The woman in the database

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Abstract

This editorial introduces a portfolio of essays, interviews, videos and images, based on the 2019 Data-Stories Confestival in Volos, Greece. I present four experimental genres showcased at that event—the anthropological role-playing game, the locative media walk, desktop documentary, live participant film—as ethnographic "data-stories". Overspilling familiar formats, spaces and temporalities of academic discourse, these creative refunctionings of anthropological narrativity for the contemporary media ecology productively blur the borders of pedagogy, research, and dissemination, as well as between experts and non-specialist audiences. They suggest promising public-facing directions for producing and communicating social research, open to the arts and activism.

A woman at an editing bench, unwinding and rewinding celluloid film (Fig. 1). Scissors making a decisive snip between frames. Shelves with spools of footage neatly arranged according to categories such as "market," "machine," "factory" (Fig. 2). Despite her prominence in these scenes from the studio, Elizaveta Svilova, filmmaker, documentarian and pioneer of early Soviet montage, is mentioned last in the credits of the 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera*. Her name follows that of both her husband Dziga Vertov, the "author-supervisor of the experiment," and her brother-in-law Mikhail Kaufman as "chief cameraman." While her subsidiary role as "assistant editor" appears to confirm gender hierarchies of cultural production and authorship, this belittling title might be as ironic as that of the film itself (Molcard, 2020).

Figure 1. Elizaveta Svilova at work editing in *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929, Dziga Vertov)

Figure 2. Still from *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929, Dziga Vertov)

Figure 3. The opening frame of *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929, Dziga Vertov)

After all, what is the place of the director in a film that explicitly rejects the scripts, actors, theaters and literary plots associated with bourgeois art? Famously dwarfed by the apparatus in the film's opening scene (Fig. 3), the "man with a movie camera" spends the rest of his time running around Moscow, dangerously hanging off of moving vehicles. Toward the end of the movie, the camera, now automated, pirouettes on its tripod, takes a bow and even walks off without a human operator. In centering machine over human, the film could be read as either a somewhat naïve celebration of the documentary genre and its ability to capture "Life-As-It-Is" or a chilling premonition of total surveillance culture. In either case, the film takes direct aim at the male author-complex and familiar narrative conventions such as plot and character.

In place of story, the film foregrounds the material conditions—and gender divisions—of production, including cultural production. From this perspective, we can understand the reason for including scenes filmed in the studio-archive where Svilova is engaged in the feminized, labor-intensive labor of processing celluloid film. Despite the fact that it is Vertov's name that has remained in history as the auteur of this experimental work, it is Svilova's eyes we see at the end, darting between strips of film and railroad lines. It is she who produces the interchangeable film segments that retrospectively could be assembled into this work and perhaps disassembled and appropriated into future ones. In revealing the still frames behind the moving images through stop, reverse and slow-motion techniques, the film constantly breaks the illusion of looking directly at people and things through the camera, drawing our attention to the camera, the frame and the fact of an already-mediated world.

As a kind of curator of found footage, Szilova as "woman in the database" seems an apt ancestor and muse for a collection of essays, interviews, videos, images and other media artefacts that explore critical and creative ways that anthropologists and related practitioners are communicating and coproducing knowledge on timely social and political issues within the fold of our particular media context. This portfolio takes as it starting point the experience of the [Data-Stories: New Media Aesthetics and Rhetorics for Critical Digital Ethnography](#) Confestival (conference + festival) that I co-organized, in the early summer of 2019, with a team of young researchers and collaborators based at the University of Thessaly in Volos, Greece[1].

The main idea behind the Data-Stories Confestival was to examine transformations in the ways we narrate our lives and worlds in the age of algorithms, databases, social media platforms, gaming, smartphones and, more generally, networked and participatory culture. In turn, we asked how social relationships, embodied performances, forms of value

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[1] The Data-Stories Confestival was held between May 31st and June 2nd, 2019 at the Rooftile and Brickworks Museum N. & S. Tsalapatas in Volos. The other members of the organizing team were Constantinos Diamantis, Petros Petridis, Eleni Tsatsaroni and Nikos Paschoulis.

and political subjectivities were being produced and negotiated through these novel modes of storytelling. In other words, we were taking stock, almost twenty years on, of media theorist Lev Manovich's provocative claim in his 2001 *Language of New Media* that the digital database and its algorithmic engine would usher in a new cultural logic and "info-aesthetics" (p. 193) at odds with—even inimical to—the narrative basis of dominant twentieth-century cultural forms such as film and the novel. Manovich goes on to identify Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera* as a kind of database narrative, or database cinema, suggesting that maybe the two concepts were not inherently opposed after all. Our beautiful poster for Data-Stories makes an intertextual nod to Vertov through Manovich as a precursor to contemporary digital media post-narrativity—or, in our terms, "data-stories."
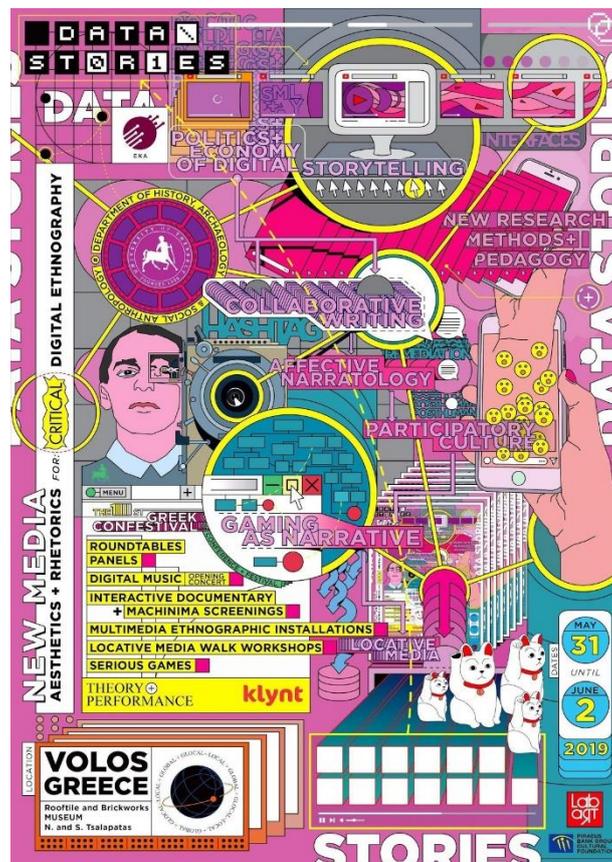

Figure 4. Poster for the Data-Stories Confestival by OneLeg RollerBoy/Vassilis Gountinas, 2019.

The Data-Stories Confestival was extremely well-received, drawing a large, youthful, interdisciplinary local and international group of speakers, performers and participants, despite the shoestring budget and the fact that the event was held in a small Greek city without an airport. Given the rare opportunities for critical discussion of research on digital network culture and social media in the Greek context, the Data-Stories open call clearly fulfilled an important need and may have jumpstarted new networks of collaboration.

What made the event unique was how it moved organically beyond the form of a traditional symposium, itself tied to the legacy of print culture and attendant hierarchies of knowledge, to develop a festival atmosphere and tempo. It was not so much that we ran events "parallel" to the academic panels and roundtables, such as film screenings, a concert and a party, but that a speculative playfulness exuded from the core of the event. The confestival was designed around a series of experimental works based on the following genres: the anthropological role-playing game, the locative media walk, desktop documentary and live participant film. As creative refunctionings of anthropological narrativity for the contemporary media ecology, these novel data-stories, each in their own way, overspilled familiar formats, spaces and temporalities of academic discourse. In this way, they productively blurred the borders of research and dissemination, as well as between experts and non-specialist audiences, illuminating promising new modalities of scholarly communication, knowledge production and aesthetics.

This portfolio returns to the makers of these works, asking them to describe the emergence of these particular genres from their research, pedagogy, activism and/or art, as well as to elaborate on the potential of these formats for a politically-engaged ethnographic practice. We also asked them to reflect on their personal experience at the Data-Stories Confestival and share their views on the potential of such events as venues for cultural critique and cultural production.

A word about the contributions

Please see HTML version for accompanying video content

Vasilina Alamani, Iliana Kirmanidou Rekalidou and Nikos Sykas playing *TODO* in the Data-Café with Thasos Tanagias. Video by Christina Antoniadou. Volos, May 31, 2019.

There is no better place to begin than with a cup of coffee at the Data-Café set up in the restaurant-café adjacent to the museum space where the talks and screenings were taking place. Here "with a nod to café culture, reading rooms, online browsing and digital reading practices," one could peruse curated pieces from *Entanglements* on a tablet, or play the anthropological game *TODO*, the case study at the center of anthropologist Petros Petridis' article "Anthropological Role-playing Games as Multimodal Pedagogical Tools: Rhetoric, Simulation and Critique" (Figure 4).

As the early twenty-first century's premiere culture industry, far outstripping revenues from the film and music industries combined, gaming is a critical starting point for any conversation about the fate of narrative—including in anthropology. On the surface, video games, which often ask the user to play a role in a historical, fantastical or everyday story

world, might appear as multimodal enhancements or extensions of literary and filmic narrative universes. However, as Petridis points out, theorists of games, both online and off, have for years been developing concepts such as "procedurality" and "procedural rhetoric" to describe a fundamental shift away from the *representation of reality* and toward the *simulation of actions*. Texts and images might be prominent in games, but they are produced secondarily, after the rules, processes and algorithms have been "run." Rather than providing a description of a past or present situation—as in ethnography typically, games are future-oriented. They are composed from the actions and moves of participants each time a game is played.

Petridis' article focuses on the *TODO* role-playing game about Greek cultural stereotypes, designed by his students Christina Antoniadou and Thasos Tanagias. Considering this particular game from a pedagogical perspective, he asks if games might provide an effective mode of communicating anthropological knowledge and concepts, an alternative to traditional linear, text-based forms such as final term papers and classroom lectures. For the student-designers, "writing" this game involved imagining a set of rules, processes and scenarios that would engage potential players to enact particular roles, enter into debate with other players and reach a point of critical reflection regarding their assumptions and certainties about the social world. As a result, authorship of the game was ultimately ceded to the players who co-produced each iteration of the game. Rather than provide fixed knowledge and conclusions, the anthropologist-designers had to develop the skill of facilitating somewhat awkward conversations with previously unknown players. They also often had to keep quiet and listen as players spoke among themselves. Rather than the end point of the teaching-research-dissemination process, the conference proved a dynamic site of encounter and research. Indeed, the insights gained each time this game has been played have shaped the redesign of the game as an open and in-process methodology.
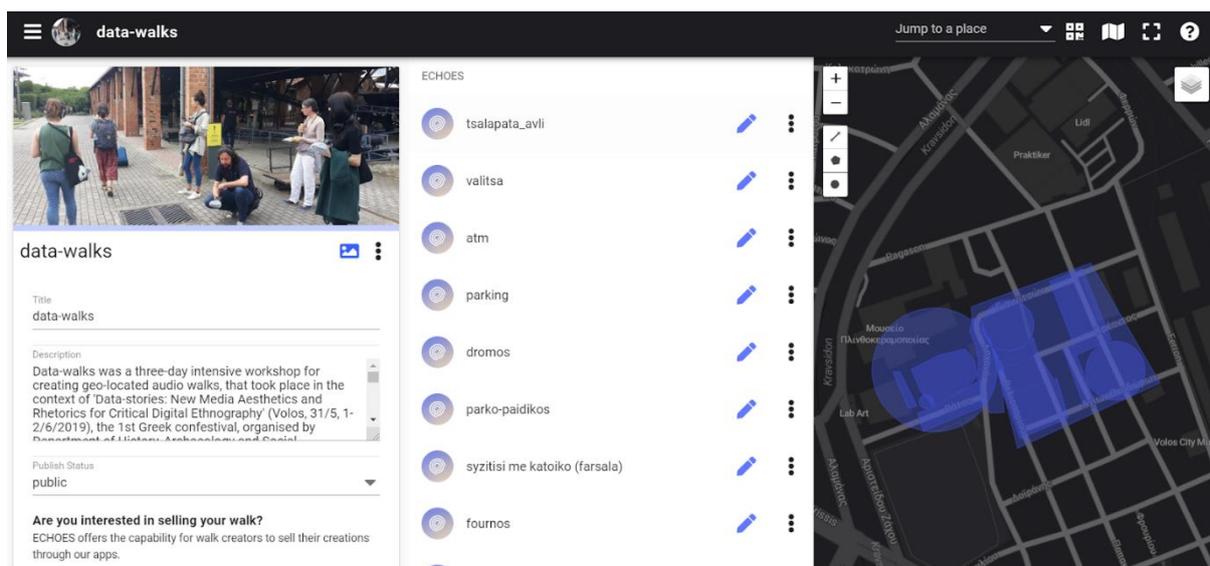

Figure 5. Data-walking in physical, mediated and imaginary spaces, 2019. Credit: Ismini Gatou.

In the case of the experimental three-day, location-based (locative) media workshop "data-walks," led by cultural media theorists and practitioners Nikos Bubaris and Ismini Gatou, the conventional borders between social science research and artistic creation were challenged (Figure 5). This workshop took place both inside and outside the spatialities and temporalities of the confestival, as participants in the workshop were invited to drift around the grounds of the conference venue, as well as beyond its socially-demarcated borders to explore the adjacent parking lot, historical site and residential neighborhood. They recorded the sounds of the physical environment, such as rain, but also conversations with strangers they met outside and their own interior monologues. They then returned to the studio to painstakingly curate the captured sonic and spatial data and remix a media walk for others to follow on a specialized app. This linking of sonic data to spatial coordinates through GPS technology is known as geolocating. In their article, "Geolocating beyond coordinates: Spatial stories of researching - relating - creating," Bubaris and Gatou not only outline the theoretical framework of the workshop, but also draw on the workshop experience as a corpus of data, demonstrating how this model of conference can provide as much a site of knowledge dissemination as of knowledge production. As in the case of the role-playing game, the live performative interaction of "walking subjects" with their environment and human/nonhuman others during the confestival event problematized realist modalities of representing space and time, enabling the interweaving of "objective" and "subjective" sensorial impressions of physical, mediated and imaginary events. Like Svilova, Bubaris and Gatou also foregrounded the mediating technologies themselves: in this case, sonic ones, made audible through the haptic contact of the microphone with physical surfaces. The non-representational, non-linear, collaboratively-produced media walk ultimately decentered authorship both during the process of production and in subsequent re-walkings by those who use(d) the app to explore the area after the conference. This turn away from factual documentation should not be understood as an abandonment of the ethnographic "field" to more pragmatic social scientists, but as an attempt to acknowledge the multiplicities of time, event and situation of which it is comprised, as well as the "reality" of subjective, affective and speculative relations to space, environment and technology.

The next two pieces in the portfolio are interviews with the visual anthropologists Steffen Köhn and Maple Razsa who reflected on their experiments with film and video genres at Data-Stories. In "Exploring Uses of Networked Images in Desktop Documentary," Köhn speaks about the genre of desktop documentary with his former student Lillian Dam Bracia, an artist, curator and herself a creator of a desktop documentary. This kind of documentary, filmed with screen recording technology rather than through a camera lens, implicitly recognizes that the life lived on screen is worthy of witness. Svilova would certainly have been intrigued. The form is also intensely reflexive: the anthropologist as character-performer reveals her/his research process —searching information online from a home office, conducting interviews with participants on video conferencing platforms. Furthermore, the anthropologist plays the role of curator appropriating and recontextualizing segments of visual material produced by interlocutors into a new data-story, rather than engaging in the "heroic" production of more new footage like the "man with the movie camera." Another technique prominent in this genre that Svilova would have appreciated is its use of spatial montage. The screen in desktop cinema is typically layered

with multiple open windows and tabs, becoming an argument in and of itself about the relation between spatialities, temporalities and subjects. In the age of Zoomification brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown measures around the world, this aesthetic has become widespread. Desktop cinema, despite its seemingly spontaneous and informal style of documentation through the browser, can be very subtly crafted and performed, often presenting a theorization of these new intimacies, networks, information ecologies and modes of navigating and participating in contemporary platform socialities. Finally, as a born-digital format, desktop documentary does not begin its life in the niche world of film festivals or academic screenings only to be remediated—at '"lower quality"—for a cell phone screen and online streaming. Desktop cinema is already in and of the networks. As a sort of organic low-tech data-story, this format is being experimented with, in more or less critical ways, by makers of prestige television and video art, gamers and everyday users as they curate their social media feeds. Köhn suggests that anthropologists have much to gain from engaging in this dynamic field of cultural analysis and production, which is more inclusive relative both to academia and filmmaking. At the same time, working in this popular idiom also offers the possibility for the ethnographic work to be taken up by broader publics.

The last interview addresses another genre of audiovisual data-story, the live participatory film, through an interview that Lillian Dam Bracia and I conducted with documentary filmmaker and visual anthropologist Maple Razsa, entitled "[What if This Happened in Your City? Collective Decision-making and Embodied Witnessing in Live Participatory Film Events](#)." The screening and facilitation of Razsa's participatory documentary *The Maribor Uprisings* about a popular uprising in Slovenia was a highlight of the Data-Stories Confestival. As in the case of desktop documentary, but from a different perspective, this film also resonates with the spirit of the "woman in the database." Forgoing the role of documenter-author, Razsa, who was not actually present at the particular demonstrations, made the film entirely through the curation of activists' footage. As an assemblage, the film thematises the politics of witnessing for activists, as well as for mediated witnesses of such critical events. At the same time, the making of the film acknowledges how the contemporary radical democratization of access to the means of filmic production unsettles hierarchies of professionals and amateurs, decentering the filmmaker-anthropologist's view.

The transformation of the film screening into a participatory live event also reorients the relation of the anthropologist-filmmaker to the audience, in ways similar to the role-playing games discussed above. As Razsa explains, the presence of a facilitator at the screenings is not auxiliary to the film: the facilitator does not come before the audience at the beginning or end of the screening to respond to questions, as an expert either on the particular socio-historical context or the filmic technique featured in the film. Rather the facilitator is on the stage throughout, mediating the audience's relation to the media and to each other during the course of the screening-event. While as the anthropologist-filmmaker Razsa usually plays this role, he suggested in our conversation that facilitation might best be taken on by someone *not* involved in the making of the film. The live participatory film, thus, is not conceived as a closed work to be viewed and then discussed and judged by viewers, but as a catalyst for dialogue and debate *among* audience members. In the case of *The Maribor*

Uprisings, the participants come together to enact the role of an assembly, making political-ethical decisions in relation to the direction in which the film should go. This form simultaneously immerses the audience in the subjective bodily experience of participation in the particular uprising *and* pulls them out of the depicted situation to reflect on how they might act together with others—or have acted in the past—in similar situations in their own communities, from anti-austerity demonstrations to Black Lives Matter protests. In short, the live participant film is based not so much on interaction with media as it is on the interactions of viewers-turned-participants with each other. Data-story formats such as the live participant film, thus, require a theatrical kind of setting and occasion of gathering in order to take place. At the same time, we might say that they are the magic ingredient needed to provoke intense and unpredictable encounters, exchanges and explorations that, in turn, might spawn future collaborations.

The portfolio closes with my theoretical essay "[Data-Stories for Post-Ethnography]()," which explores the reconfiguration of ethnography-as-book in the contemporary age of database, gaming and social media platforms. To go beyond the book as legacy of print culture and continuing gold standard of academic authority, I argue is about more than adding multimodality to existing formats. Books and journal articles are complex power-laden artifacts of social and (geo)political relations supporting particular ideas about the place of the university and expert knowledge in the world. The turn to the data-story model, thus, might help us reimagine the relationship between research and pedagogy, students and faculty, the university and the local community. This shift also could enable anthropology to forge deeper relationships with other fields of cultural production and public intervention from art to activism.

Specifically, I will argue for a post-ethnography centered around three figures—the anthropologist as *curator* of data-stories, who unsettles habits of authorship, the anthropologist as *performer* of data-stories, who exchanges argument and representation for experiment, play and facilitation and the *anthropologist as producer* of data-stories, who designs the stage of encounter and builds publics. As part of the broader agenda of public anthropology and experimental humanities, I argue that the data-story model offers a pathway toward a critical and creative mode of engagement with new modes of composition, expression and communication, as well as with the emergent knowledge ecologies of contemporary digital networked culture. This shift, in turn, I believe has the potential to make the process of producing and disseminating social research and ethnographic knowledge more inclusive, relevant and empowering.

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Film

1929 Человек с киноаппаратом (*Man with a Movie Camera*) (Dziga Vertov)

Penelope Papailias teaches social anthropology at the University of Thessaly where she directs the Laboratory of Social Anthropology and the <u>Pelion Summer Lab for Cultural Theory and Experimental Humanities</u>. She writes on the politics of cultural memory, historical culture and witnessing, visuality and violence, public death and networked mourning from postcolonial, anti-racist, feminist perspectives. She is particularly interested in exploring the possibilities of digital technologies in pedagogy and in expanding the agenda of experimental humanities. Her latest collaboration is <u>Decolonize Hellas</u>: a call for the re-viewing the place of modern Greece in relation to geographies and genealogies of European colonialism.
Web: http://ha.uth.gr/index.php?page=faculty.display&a=papailia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3557-2960