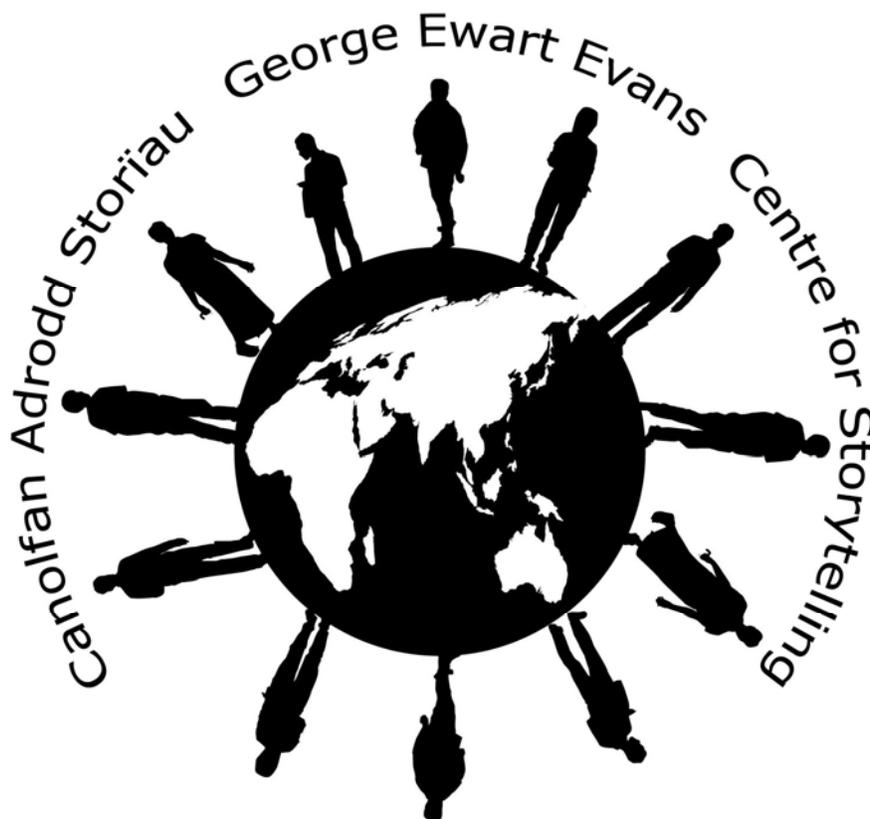


George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling Research Seminars 2007



Join the George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling for three research seminars exploring storytelling and identity. All seminars take place in L201 in the LRC

Thursday 20th May at 5pm - Prof Aldwyn Cooper (Regent's College)
Broad­sides and Ballads – Ewan McColl a life of Stories and Song

Thurs 24 May 5pm – Liz Weir (storyteller and author)
Shortening the Road - Storytelling on the Path to Peace in Northern Ireland

Thurs 14 June 5pm – Prof Hamish Fyfe (University of Glamorgan)
“Habits of the Heart” Storytelling and Everyday Life

To reserve your place at any of the seminars or to discuss any of the activities of the centre email storytelling@glam.ac.uk or call 01443 483312

www.glam.ac.uk/storytelling

“Habits of the Heart” Storytelling and Everyday Life

Thurs 14th June 5 p.m. Prof Hamish Fyfe (University of Glamorgan)

Let me start by saying that it’s a pleasure to give this seminar today especially since I am following a distinguished group of scholars who have provided considerable insight into the process of storytelling from a variety of fascinating and personal perspectives.

What I’d like to do this afternoon is to consider and interrogate the ambivalence with which the academy has viewed the ‘everyday’ and to attempt to rescue ‘ordinariness’ or even as Joe Moran puts it in his new book ‘Queuing for Beginners’¹ the ‘infra-ordinary’ as a legitimate object of delineated scrutiny by what Pierre Bordieu calls Homo Academicus.

There is of course a bit of a history of all of this that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be traced through the characteristic way in which the Surrealist Movement problematised and discredited the ‘everyday’, through to the restorative work of the documentary film maker Humphrey Jennings, of which more later, to the inauguration of Mass Observation in England in the 1930’s and the work of the pioneering ethnographer and people’s historian George Ewart Evans whose name is eponymous to this Centre.

I will argue that strong echoes of this work are contained in various strands of BBC programming like the Radio Ballads created by Charles Parker and Ewan McColl of which we heard earlier in this lecture series and in the 80s, 90s and in to the twenty first century with the BBC’s Video Nation project, and in the development of the BBC Capture Wales project that centres on digital storytelling. These practices describe a world of dialects, not usually mother tongues, and utterances so apparently inconsequential that they have all but avoided the attentions of the academy.

I am going to begin with three short fragments – the voices of people in Wales. These people are separated by years, culture and partly, by language but they have all participated in BBC Wales’s extraordinary Capture Wales project. The first voice is that of Vivian Parry Williams from Blaeneau Festiniog who is talking about a slate-mine near his home in the Mountains of Snowdonia. Vivian Parry speaks in Welsh but his story has English sub-titles.

Vivian Parry Williams – The first story Gweld Llun, Clewyd Llais

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/cymru/cipolwgargymru/gwybodaeth/vivian-parry-williams-stori.shtml>)

Digital stories are usually two minute long films. They are made by the people whose stories they are. They record their own voice, select a small number of usually still images, and use computer technology to actually make the films. This can be done increasingly easily and cheaply as the technology, which is integral to the practice,

¹ Moran, J *Queuing for Beginners*, Profile Books, 2007

develops although the intervention that is required is hugely sensitive and nuanced. In sharing these stories whether with family and friends, school mates, on the internet or broadcast on television they illuminate story as one of the ever present habits of the heart that makes the unheroic heroic and the ordinary extraordinary.

The second voice is that of Doris Cole. Doris is now involved in a programme for people with short-term memory loss, dementia and Alzheimer's disease. As part of the programme and with extraordinary and sensitive support from the Lisa Helled Jones and others she made this story.

Doris Cole Something on my

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales/background/doris-cole.shtml>)

As Daniel Meadows who is the pater familias of digital storytelling in Great Britain has observed these stories are like technologic Haiku or sonnets in that they tend to follow a very clear grammatical structure that limits the number of words and images, which in turn brings an emotional intimacy and clarity to the process. Emerging from the work of Joe Lambert and his colleagues at the SF Center for Digital Storytelling in the 1990's Digital Storytelling has developed around the world as a potent challenge to the idea of a profane commonality in a lay practice of storytelling. Love and loss, success and failure, death and rebirth – the biggest stories anyone has ever told are all held in people's lives. Joe Moran begins his book *Queuing for Beginners* with a quotation from Raoul Vaneigem's book *The Revolution of Everyday Life* in which Vaneigem observes that –

*There are more truths in twenty-four hours of a person's life than in all the philosophies.*²

And Moran ends his book with a quotation from Georges Perec in which he says

*What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary: the front page splash, the banner headlines...The daily papers talk of everything except the daily ... We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep.'*³

I would argue now that the great successes of Capture Wales and its historical antecedents has been to intervene in that dreamless sleep and to discover new ways of valuing, creating and sharing common sense, local knowledge and strengths in life for all of us. This next story was made by Paul Cabutts.

Paul Cabutts story Elvis Died in my bedroom www.bbc.co.uk/digitalstorytelling

² Vaneigem, R *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans Donald Nicholson-Smith Rebel press 1967, 1994

³ Perec, G *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, ed and translated by John Sturrock, Penguin, 1999

It seems to me that every community has a memory of itself. Not a history, or an archive or an authoritative record...a living memory, an awareness of a collective identity which is woven from a thousand stories. The sum of these stories creates a meta-narrative that is far greater than the sum of its constituent parts. The 'stuff' of this narrative is the quotidian experience of people's everyday lives.

The BBC's Capture Wales project has set out to explore the tapestry of stories that exist in communities of interest, experience and location across Wales. The story of Wales and its people that the project tells is very different from the story that is often told about Wales or the one you might expect to hear. The deceptively simple idea at the heart of the project is that everyone has a story to tell. The project seeks to provide this opportunity and often works with people, who, because of the increasing gap between rich and poor in this country are excluded from the benefits of the 'digital revolution'. This is a project that doesn't have a totalising aim. It aims to provide an overarching narrative by creating myriad individual and separate stories.

The Capture Wales web-site now has many hundreds of Digital Stories and links to the many other Digital Story projects that it has given life to in Wales and elsewhere. For those of you who might not know about it you can find it at www.bbc.co.uk/digitalstorytelling

I'm delighted to say that a collaborative team of University of Glamorgan, BBC Wales and University of Cardiff staff have been awarded a collaborative research grant from the AHRC to consider how we can develop and sustain the work in Wales and elsewhere. The production of digital stories is part of a slough of nascent creative forms which amalgamate new technology, film-making, photography, music, story and social purpose. These activities cut across silo boundaries in the arts democratising the process of media-making and establishing an 'anti-heroic' position for the artist. Our research will examine the new creative literacies that are now being shaped and the social literacies that underpin these innovative ways of knowing the world.

I wanted to begin with these voices from Wales for two reasons. Firstly to remind myself of what a shockingly bad job the human race is making of providing a space for all of us to express our cultures, sense of identity and vision for the future. War, slavery, sexual abuse, degradation of the environment, child labour, a utilitarian approach to education and learning are all playing their part in shrinking that space to a narrow fraction much of which is controlled, directly or indirectly by multi-national conglomerates whose only interest in financial gain. Secondly though I wanted to remind myself of the incredible ability of the human spirit to discover creative ways through oppression and destruction if there is the smallest encouragement, the merest chink of available light. What I will attempt to argue here is that when the light is shone on the apparently 'ordinary', the quotidian of our lives, the results can provide the strength the courage, the faith for all of us to be more fully human.

So how does this work link with the on/off project of engaging with the everyday and what are the specific ethical, political and aesthetic purposes in proposing the everyday as

the realm in which storytelling might best be considered to reside? One way of looking at this is to consider the genesis and relatively short life of the Mass Observation movement.

A letter to the *New Statesman and Nation* on January 30th, 1937, announced, '*Mass Observation develops out of anthropology, psychology and the sciences that study man but it plans to work with a mass of observers.*' Charles Madge, the poet, friend of WB Yeats and TS Eliot, talked of an '*Anthropology of home*' and referring to the experience of people in Great Britain at the time of the abdication crisis in 1936 he defined the possibilities of such a movement.

The real observers in this case were the millions of people who were, for once, irretrievably involved in the public events. Only mass observations can create mass science. The group for whom I write is engaged in establishing observation points on as widely extended a front as can be organised.'

Amongst its first set of studies were;

Behaviour of people at War Memorials

Shouts and gestures of motorists

The aspidistra cult

Anthropology of football pools

Bathroom behaviour

Beards, armpits, eyebrows

Anti-Semitism

Distribution, diffusion and significance of the dirty joke

Funerals and undertakers

Female taboos about eating and

The private lives of midwives

The data collected would allow the organisers to plot 'weather maps of public feeling'. As a matter of principle, Mass Observers did not distinguish themselves from the people they studied. They simply intended to expose facts '...to all observers so that their environment may be understood and thus constantly transformed.'

Mass Observation wanted to thwart the tendency in modern society to live our lives deadened by habit as Madge said '*With as little consciousness of our surroundings as though we were we were walking in our sleep.*' It soon became notorious for paying minute attention to apparently trifling topics. Its researchers counted the average number of chips in each portion at a Bolton Fish and Chip Shop, recorded conversations taking place at 5.30pm each day, and wrote reports on 'The application of face cream' and 'Upper and Middle Class soup eating habits'. No detail was too trivial – the number of outdoor copulations in Blackpool one no doubt cool October night in 1938 was recorded as four including one in which an observer took part in the tradition of observer/participation that characterised the movement.

From these beginnings Mass Observation became an independent scientific organisation. Its origins were in two focussed areas of activity, in northern English working class towns and on the broader record of national phenomena such as dreams, clothing and daily life.

Moving back to illustrate the link between this project and the activity of Capture Wales have a look at this story

Richard Pugh A Quest for Understanding

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales/background/richard-pugh.shtml>)

Mass Observation became, for some participants an habitual activity with a totalising aim – the complete record and understanding of modern society. Strangely and perhaps perversely its roots lay in surrealism and the documentary fiction of George Orwell, coupled with a faith in the contribution that science could make to the liberation of humanity as expounded by writers like HG Wells, CP Snow and JB Priestly. I wouldn't make too many claims for the work that is exemplified by the stories we've just seen but I recognise many aspects of documentary, surrealism and science in many of the stories and in the basic precepts that have motivated the *Capture Wales* project.

Like *Capture Wales*, Mass Observation was not issue based but holistic in that it sought observation of the unobserved resisting a pastoral attitude towards the 'people' by not only being about them but for them and by them. Some of the concerns of the founders of Mass Observation continue to be significant and these concerns seem prescient and to dominate the discussion around new 'mass' phenomena such as citizen journalism and 'user generated content'. The concerns of the progenitors of Mass Observation were – a distrust of the press and how events were being reported to people especially around the abdication crisis, a perceived gulf between politics and the people and a fascination with the part that myth and superstition were playing in the everyday accommodation of crises such as those that led up to the declaration of war in 1939.

At its height Mass Observation attracted upwards of 3,000 participants, but with a hard core of around 700 active observers. Amongst these was the documentary filmmaker Humphrey Jennings. Writing in the introduction to his extraordinary collection of juxtaposed images 'Pandaemonium' ⁴Jennings expresses the view that

'The soul of nature has been concealed by industrialisation and this is reflected in the appropriation of poetry and the repression of the clear imaginative vision of ordinary folk.'

This may sound patronising but I would assert that it is precisely Jennings, and the current work of the New media grouping in BBC Wales, un-patronising association with

⁴ Jennings, H *Pandaemonium – The Coming of the Machine in the Industrial Age* Hulton Press, 1938

the subjects of their work that signifies the radical nature of both projects, although they appear seventy years apart. The BBC and its sister broadcast organisations are the spaces in which cultural capital circulates most aggressively at the moment and yet this strand of work that has connected with the everyday and the ordinary has been apparent almost since its inception. This is not an accident it seems to me, but an acknowledgement and central outworking of the complex relationship with a 'public' that broadcasters have struggled with for almost a hundred years.

As with many digital stories, in the films of Humphrey Jennings a kind of reality was mediated by the juxtaposition of images, often from the phenomenological world of things. For Jennings the basic problem for the film director was the question of imagination in an industrialised society. It was through the exercise of the imagination that Jennings' apocalyptic and surreal vision of *Pandaemonium – The Coming of the Machine in the Industrial Age* (ibid) would be transformed into William Blake's Jerusalem. EP Thompson the historian was a commentator on Jennings work and as far as the role of the imagination in obtaining political and social change was concerned he was in no doubt that –

*Few people in these latter days, (Thompson is writing in 1986) like to talk much about such a shabby, old fashioned suspect uncerebral thing as the imagination. It is time that we imagined it once again.*⁵

Mass Observation's early avowal of science was, in many ways to provide its downfall. In a January 1939 lecture, later published in the *Sociological Review*, Raymond Firth, an anthropologist at LSE, attacked the group on its weakest point: statistics. The samples of people surveyed in the groups best known publication 'Britain' were small, unrepresentative and inconsistent, he asserted, he noted that George Gallup's new organisation had brought scientific polling to Britain. It was the start of a long argument that Mass Observation was doomed to lose. But, just as it was being cast out of science, Mass Observation had a rebirth in art. In March of 1939 Jennings began to shoot 'Spare Time', a documentary about workers in the steel, cotton and coal industries. This time Jennings presents a sequence of visual images, subtly interconnected by sound and often disruptively juxtaposed. While men play darts for example, the viewer hears the tuning up of a brass band, which appears in the next scene. After the band has come and gone, the music continues as a boy reads a comic book, his mother removes a shepherd's pie from the oven, and a man takes three racing dogs out for a run behind a factory. As if brought to life from the pages of Mass Observation studies, old men in a pub play billiards, an audience watches all-in wrestling and a man launches pigeons into flight. Even more evocative of Mass Observation though is the film's mood. I can share with you some of the film's synopsis and part of the film itself. Interestingly for us, a significant part of the short fifteen-minute film was shot in Pontypridd. Take particular notice of the first 30 seconds of the film that concerns coal.

The film's shotlist and narrative is like this –

⁵ Thompson, E P, In - *New Society*, October 1986

Manchester and Bolton. Cotton workers' hours are 8-5, half-day Saturday, and Sunday off. On a parade ground, a kazoo band advances. A boy draws chalk figures on a pavement and a woman fills a watering can. Some members of the kazoo band carry a child dressed as Britannia.

Belle Vue Zoo: caged tigers and lions growl at visitors. A play is rehearsed. Wrestlers fight before amused spectators. The empty floor of a ballroom gradually fills with energetic dancers.

Pontypridd. A siren rings out over the colliery town. A fairground of spinning rides and a shy. Morning comes and a pianist begins to play, a choir circling around her. From the keys of the piano to white beer pumps being pulled; men sit around in a pub, playing cards and billiards. An audience of (mostly) women watches a puppet show. In a high street, a couple flirt outside a shop. A basketball match is in progress at the YMCA. The sun sets, a woman serves dinner and an old man walks home, his silhouette superimposed against a corrugated iron fence.

Voiceover: "Spare time is the time where people can be most themselves." The siren rings again. Workers in overalls walk towards the mine, pack into a lift and descend.

Let's see the extract.

Humphrey Jennings work as an artist and film-maker, Charles Madge's poetry and the creative work of the renegade anthropologist Tom Harrison who all created Mass Observation recognised the fact that capturing the lives of people had to be a creative process if it was to have meaning and it seems to me that projects like Capture Wales follow directly in that tradition. Young, occasionally inaccurate, inefficient as far as statistics were concerned Mass Observation sought to understand something that anthropology and sociology still took for granted: the everyday life of ordinary people.

So why, despite the obvious cultural capital of projects like Mass Observation and Capture Wales has the Academy remained largely unresponsive to the quotidian experience? Perhaps politically and contextually bound study has simply not attracted the 'theory', which has characterised and become the normative academic project of the last forty years. Interestingly critiques of consumer society, which ultimately many of the everyday life theories propose, (the fate of Mass Observation was to become a market research organisation), have been consistently marginalised by the academy in favour of a series of socially disconnected theories like semiotics and structuralism. These educational concerns however are a minor 'internal' reflection of a more important socially rooted phenomenon. That is the division between what is perceived as valid 'knowledge', what carries epistemological weight, and the common sense and local understanding that emerge from projects like the ones to which I have referred this afternoon. Clifford Geertz and his concept of *local knowledge*, Michelle de Certeau with his conceptualisation of *tactics and ruses* and the *doxa* of Ivan Illich validate the study of the intelligences of living, the knowledge which allows for social and political change.

To move beyond the role of observing the everyday as the Mass Observers did to that of interpreting it as Humphrey Jennings did in his films and provide an intervention, as *Capture Wales* does is to reflect the Marxist challenge to philosophers not only to interpret but to change the world. By going to communities and making a technological and skills based intervention that allows people to make these short films *Capture Wales* is acting as an interlocutor for social change. This happens through the provision of a democratic platform for people to express and explore their identity. As two American theorists of the everyday Kaplan and Ross point out –

‘The purpose of examining a position from which to consider everyday life, to advance a theory in its name is to elevate lived experience to the status of a critical concept – not merely in order to describe lived experience, but in order to change it.’

If this is a kind of Marxism, it is a kind that is challenged by the Surrealists (Humphrey Jennings was a member of the Surrealist International and exhibited paintings in their seminal London exhibition in 1936) to embrace the psychological realm of the everyday, a Marxism reinterpreted through the lens of phenomenology and existentialism and reformulated by the kinds of playfulness and anarchy that can be seen in many of the *Capture Wales* stories and in the everyday lives that are recorded by Mass Observation against the grim backdrop of the 1930’s.

The final voice I want us to listen to is that of ten-year old Samiya who lives in Riverside in Cardiff. Her story is very short containing , like most good poems, much matter and few words

Samiya – My Picture

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/digitalstorytelling/sites/schoolshoebox/pages/samiya.shtml>)