THE PEARL DIVER

DESI S PHILOSOPHY TALKS:
STORYTELLING & DESIGN
FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

EDITED BY
Elisa Bertolotti, Heather Daam,
Francesca Piredda & Virginia Tassinari

FOREWORD BY Marisa Galbiati & Ezio Manzolini
To our beloved friend and colleague Mika ‘Lumi’ Tuomola. Words as smooth as stones from the sea, thoughts deep as the ocean, generosity without end.

Thank you, Mika.
“This thinking, fed by the present, works with the ‘thought fragments’ it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of the extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what was once alive, some things suffer a ‘sea change’ and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune from the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living—as ‘thought fragments,’ as something ‘rich and strange.’”

Hannah Arendt
DESIS PHILOSOPHY TALKS

Since its start, DESIS Philosophy Talks have been performed in a variety of places by a bright network of researchers, professionals and students and hosted by different Schools or research centres dealing with design for social innovation and sustainability. The Talks have always kept a spontaneous form as invitation seminars addressing a variety of themes. The Storytelling series, then, introduced new experimental formats for eliciting the discussion such as the video-statements, which provide contributions also from testimonials (designers or philosophers) that are not able to join the conversation in person. Therefore, we started to collect thoughts as digital videos and also documentation repertoires as tools for continuing the self-reflection experience with a process of open and continuous discussion. One of the main goals for the DESIS Philosophy Talks is to make all this material available to the large community of interest and to keep the tension between theory and practice using that footage as fragments of the “design for social innovation narratives” which we are contributing to build and co-generate.
01 | DESIS Philosophy Talk Series: Storytelling and Design for Social Innovation

Storytelling & Social innovation
November 2013
Dublin, National College of Art and Design Dublin, Cumulus Conference

Virginia Tassinari, Francesca Piredda, Elisa Bertolotti, Walter Mattana, Andrea Mendoza

with Eleonore Nicolas, Ezio Manzini, Davide Pinardi, Mika ‘Lumi’ Tuomola, Francesca Valsecchi, Yongqi Lou, Anna Meroni, Sonia Matos

02 | DESIS Philosophy Talk Series: Storytelling and Design for Social Innovation

Designers Telling Stories
March 2014
Eindhoven, DAE

Virginia Tassinari, Elisa Bertolotti, Francesca Piredda, Heather Daam

with David Hamers, Liesbeth Huybrechts, Sophie Krier, David Parkinson, Bas Raijmakers, Marja Seliger, Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin (Studio FormaFantasma)

03 | DESIS Philosophy Talk Series: Storytelling and Design for Social Innovation

Designers Telling Stories and Making Meaning
May 2014
Milan, Politecnico di Milano

Virginia Tassinari, Elisa Bertolotti, Francesca Piredda, Heather Daam

with Luigi Ferrara, Davide Pinardi, David Parkinson, Walter Mattana, Elisabeth Sikiaridi & Johan Frans Vogelaar (Hybrid Space Lab), David Hamers, Joana Casaca Lemos, Valentina Anzoise, Nik Baerten

04 | DESIS Philosophy Talk Series: Storytelling and Design for Social Innovation

A Conversation About Time
October 2014
Eindhoven - DAE - Dutch Design Week

Virginia Tassinari, Elisa Bertolotti, Francesca Piredda, Heather Daam

with Bas Nik Baerten, Pablo Calderón Salazar, Alastair Fuad-Luke, Michael Kaethler, Bas Raijmakers
DESIS Philosophy Talk Series: Storytelling and Design for Social Innovation

Pearl Diver, Designer as Storyteller
June 2015
Milan - IED - Cumulus Conference

Virginia Tassinari, Elisa Bertolotti, Francesca Piredda, Heather Daam

with Francesca Antonacci, Valentina Anzoise, Sophie Krier, Donatella Mancini, Ilaria Mariani, Walter Mattana, Andrea Mendoza, David Parkinson, Davide Pinardi, Daniel Anthony Rossi, Roberta Tassi, Francesca Valsecchi, Susan Yelavich
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Engagement & storytelling for social innovation

Marisa Galbiati
Full Professor, Politecnico di Milano

ABSTRACT
People and communities, architects and designers, public administrators and others have discovered storytelling. Storytelling simply means telling stories: stories and tales are much more effective at representing meaningful worlds than abstract representations. Using a narrative gives the audience to experience an event empathically, and to translate real or imagined scenarios into a flow of time, giving them an understandable representation. As such, if storytelling is created with audiovisual tools, the degree of effectiveness is higher, because of the image-movement’s ability to describe and represent the depth of an event, an action or a context. And this is the real challenge, since the problem is not so much to make a good video, but ensure that it will become interesting, engaging, appreciated and seen by many people, in short, that it will go viral. What seems to be the driving force is an unconventional creativity that uses simple but catchy language.

If the designer is emerging as a cultural mediator, capable of interpreting the needs of communities or individuals, finding solutions that can improve quality of life, it becomes evident the importance of their communicative abilities in terms of both listening and communication skills.

An effective message is a message that can elicit a change in the person who receives it. It may be a change of perspective, thought or behaviour. In the field of social innovation, storytelling is assuming an important role as a translator of messages, and also as a catalyst for interests communities can identify with.

TAGS
Audiovisual Storytelling, Engagement, Viral, Empathy, Change of Behaviour, Listening, Communication, Mediator Design
People and communities, advertisers and architects, designers and public administrators have discovered storytelling. In truth, storytelling has always existed (as stories, tales, fables and testimonies) since our ancestors came together around a fire to tell each other about the events of their daily lives, or even before, when people told stories by drawing scenes of their community life on cave walls in prehistoric times.

Moreover, until the advent of writing, knowledge was transmitted orally, and stories were told through spoken words and accounts. Then, from the late nineteenth century, film translated the narrative flow into images and movement, incorporating the dimension of time and emotion to make the viewing experience realistic and exciting. What has changed in the contemporary scenario, in relation to the past, is attributable to a number of factors that make storytelling an object of worship today. Of these, there is one that undoubtedly plays a crucial role: the paradigm shift in communication moving away from one-directional communication (cinema, advertising, novels, theatre, etc.) towards a model of participatory, shared and viral communication, where the contents are re-modelled by the end user, who can determine their success or failure. The digital age (and in particular the development of social networks) has therefore favoured a return to the story and sharing, just as in pre-technological societies.

However, although everyone is now appealing to the communicative qualities of storytelling, it is necessary to understand some linguistic, structural, grammatical and semantic specificities in order to take full advantage of its effectiveness as a means of communication.

Storytelling simply means telling stories: stories and tales are much more effective at representing meaningful worlds than abstract representations. Using a narrative gives the audience the opportunity to experience an event empathically, and to translate real or imagined scenarios into a flow of time, giving them an understandable representation. As such, if storytelling is created with audiovisual tools and languages, the degree of effectiveness is higher, because of the image-movement’s ability to describe and represent the depth of an event, an action or a context. In a sequence that describes a craftsman at work, for example, we intercept a lot of information relating to the context (the environment in which the person is placed) and the text (the person in question).

But the information we receive from the images is not enough to recreate the whole landscape if it is not accompanied by an emotional representation. This emotional representation can be achieved through the beauty (aesthetics) and the accuracy of a video, or through its capacity to involve viewers by offering very original, unexpected content that intrigues them and allows them to enter a world with a touch of magic. And this is the real challenge, since the problem is not so much to make a good video, but ensure that it will become interesting, engaging, appreciated and seen by many people, in short, that it will go viral.
We know that the viral video phenomenon can not be controlled: it is a truly bottom-up phenomenon that invades the space of the web according to principles that many scholars are currently exploring. For example, not all interesting and beautiful videos become viral: it is often less professional videos that gain high visibility, videos capable of intriguing and fascinating despite the simplicity and spontaneity of their language. What seems to be the driving force is an unconventional creativity that uses simple but catchy language.

This long introduction has been necessary to introduce the subject of storytelling as it now being addressed and discussed in the design community. If the designer is emerging as a cultural mediator, capable of interpreting the needs of communities or individuals, finding solutions that can improve quality of life, it becomes evident the importance of their communicative abilities in terms of both listening skills (a function that is not at all simple, and requires an openness to dialogue that must be gained with the right tools) and their communication skills in the sense of knowing how to construct effective messages, targeted at the groups for which they are intended. In this regard, an effective message is a message that can elicit a change in the person who receives it. It may be a change of perspective, thought or behaviour. It can be the beginning of a new awareness. For example, Wim Wenders’ film “Salt of the Earth” on the life of the great Brazilian photographer Sebastiao Salgado tells us and shows us the tragedies of war in Africa with an evocative power that far exceeds the narrative ability of a novel. It is a film that makes the observer think and evokes a feeling of duty, condensing a concentration of information and highly intense emotional narratives into just two hours.

In the field of social innovation, storytelling is assuming an important role as a translator of messages, and also as a catalyst for interests communities can identify with. Not only that, storytelling can amplify weak signals that would otherwise melt away like snow in the sun. To say that a good video is worth a thousand words is not to say anything new. Storytelling’s ability to engage has been amply demonstrated in the marketing industry, which has turned it into a strength. Of course we talk about innovative storytelling that contains a good idea, and today that is worth more than a good budget. Some examples: the video by Blendtec (https://youtu.be/IBUJcD6W56s) in which the marketing director of a blender company shows the blender’s power by pulverising an iPad in a video with an ironic and naive tone that went viral, attracting millions of views and quadrupling sales of the product. Another example is the Green Peace video, which plays on a well-known commercial for Volkswagen. In this case, the well-known car brand takes its cue from a scene from Star Wars and shows a child dressed as Darth Vader trying to use his magic powers on his dad’s car. After failing with a series of objects, finally the car turns on its lights and its engine at his command: the child looks at his parents with a puzzled expression, in awe of his new force, while it is revealed that it was in fact the father who started the car’s controls. Green Peace appropriates this narrative concept and turns it into a counter melody where the child-Darth Vader (the dark force) is surrounded by the forces of the good as they try to prevent planet Volkswagen from continuing to cause damage to the environment through pollution. This viral video achieved global success by leveraging on the long advertising series by the famous car brand (https://youtu.be/RFlKnMCRwNOI).

The protagonists in this video are the children we are bequeathing a dilapidated world. The children, or rather their future, represent the tender area, the way to touch the adults’ heartstrings. It’s what is called “insight” in technical terms, that is the raw nerve of our sensitive areas, that space that draws our attention and drives our actions.
While the storytelling popular with major brands can sometimes be reduced to simple representations of well-being caused by the possession or use of an object (the historic carousel to the large case histories of contemporary advertising), the big spenders are currently making a huge effort to draw attention to products by using storytelling with original narrative schemes that do not mention the product at all, but rather focus on the symbolic function that the product can carry out. A significant example is the Worldstoughestjob video (http://youtu.be/HB3xM93rXbY), made by the company Cardstore, which produces personalised cards for different occasions, such as birthdays, anniversaries etc. The narrative ploy develops around the three points of a triangle involving a simple object (the card), a value to be transmitted (affection for a person) and the target audience to be informed. In this instance, a fake recruiting firm puts a notice online looking for a very particular profile: a director of operations. Many young people respond to the ad and an employee begins recruitment interviews. The interviewer says that it is a special job, with no holidays, no breaks at work, you have to stand for up to 20 hours, working on Christmas and Easter, Sundays and holidays, you have to have expertise in medicine, economics, and much more, and above all the job is totally unpaid. The young people are surprised and shocked... until the interviewer tells them that this job exists: it is what all their mothers do. At this point the kids get emotional and, with a few laughs and a few tears, the video ends with a call to action: tell your mother that you are grateful for everything she has done for you, send them a special card (a Cardstore card)! Cardstore identified a very powerful insight, the mother figure, and staged it in an original way far removed from family stereotypes, and without ever showing the object-card.

Being a very powerful insight, the maternal role is often used in brand campaigns, such as in the Kinder cereals campaign #PossoAiutartiMamma_Ti Prometto (#ICanHelpYouMum, I Promise). It also starts with a staged situation: a (non-existent) production company rounds up some mothers for a (fake) casting session. When the mothers come to read the script they realise they are actually reading letters from their children, containing expressions of love and promises to help in the family home. The approach to by Pampers is more interesting, but still on the same theme (Mom's first birthday: https://youtu.be/uu3iM1azTj4): while some mothers are taking their children to the paediatrician as they turn one, a photographic exhibition outside the doctor's office with large photographs depicts the same mothers with their little ones. It's the baby's first year of life, but also the first birthday of the mother who has cared for it with love. The mothers are moved and recognise the centrality of their maternal role through the images. The Pampers brand only appears at the end of the video, marking the partnership with a product that has changed the women's lives. Here, too, the product is never mentioned, only the emotional context and human feelings are evoked. These three examples show how important the sphere of emotions is to the narrative function. They are images with a strong communicative impact that able to touch that raw nerve that links to our deepest emotions. It is a new way to stage a slice of real life, without having to show the products and their performance (which is what has characterised advertising to date), instead constructing a scenario where people's lives are intertwined with the things that have helped to make their lives easier. While human emotions have not changed, the ways to communicate them have, however.

I chose these examples to show how the crisis in advertising has pushed creatives to find new ways to communicate with their audiences. It has been clear from the outset that people are tired of the old models of advertising, and that it was necessary to create new ways of relating to the public to inspire new confidence among audiences. Storytell-
Designers, in my opinion, should look carefully at the communicative behaviours of advertising professionals because in that sector investments and energies are much more directed at achieving measurable goals.

Today there are many co-production operations taking place in the field of video for social innovation: documentation on state of the art processes, participatory videos, self-narration, videos for social organisations (documenting the life of the most vulnerable populations, people who don’t have access to income, the unemployed, the Roma, etc.), crowdfunding for filmmaking, transmedia storytelling, etc.

We are currently seeing a big effort to document processes and results or to construct scenarios of what is not there yet, but which can be represented with images and thus easier to understand, since it includes the narrative power of images. Now we need to go one step further: to make narrative an engaging, captivating and empowering tool so that the message has a more profound effect on decision makers, politicians and people who, if involved, will participate in the processes of change contemporary society needs with more passion.

**About the Author**

Marisa Galbiati is full Professor at the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano, where she teaches Multimedia and Audiovisual Communication. She deals with creative strategies of communication applied to social issues and the design of transmedia communication systems applied to urban contexts aimed at the development of social innovation and social inclusion. Former Vice Dean (from 2010 to 2015) of the School of Design, she is Director of the Masters programmes: Brand Communication, Art Direction and Copywriting and SNID (Social Network Influence Design), at POLI.design - Consorzio del Politecnico di Milano.
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