the global, postmodern world' (Denzin 1997: 54).⁵ In borrowing from and developing Denzin, it is proposed that the new ethnographies' ability to 'move' is their defining 'reflexive' feature. To 'move' not only in the sense of spurring the 'other and self to action' but also to 'move' in the sense that ethnographic re-presentations are imbued with 'spirit', with sensuousness, with feeling and emotion in dialectical tension with constructive rationality, our 'out there' sense of being in the world. In essence, they inspire praxis through a 'politics of feeling'.⁶ This paper outlines a renewed methodology for interpretive ethnography as ethno-mimesis via the hybrid inter-relationship between ethnographic narratives and performance art, and other artforms.

Hybrid texts

Renewed methodologies are a response to the fragmentation, plurality, and utter complexity of living in postmodern times. Such conditions motivate as well as require renewed methodologies to take account of 'new times'. Indeed, following Alasuutari, Gray and Hermes (1998), hybrid theorising and reflexivity are crucial to better understand contemporary culture and society, especially when we consider the ways in which such hybrid research can 'understand culture as a process of meaning making, and to give attention to the power relations that set boundaries to those processes' (p. 9). In exploring renewed methodologies for social research by focusing upon alternative/visual re-presentations of life story interviews the methodological model outlined here is rooted in the work of Benjamin (1992) and Adorno (1984, 1997) and what Denzin describes as the sixth stage of ethnographic research. But more than this, the crisis in representation which occurred in the 1980's encouraged reflexivity particularly around issues of gender, class and race, and the critique of the moral and scientific authority of the fieldworker. This led to the acknowledgement that the 'real' world can still be recovered through ethnographic work, through a postmodern 'multinational, multi-cultural gaze that probes, yet goes beyond local markets while it remains anchored in the interactional experiences of the reflexive ethnographer' (Denzin, 1997: 19). Moreover, what Denzin calls hybrid texts are emerging,

which may or may not acknowledge the postmodern turn but nevertheless engage alternative forms of representation – poetic, literary, aesthetic. These can be described, drawing upon Robert Witkin (1978) as ‘feeling forms’.⁷

Denzin (1997) urges researchers to acknowledge that writing is an evocative act of creation and representation. Refusing old categories (but acknowledging that the six moments of ethnography are inter-related) we should reflexively focus upon the personal, emotional, and biographically specific, and let ordinary people speak and interpret the many ways they use to make sense of their lives. Thus we can create cultural texts that move backwards and forwards between lived experience and cultural texts, shaping and writing experience (Denzin, 1997: 26). This methodological approach will require that we experiment from multiple centres or points of view, multiple forms of narration and narrative structures including visual re-presentations and performance texts.

Renewed methodologies and ‘transgressions’ take social research outside of binary thinking, between the spaces of the linear narratives of his-(s)tory, and purposefully challenge identity thinking/identitarian thinking. The challenge to identitarian thinking involves prioritising certain discourses and developing hybrid methodologies – feminist critique of psychoanalysis, feminist critique of post-structuralism, feminist critique of ‘representation’ through cultural and social imaginaries *and* contemporary work on the inter-relationships between ethnography and performance/performing arts – what Denzin describes as: ethnodrama/ethnoperformance (Mienczakowski, 1995; Conquergood, 1992, 1985; Becker *et al.*, 1989; Denzin, 1994, 1997).

In this paper hybrid methodologies focus upon the author’s ethnographic, participatory action research work with women working in the sex industry; and the re-presentation of ethnographic work through live art/performance.⁸ This hybrid form is defined as ethno-mimesis. The mimetic re-telling of life stories in visual, artistic form and a focus upon the transformative, change causing gesture involved in participatory action research. At every phase of the PAR model there is the possibility for change:

- when conducting life story interviews this process can validate the experience of the interviewee;
- in the process of involving and including interviewees into the research as co-researchers this validation is transformed into constructive and creative responses for themselves and their communities;
- outcomes of participatory research can inform, educate, remind, challenge and empower both those involved and the audiences of the research outcomes.
- Outcomes can be print based or performance based, or art/exhibition based.⁹

The point about renewed methodologies is that they deal *with* the contradictions of oppression *and* the utter complexity of our lived relations between

the twentieth and twenty first century – within the context of technologisation, globalisation – indeed within the context of what Paul Piccone calls ‘the permanent crisis of the totally administered society’ (Piccone, 1993: 3) marked by conformist political theory, the transformation of the liberal state, mass society, pseudo culture and New Class dominations (Piccone, 1993: 7–9).¹⁰

For Denzin the new ethnographies can help to transform the 21st century because ‘a text must do more than awaken moral sensibilities, it must move the other and the self to action’ (1997: xxi). The inter-relationship between research and praxis is fraught with tensions. Renewed methodologies which incorporate the voices of citizens through scholarly/civic research as participatory research can not only serve to enlighten and raise our awareness of certain issues but could also produce critical reflexive texts which may help to mobilize social change. The tension between a modernist ethos of resistance and transformation through participation as praxis (working with, not for); and a postmodern ethos of hybridity, complexity and inter-textuality (anti-identitarian thinking, re-presenting the complexity of lived experience though performance art) is uneasy but re-presents the complex dynamics of this work, and, it uncovers important messages about the complexity of everyday life. Ethno-mimesis as performative praxis seeks to speak in empathic ways with women, re-presented through the performance text in ways which counter post-emotionalism, valorizing discourses, and the reduction of the Other to a cipher of the oppressed/marginalised/exploited.

Ethnographic context to performative praxis

When talking about ‘transformation’ we must be very clear about the relationships and inter-relationships between the particular actors involved. For example, the author has worked with women and young people working as prostitutes over a period of ten years. During the first five years the ‘subjects’ and the ‘audience’ for the research were the co-creators of the research. Women working in the sex industry, local authority representatives, and various statutory and voluntary agencies were involved in creatively developing and monitoring the research which began as a short three month project exploring current responses to prostitution in a Midlands city. The research developed into a multi-faceted collaboration between women, various statutory and voluntary agencies and the author, (working from the University). Many changes took place as a result of the collaborative work including a shift in the attitude of the police and magistrates to women; a co-operative working party which revolved around women – indeed they were the key players; a breaking down of barriers between agencies; and a genuine multi-agency response to prostitution in the city, which was not ‘owned’ by any of the leading statutory bodies, but revolved around the key role of women working, and no longer working, in prostitution. The working party lasted as long as it was useful and was overtaken by other forms of collaboration and information sharing. The women representing ‘prostitutes’ went

on to set up their own street level drop in agency supported by a management committee made up of representatives from statutory and voluntary agencies and funding from the Health Authority, Social Services, and the European Social Fund.

In this initial five year period of the research with women and young people working in prostitution the print based texts were records of the mobilisation and transformations that were taking place both in and through the 'subjects' and 'audience' as researchers. The print based texts were the 'forms' in which and through which cutting edge methodological endeavours were represented and recorded if only in a partial way – they never tell or show everything. Our collaborations included two journal articles, a report and a bid for funding to support options initiatives for women wanting to attend college or get more training (O'Neill *et al.*, 1994, 1995).

Within the context of the broader participatory action research described in part above, the collaborators to the work discussed in this paper met initially in 1997 to explore possibilities for the inter-relation and inter-textuality between live art and ethnography. A trilogy of artworks have now been produced which combine the life stories of women working as prostitutes with live art forms interweaving dance, text, sound and the live pre-recorded image. The immediacy and directness of live art, its potential to move and in the words of Catherine Ugwu its 'resistance to categorisation and containment, along with its ability to surprise and unnerve . . . makes live art's impact so far-reaching' (1995: 9). Performance art could be described as an exemplar of anti-identitarian thinking. The audiences are able to re-engage in interpretation at every performance; they do not just receive information but have to actively engage in meaning making through immersion in the performance, identification, and subsequent distancing and critical reflection.

Following Hillis Millar (1992) the concept of the performative is explicitly political, especially within the context of socio-cultural research. For Hillis Millar the 'performative side' of cultural studies lies in the way it both describes and celebrates; preserves and enfranchises.

On the one hand performative praxis can rescue and empower disadvantaged culture on the other hand it can bring into being something inaugural, something unheard into the world . . . the bringer must take responsibility . . . art changes the society into which it enters. (Hillis Millar, 1992: 56)

Hillis Millar (1992) draws upon Walter Benjamin's work to illustrate

how works of art bring something new into the world rather than reflecting something already there. This something new is constitutive rather than being merely representational or, on the other hand, reveals something already there but hidden. Works of art make culture. Each work makes different the culture it enters. (p. 151).

In this paper it is argued that the task of renewed methodologies, is to recover and re-tell through micrology, through storytelling both the continuities and the transformations – the complexity of lived relations at the end of the twentieth century (post modern times) in transformative, change-causing ways. Exemplars can be found in the 'performative praxis' of Mienczakowski, William F. Whyte, Becker *et al.*, Orlando Fals Borda, Augusto Boal and Trinh. T. Min-Ha.

The work of the aforementioned theorists and the work outlined here, counters post-emotionalism – 'intellectualized, mechanical, mass produced emotions' (Meštrović, 1997: 26) and what Meštrović describes as a society where spaces to think and feel critically are constantly diminishing. Post-modern society or the 'hyper – modern' embraces plurality, ambiguity, ambivalence, uncertainty, the contingent, transitory, disruptive, critical and oppositional against uniform, standardised culture. There is the abandonment of any claim to universal standards of truth, goodness and beauty. Human knowledge is always situated but also always fluid and always contested.

The key point here is that 'post modern' times are not to be read as periodising concepts. On the one hand clear shifts and transformations have taken and are taking place which need to be 'named' (for example, increasing globalisation, cyber technology, de-traditionalisation); on the other hand there are continuities which also need to be acknowledged, for example, socio-cultural and economic inequalities of class, race and gender embedded within patriarchy, racist ideologies and hegemonic heterosexuality.

The work discussed in this paper develops a collaborative approach to producing socio-cultural texts as alternative means of re-presenting the lived experiences of the people, communities, and co-researchers. Combining ethnographic research and live art involves producing hybrid texts to represent ethnographic participatory action research with women as ethno-mimesis, as performative praxis. Ethno-mimesis is defined more closely in the following section.

Ethno-mimesis: towards a politics of feeling

'The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass' (Adorno, 1978: 50).

The above statement encourages us to focus upon what is ordinarily overlooked, the small scale, the minutiae of lived experiences. In focusing upon the small scale we can often reach a better understanding of the broader picture. For Adorno, it is only by trying to say the unsayable, the 'outside of language', the mimetic, the sensual, the non-conceptual that we can approach a 'politics' which undercuts identity thinking/identitarian thinking and criss-crosses binary thinking/territories and resists appropriation.

Works of art are ciphers of the social world – in art works we are able to access the 'sedimented stuff' of society – what is normally unseen/hidden/overlooked. The function of aesthetics is to reveal the unintentional truths

about the social world and to preserve independent thinking (see Adorno, 1984, 1997). Shierry Weber-Nicholsen tells us that cultural critics such as Susan Sontag, Herbert Marcuse and Frederic Jameson have discussed the ways in which we absorb image-commodities in states of habitual distraction, and more to the point, in such environments it is increasingly difficult to 'maintain a genuinely critical distance or a genuinely felt involvement' (Weber-Nicholsen 1993: 13). Moreover, environments of socially constructed images tend to directly shape our experience and opinions without the necessary critical reflection and analysis. This is a crucial dimension to Meštrović's thesis (1997). For John O'Neill (1998) the power of the arts are their civilising function:

The burden of our arts and sciences is to lift the weight of sorrow, to lighten suffering and to sustain the mind's capacity for complexity, polyphony and metamorphosis. Our collective story is one of resistance, hope and of endurance. Our arts and sciences civilize the word. They displace the barbarism of intellect without compassion and they affirm the millennial chorus of humanity. (p. 17).

Through art works – performing arts/live arts, painting, poetry, literature, photography – we are able to get in touch with our 'realities', our social worlds and the lived experiences of others, in ways which demand critical reflection. For example Rosalind Krauss calls the photograph an index, a direct trace of the real rather than a representation. Victor Burgin and Douglas Crimp, following Benjamin show how photography can subvert dominant ideologies in the art world by critiquing notions of authorship, the authority of the individual artist and emphasising photography's emancipatory political potential (Weber-Nicholsen, 1993). On the other hand, following Benjamin, Weber-Nicholsen adds that the representation of reality in photography is in fact socially constructed meaning as debates over the ideological construction of the poor in the work of Walker Evans exemplifies (Weber-Nicholsen, 1993: 12–13). In this sense, for Benjamin, photography can turn poverty into an object of enjoyment and for Adorno, there can be no poetry after Auschwitz. What these debates (over the deconstructive potential of photography versus the aestheticising of social problems) do, in fact, highlight is the critical analysis, the critical potential of art works. It is this critical potential to pierce us and to grasp 'reality in its otherness' within the context of the image society which attempts to tame and inhibit this critical reflection that Weber – Nicholsen looks to photography and its potential to help us develop a broader, more compassionate and accurate consciousness (1993: 14; 1999).

The intention in this paper is to explore renewed methodologies for writing/doing ethnography in the 21st century by developing hybrid texts, by drawing upon the inter-relation/inter-textuality between live art and ethnography – as ethno-mimesis. The key concept used, drawing upon Adorno and Benjamin is 'mimesis' and the dialectic of mimesis and constructive

rationality. Following Adorno, 'mimesis' does not simply mean imitation (see Mienczakowski, 1995), but rather feeling, sensuousness, spirit, the playfulness of our being in the world in critical tension to constructive rationality, reason, the 'out there' sense of our being in the world. This inter-relationship between mimesis and constructive rationality is the central dialectic in *Aesthetic Theory* (1984; 1997) Adorno's unfinished book which laments the growing rationality and the retreat of mimesis in an almost totally administered society. Hilde Heynon (1998) writes:

The mimetic moment of cognition has to do with the possibility of approaching the world in a different way than by rational-instrumental thinking. Mimesis, however, is not simply equivalent to a visual similarity between works of art and what they represent. The affinity Adorno refers to lies deeper. It can be recognised, for example, in an abstract painting which, in mimetic fashion, depicts something of reality's alienating character. (p. 175).

Taussig (1993) understands 'mimesis as both the faculty of imitation and the deployment of that faculty in sensuous knowing' (p. 68). Moreover, Taussig concludes his book on mimesis and alterity by re-affirming his interest in the power of the copy to influence what it is a copy of, especially in postmodern times 'the virtually undisputed reign of the image-chain in late capitalism'. As Taussig points out, Adorno gave great emphasis to the mimetic faculty in combining sensuousness with copy, in facilitating immersion in the concrete necessary to 'break definitively from the fetishes and myths of commodified practices of freedom' (p. 254).

In the author's participatory action research with women and young people working as 'prostitutes', conducting ethnographic research involves recovering and re-telling stories of lived relations, experiences, meanings, practices and actions, through immersion in the stories and lived experiences of the women and young people. Immersion is necessarily followed by identification, followed by critical distancing and reflexivity involved in interpretation, commentary and criticism. The dialectical relationship between mimesis (emotion, 'spirit') and constructive rationality (instrumental rationality, the 'out there' sense of our being in the world) articulates the relationship of mediation (tension) between emotion, sensuousness and feeling on the one hand and reason, constructive rationality and the materiality of life on the other. The choice of the participatory action research method developed out of the authors immersion in critical theory and commitment to including the stereotypical subjects of research in the entire research process, thus developing feminist praxis as purposeful knowledge.

Immersion and identification enables researchers to better understand the lived experiences, feelings, meanings of the group(s) they are working with. Subsequent objectification, critical distancing – metaphorically if not actually – enables interpretation, commentary and criticism. This describes the

methodological approach embedded in constructing 'feeling forms' through life story narratives.

Engaging with (or mediating) the critical tension between experience, feeling, emotion *and* materiality – constructive rationality can help us to better understand the 'micrology' of women's lives within the meta conditions/structures of our lives. This can in turn help us to better understand the individual/society relationship, and the wider sexual, socio-economic, cultural and political implications.

The work of Adorno is arguably very useful for developing renewed methodologies in current times. He emphasises negativity and the need for non-identical thinking; he focuses upon micrology (drawing upon Benjamin) – upon the small scale- the minutiae of lived experience and upon living a damaged life, through the ambiguity and ambivalence of modern and hyper modern times. He develops a relentless attack upon essentialising the feminine at the same time as proclaiming the utter loss of hope in the Enlightenment as progress, as the *promesse de bonheur* .

The concept of Mediation was crucial to Adorno's theories. Mediation is a pivotal concept in *Aesthetic Theory*. The relationship of art to society is one of mediation. The sedimented aspects of reality, of the subjective/collective, arise/unfold in certain works of art. 'Truth' resides in arts form and is activated and released via interpretive philosophy; or by critical reflection. Art is a product of society, it is formed through the objective demands of the material – the historically given techniques and means of production; and the subjective experiences and playfulness of the artist. Art is therefore a feeling form, created from the tensions between sensuous knowing, the playfulness and creativity of the artist and the objective demands of the material.

In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno tells us that art is a product of society *but* at the same time an independent force in society. This is linked to the central dialectic of mimesis and constructive rationality . Mimesis re-presents the subjective freedom of the artist, the sensual, sensuous appearance and is related to the Hegelian theme in Adorno's work. Constructive rationality re-presents reason, order, the objective demands of the material that artists works with, disinterestedness and is related to the Kantian theme in Adorno's work. Society is mediated through aesthetic form as content and is expressed through the antagonisms and conflicts between the mimetic sensuous and rational constructive poles in the dialectic of art.¹¹

What is relevant for the purposes of this paper is the ways in which ethnographic research and artistic re-presentations can inform each other, developing greater knowledge and understanding through the production of texts (film, literature, performance, dance, life story narratives) as 'feeling forms' (Witkin, 1978). Why? because they contain 'truths' about the social world and moreover because we can acquire a complex understanding of our social worlds of our similarities and differences through such inter-textual 'feeling forms'. Art, literature, film, performances give us glimpses of the sedimented stuff of society. They can inform, educate, challenge, facilitate and help us to

critically reflect upon certain social issues such as prostitution. The following section focuses upon a live art performance text of an ethnographic life story as a (renewed) methodological case study.

Ethno-mimesis as performative praxis

Case Study: Not all the time . . . but mostly . . .

It's not an easy job to do . . . far from it . . . like I know I have to go to work tonight . . . and I know I have to put the stockings on and all the slutty stuff . . . and strut it about . . . you know you think . . . I don't even want to go . . . I don't even want to go. Imogen (O'Neill, 2001).

In the development of the performance text the choreographer, dancer, and sound technician focused on the author's research with female prostitutes to set in motion possibilities for alternative re-presentation as ethno-mimesis. Throughout her research the author used a life story approach in order to document the lived experiences of women working as prostitutes and to develop participatory action research. Stories, whether they are individuals stories of their personal journey through life; whether they are from the imagination of a storyteller who has collected the 'stuff' of social life (through immersion, feeling and observation) and woven it into stories for our pleasure and education; or whether they are told for a purpose to explain an event or action, stories are powerful learning tools/experiences. For Walter Benjamin (1992), focusing upon the telling of stories, the most extraordinary thing about storytelling is that the psychological connection of the event is not forced upon the reader or listener, and it is left up to the reader/listener *to* interpret things the way that they are understood. Moreover, a fragment of a story of a life can tell us so much more than one hundred pages of information about a life.

Sara (choreographer) was given certain transcripts (which had been rigorously anonymised) and asked to develop a re-presentation of the data in the form of live art with Patricia (live artist) and Darren (sound artist). This group set about interpreting the data based on key themes, images, rhythms, moments, parts of the many stories contained within the transcripts that were meaningful and resonant to them. The text images and sounds used in the video were finalised and agreed through discussions with all the collaborators. Both the video and live performances include fragments of the interview transcripts (the developed version of the performance includes small fragments of text which are spoken live). The images present in this text can give only a partial awareness of the live performance. To date a trilogy of works have been performed live.

The live art performance as ethno-mimetic text engages with people as human beings, not as 'stand in political subjects', and in so doing re-presents the ambivalence of prostitution, and the situation of the women involved,



Figure 1

located as they are between and within discourses of good and bad women. According to Tim Clark (1980) the whore, the fallen woman, is the end stop in discourses on good, or honest women. Such discourses and their dynamics can help, in part, to 'name', 'police', 'survey all women.

In conducting ethnographic research, particularly participatory action research, one becomes immersed in the life worlds of the participants. Engaging with the feelings, impressions and life experiences, witnessing the relevance of these narratives for all women and being able to work with them in transformative ways necessitates a theory of emotion in critical tension to reason and rationality. This dialectical relationship is pivotal to participatory action research as ethno-mimesis.

Ethno-mimesis as the inter-textual relation between an ethnographic life story and a dance/performance as live art represents a re-covering and re-telling of lived experience as embodied performance. Thus, it recovers the tellings of the oppressed and marginalised whom Denzin and Trinh describe as being on the borders/borderlands/margins (see Denzin, 1997: 95), as well as tellings of resistance to dis-empowering sexual and social structures, practices and processes. The performance text focuses our attention on the performing body, the embodied woman/prostitute, the unfinished body, the fragmented body, the fetishised body, and at one and the same time the commodified body (see particularly figures 2 and 3).

The point here is that our potential 'feeling involvement' in the ethno-mimetic text, erupts from the tension between the mimetic (sensuous

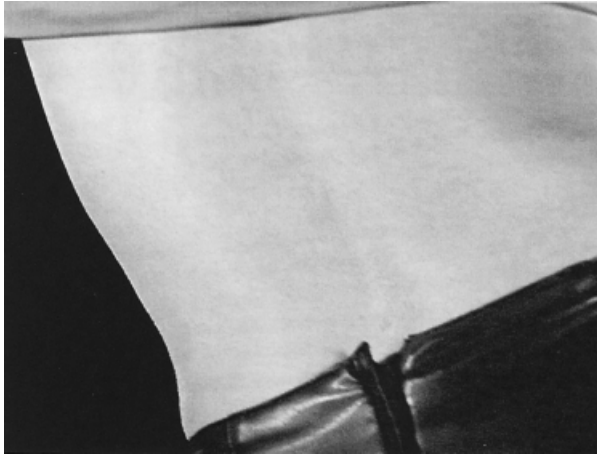


Figure 2 *back.*



Figure 3 *hair and shoes.*

knowing) and the rational/constructive moments in the interplay between movement/performance/motifs and narrative voice. An evocative tension is created between what is played out on screen (or live) and the relationship the viewer or audience has with the 'performance'. One is left feeling in some cases 'stunned', but in others able to grasp reality in its 'otherness'; 'feel' emotional structures and inner experiences; experience the traces of the 'prostitutes' 'work' within the context of a life, albeit for some a damaged life. In this sense the ethno-mimetic text is able to 'say' the 'unsayable', the 'outside

of language' and undercut identity/identitarian thinking and in the process facilitate a space for the viewers to approach a genuinely felt involvement (see NicholSEN, 1993: 12) which demands critical reflection. Thus generating what Bakhtin calls 'Dialogic texts' and facilitating the de-construction of stereotypes of 'otherness'.

Conclusion

Participatory Action Research (PAR) as ethno-mimesis creates spaces for the voices of marginalised peoples and in doing so challenges stereotypes and encourages both those participating, and the audiences, to mobilise for change in constructive ways at the level of the individual; the group; the community; or more nationally. Inter-textual knowledge as ethno-mimesis is an example of praxis – purposeful knowledge.

In this paper I have sought to encourage reflection and discussion on an unconventional way of re-presenting knowledge in the form of a conventional academic article. The work that has led to this paper develops unconventional means of re-presenting social research in an attempt to be more creative and inclusive with our research methods and methodologies, and gives voice to the transformative role of art within the context of PAR.¹² This work also suggests that researchers might think about re-presenting the unsayable, through the language like quality of art, through sensuous knowing within the boundaries of what Mienczakowski (1995) calls the legacy of ethnography. Currently, engaging in ethnographic research involves rethinking and reinterpreting ethnographic practice and representations. This paper documents an attempt to do this by renewing methodologies through ethno-mimesis as performative praxis.

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Notes

- 1 The term 'renewed methodologies' for social research was developed in Maggie's discussions with the late Malcolm Vout, Reader in Philosophy of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University.

- 2 See Adorno and Horkheimer (1979) *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* London, Verso, especially the essay – 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception'.
- 3 For example, the author conducted PAR with 'refugees' from Bosnia-Herzegovina, and together with community arts and community development we facilitated the re-presentation of life history narratives in photographic form (by the people themselves as co-creators of the research) for exhibition during refugee week November 1999. 'Global Refugees: the Bosnians in Nottingham – past, present and future' was accessed by a relatively wide audience in the Bonnington Gallery Nottingham, and also discussed in local newspaper articles. The latter served to re-present the Bosnian community in ways that challenged negative stereotypes of 'refugees' and presented their stories of resistance, loss and exile in creative, informative ways. Thus validating their voices and creative reconstructions/re-presentations of their lives before the war, through the war and now living in the UK. This work was able to help a wider population than might ordinarily access the ethnographic research data to see and better understand the experiences of displacement, loss, 'longing' and re-settlement in the UK which is part of the experience of being in exile, a refugee, an asylum seeker. The ethnographic research was developed in collaboration with the Bosnian Association Nottingham, City Arts Nottingham and the City Council Community Development.
- 4 See Hillis Millar's excellent book *Illustration* (1992) for a thorough account of the development and role of Cultural Studies as 'performative praxis'.
- 5 Denzin divides interpretive enquiry into five phases:
 - the traditional period when researchers wrote 'objective' accounts within a positivist paradigm (1900–1940);
 - the modernist phase, challenging positivism and concerned with formalizing qualitative methods with a focus upon social processes, deviance, social control (1940–1970);
 - the blurred genres phase shaped by Geertz's *Interpretation of Culture* (1973) and *Local Knowledge* (1983). Positivism had given way to a plethora of perspectives ranging from symbolic interactionism to semiotics and various 'ethnic paradigms' (p. 17) – there is no privileged voice (1973–1986);
 - the 'crisis of representation' developed Geertz's blurred genres and reflexivity focusing upon new forms of writing and 'truth' as a way out of the crisis through 'memoirs, fictional experimentations or dramatic readings' (p. 18). (1986–1992)
 - We are currently in the fifth phase, 'writing our way out of the writing culture and into the still undefined Sixth Moment' (p. 18). (1992–present)
- 6 A 'politics of feeling' is discussed more fully in *Prostitution and Feminism* (O'Neill 2000)
- 7 For a full discussion of 'feeling forms' see Witkin (1978) and his later book *The Social Structure of Art* Cambridge, Polity Press.
- 8 The re-presentation of the authors ethnographic work through live art/performance was undertaken in association with Sara Giddens, Patricia Breatnach, Carl Bagley, Darren Bourne and Tony Judge.
- 9 For example currently the author is working with Rosie Campbell on a PAR study developing consultation research on prostitution in the West Midlands. One method of consulting local communities (alongside the usual ethnographic work and focus group interviews) is through artworkshops where residents in the red light area; young people who are resident in the 'red light' area; and women working on street are producing artworks to express their views, experiences and ideas for addressing the complex issues of prostitution in residential areas. This work is funded by Walsall South Health Action Zone and facilitated by Walsall Community Arts and Walsall Youth Arts.
- 10 See O'Neill (1999) (ed.) *Adorno, Culture and Feminism*, London: Sage Press.
- 11 To explore the Hegelian themes and the Hegelian-Marxist narrative of subject and community/Master-Slave discourse see John O'Neill's text – *Hegel's Dialectic of Desire and Recognition* (1996) SUNY. For an excellent analysis of Adorno's use of Hegel and Kant see Christine Battersby's (1998) *The Phenomenal Woman*.

12 A short 'visual' essay based on video stills from the recorded version of the first live performance can be found in Feminist Review special edition on Sex Work Spring.

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