

Articles

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University of Huddersfield

John Kelly is senior lecturer in graphic design and animation at the University of Huddersfield. He studied graphic design at degree level and graphic arts and design at master's level. His current research explores the manifestations of data shadows and visual residues contained within artefacts and archives to evaluate their potential role in the generation of graphic outcomes.

Contact: School of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Huddersfield, Queensgate Campus, Huddersfield HD1 3DH, UK.

E-mail: j.r.kelly@hud.ac.uk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2508-674X>

Abstract

This article will firstly account for the role of the graphic designer as a custodian of stories and their transcriptions into visual form. This is a mode of storying the self through the production of different graphic formats. Secondly, it will address the mixing of narratives from out of the archive: between the researcher as narrator and the archive source (in this case Edward C. Rigg). Thirdly, the benefits of this project will consider how graphic design students engage with storytelling as a means to develop brand and

content strategies. This approach examines the role of storytelling in type and image selection and its relevance within graphic design. The process will be analysed through the mechanisms of autoethnography, cultural analysis and the reinterpretation of oral, written and physical ephemera. The article argues that these are the building blocks for creating new narratives and design concepts.

Keywords

autoethnography

graphic design

storytelling

archive

memory

narrative

As a graphic designer I am currently transcribing the archives of Edward C. Rigg. This is a story of an ordinary man who led an extraordinary life. It is a rich resource of detailed historical content, focusing on Edward's time in the RAF just after the Second World War and documenting his profession as a jet test pilot and military transport pilot during the 1950s and 1960s. The archives contain three main sections: a collection of 24 Ring bind folders, five boxes of slides and a collection of video interviews. The 24 Ring bind folders are the main section of the archive and play an important role in Edward's daily life and his links to the past and present. The physical archive consists mainly of photographs and correspondence with the RAF and Edward's father. The transcription of the physical and largest archive has presented many design challenges in deciding the most effective way to transcribe and analyse the content. Autoethnography has been key

in drawing out stories from the archive. This has included repetitive conversations with myself and with Edward to explore narratives that may not be immediately visible in the archive and need to be brought alive through a translation process. These memories are stored not only in the interviews I have undertaken, but also through the design work I have generated from the research process. This article will address both verbal and visual storytelling contained within these archival items, and show how they have been transcribed in and through the graphic design process. The work produced highlights the legacy of Empire and the personal stories contained within archives, whilst also exploring the intergenerational experiences of the time period (see [Figure 1](#)).

[Figure 1: RAF Leconfield folder, item from the Archives of Edward C. Rigg, granted with permission.](#)

The purpose of this research project is to further evaluate the manifestations of data shadows and visual residues contained within artefacts and archives and their potential role in the generation of written and visual narratives in creative practice. The term 'data shadow' refers to written and visual narratives, which can be used to form an emotional attachment to objects and images. Visual residues can be defined as fragments of information, which still retain the physical essence of the original, requiring the viewer to reconstruct the narrative. These visual residues are interpreted through my own autoethnographic investigations, which are based upon my interaction with the archives and Edward's personal narrative. Cultural, social and political experiences come to the fore through this exchange. This form of research enquiry has facilitated the generation of narrative and metaphor in the transcription of the archive. Data is initially gathered through short video clips of my thoughts and recollections of Edward and the archives.

This has proved beneficial in exploring Edward's personal view of his time in the Royal Air Force and Empire Test Pilots School. It also combines my personal story of Edward and our relationship and journey as we unpack the narratives that unfold from out of the archival material.

Autoethnography can be described as a process, which analyses personal experiences as part of a wider reflection and understanding of the character and diversity of cultural experiences. According to Ellis et al. (2011: 1) autoethnography:

[...] challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product.

Autoethnography is a multifaceted and flexible research process useful for analysing not only the lives of others, but also the self. Ellis and Bochner define this method as, 'an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 739). Autoethnography thus allows the researcher to make connections between the personal and cultural aspects of the subject, whilst placing the self within a social context. This validates the researcher's own voice within the object being investigated and utilizes multiple strategies in the process. Margret Ducan in the journal article, 'Autoethnography: Critical appreciation of an emerging art' writes:

[...] this research tradition does more than just tell stories. It provides reports that are scholarly and justifiable interpretations based on multiple sources of evidence. This means autoethnographic accounts do not consist solely of the researcher's opinions but are also supported by other data that can confirm or triangulate those opinions. Methods

of collecting data include participant observation, reflective writing, interviewing, and gathering documents and artefacts.

(Ducan 2004: 5)

Without autoethnographic research, rich narratives would remain hidden from the researcher. For example, Edward's own autobiography contains descriptions of dates, official correspondence and employment undertaken within the RAF. However, it is through our relationship and the dialogue generated between myself and Edward that narratives start to emerge and unfold. Such an approach to the research process is examined through my own self-reflective narratives, where I re-tell the stories told to me by Edward, through the contents of his archive. In other words, I translate my own personal experiences of the archive and my relationship to it, into graphic outcomes. Graphic design methodologies and the design process have been fundamental in the creation of distinct visual outcomes. The final images, which feature on the Last Argosy website (www.lastargosy.com), are part of the narrative distilling process, which in turn creates its own visual data, generating new insights and interpretations. The outcomes can be considered as multivocal as they are not only an historical record but are able to generate meanings influenced by the personal perspectives of myself as researcher and/or the audiences/readers of the graphic work. Autoethnographic research thus allows the archive to grow with the creation of new narrative content, rather than just re-cataloguing and re-ordering historical information. Dydia DeLyser in 'Collecting, kitsch and the intimate geographies of social memory: A story of archival autoethnography', states that this is 'a shift in method, methodology and practice to focus on understanding the archive and archival resources differently: as collections that grow and change, as collections that scholars can contribute to' (DeLyser 2015: 209).

The graphic design process helps me to connect stories from out of the archive to wider cultural audience through curated content in both traditional and online digital formats. In this respect, autoethnography has been a key framework for bringing together different ways of storying the self – the self of the custodian and author of the archive (Edward C. Rigg), the self of the researcher as graphic designer and the selves of those audiences who engage with the creative outcomes as part of a wider cultural experience. This triangulation has resulted in the design and development of an interactive timeline, which not only represents Edward’s timeline but also encourages, in collaboration with participants, to map their own experiences and backgrounds to the timeline. Cohen and Manion (1986: 254) define triangulation as an ‘attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint’. This is a way of opening these narratives out to the storying of other selves, and highlighting the intertwining storying of personal experience inside the wider historical contexts of archival content. The timeline has several themes: the main time line reflects Edward’s career in the Royal Air Force and Empire Test Pilots School, which runs in parallel with a cause and effect timeline that influences Edward’s choices in life and postings around the globe. A further timeline explores how historical events influence contemporary social, economic and political issues.

Graphic designer as custodian of stories

I first met Edward in 2014, whilst undergoing medical treatment in Guildford, Surrey. I was staying at a delightful guest house near the hospital, owned by Daphne and Phil who told me about an ex RAF pilot in the village and asked if I would like to meet him. At that point I had no idea of the influence Edward would have on my research over the next

few years. On our first meeting the archival content was part organized, but most still remained in RAF utility cardboard boxes and Edward was reticent to let me rummage through the contents, but promised on my next visit that he would try to order the archive. Just as I was leaving to come home after my treatment I went to say goodbye and noticed several homemade 35mm slide containers. Edward asked if I would like to borrow them and after careful consideration I agreed and said I would return them to him on my next visit. I now make a point of borrowing something every time I visit. This way we both know we will resume our relationship and conversations. The slide archive, although well documented with two logbooks, has sat neglected for many years due to restrictions in viewing and the immediacy of the physical archive. It occupies the same time line as the folders, but is of a different narrative. It depicts the last days of the British Empire from Edward's personal and work related perspectives. I have transcribed two slide boxes into physical prints, which can be viewed at www.lastargosy.com. The prints highlight Edward's first posting to Germany just after the Second World War through to his posting at Khormakasar, Aden. Khormakasar was once the busiest airport in the world and a major supply artery of the British Empire. Edward was Wing Commander and pilot flying the Argosy & Beverly military transport planes. The curation, design and composition of the resulting prints have been constructed to allow the content to retain its original voice, whilst allowing the audience to further investigate the context. For example, 'The Boy at the Bar' composition (see [Figure 2](#)) depicts an Ethiopian boy serving at a bar in the Capital, Addis Ababa, April 1967. The image acts as a metaphor for British influence in the region and the last days of the British Empire. The bar has a colonial feel, designed to serve a Western clientele. All looks serene in the composition;

however, this is the same time line as the Aden emergency, when British influence was directly challenged in the Yemen. Several months later would see the evacuation of Aden during the Yemen uprising against British rule. This would result in the largest transport operation since the Berlin airlift of 1948–49, with the British evacuating Aden after the death of 24 British soldiers in the Yemen rebellion of June 1967. Later that year the British would withdraw completely, from Khormakasar to Bahrain.

Figure 2: Boy at the bar, print by the author, photographs courtesy of Edward C. Rigg.

The interviews

The interviews are the third part of Edward's archive and are my own personal contribution. Autoethnographic methods including interviews, narrations and conversations have been deployed through the archival material and the anecdotes recalled by Edward. On my return from visiting Edward I record my own recollections of the meetings, narrative observations and any outstanding issues, which need to be raised on my next visit. Autoethnographic research is not a precise science and is dictated by the researcher's personal understanding and lived experience. The process is therefore flexible and has a large degree of spontaneity and uncertainty. This process negotiates experiences as they happen in real time and the stimuli at the time of instigation can affect the outcome of the narrative reconstructions. Often, I will re-watch the interviews and undergo the process again with Edward using the same archive folders but with new questions. This operates at the edge of probing and respect, as I try to unpack Edward's personal and political experiences through the archival material.

Capturing the moment

I have now known Edward for four years and his memory is deteriorating. On occasions, I have to retell the stories to Edward to prompt him to remember what he himself told to me. This reminds us of the fragility and mutability of memory in the ‘storying of the self’. Edward has no immediate family and the likelihood this archive of experiences will be lost forever has caused custodian (Edward C. Rigg) and researcher many sleepless nights. Apart from Edward’s archive, I own several other archives and the materiality of them are important to me. Not just the experience of touching and handling items, but knowing I am playing a role in protecting them. I have photographed and scanned Edward’s archive of ‘neglected memories and mementoes’ on numerous occasions and on different recording devices, yet I always feel a slight emptiness. I can only surmise that this emptiness is due to the knowledge and fear that the archive may be lost forever when Edward dies. This personal drive to maintain/retain the archive relates to Jacques Derrida’s view of the desire to get closer to the origin of the archive.

[...] to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive, right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there’s too much of it, right where something in it archives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.

(Derrida 1995: 91)

Carolyn Steedman, author of *Dust, The Archive and Cultural History*, in a discussion of Derrida’s *Archive Fever* (1995) states: ‘Derrida indicated for the archive: the fever not so much to enter it and use it, as to have it, or just for it to be there in the first place’ (Steedman 2001: 2). Steedman recognizes the need to capture memory and moments, relating it to Freudian psychoanalysis and the desire to recover moments of inception

(2001: 3). However, Steedman is clear this is an illusion and no matter how we try, we cannot capture that 'moment of truth'. I recognize Steedman's need to collect, as from my personal perspective it is a tantalizing window into the past, where you crave the moment in time and long to feel closer to the originator and the narrative. But just as you think you can capture the moment, it fades into the distance and you are left once again with fragments of physical data. The regeneration of the archive through graphic representations has liberated the contents from stasis, where meaning, memories and narrative are locked in with the originator (Edward C. Rigg). Marlene Manoff investigating what constitutes a legitimate archive questions the validity and truth of the information contained within it:

[...] Many scholars (whether or not they describe themselves as postmodernists) have come to understand the historical record, whether it consists of books in Libraries or records in archives, not as an object representation of the past, but rather as a selection of objects that have been preserved for a variety of reasons (which may include sheer luck). These objects cannot provide direct and unmediated access to the past.

(2004: 14)

As custodian of the archival content and graphic designer, I am part of a narrative transcription and construction process, where the self of Edward is storied through creative means. The design process is part of my own autoethnography, my own story of finding, unearthing and saving a national asset. The major challenge for me is to curate and transcribe the content of Edward's archive in a sympathetic manner, resisting the urge to over design the work and to retain the core narrative behind its original and existing forms, whilst opening new avenues of interpretation. From my own design perspective this process is key at every stage of the transcription: from archival content

into graphic compositions. For example, type selection and harmonics are reviewed at every stage to ensure the time period is appropriately represented and the weight and size are complimentary to the compositions. The size of the physical prints is equally limited by the size of the original slides. All iconography generated has to retain a connection to the original narrative. Image and icon harmonics are only achieved from out of an understanding and interpretation of the re-telling process – my own as much as Edward's (see [Figure 3](#)).

[Figure 3: Edwards Air force Base, print by the author, photographs courtesy of Edward C. Rigg.](#)

This design development can be viewed at www.lastargosy.com/resources. The colour palette has been adjusted to represent the slide stock and colour cast of the original slides. All images retain the slide number, which can be referenced to the slide logbooks. The final selected prints can be seen in the gallery section of the website. I often retell the stories told to me by Edward and add my own interpretation of events, occurrences and consequences. In response to this process of listening to Edward recount his life and times through visual stimuli, I am currently developing a 'story box' made from a repurposed Second World War siren case. The box will contain the most memorable and contentious stories, depicted as visual compositions printed onto glass slides. Over the years I have come realize Edward only requires a small amount of visual content to recount his life and times. His verbal narratives are more vivid and expansive than the actual archives. The Storybox will be my personal homage to our shared experiences and will prompt my own failing memory to retrieve and retell the stories and times spent with Edward (see [Figure 4](#)).

Figure 4: The Storybox, by the author, photographs courtesy of Edward C. Rigg.

Mixing of narratives in the storying of the self

The largest archive is an embodiment of Edward and his ordinary yet extraordinary life. When I first viewed the files they reminded me of how the artist Joseph Cornell would first construct his files before creating one of his box compositions. The files hold the thread of narrative, hidden in photographs, correspondences, postcards, etc. They are designed and ordered and have a scrapbook look and feel. After several months of conversations with Edward and the files, it became apparent they are an important link to his past and facilitate immediate access to his memory. After discarding the notion of making a surrogate of the original, I began to design and develop the timeline. This is a way of opening these narratives out to the storying of other selves, exploring the legacy of Empire and postcolonial citizenship. Colour and textures from the original folders are used in conjunction with fonts used in the original archive. The video interviews undertaken with Edward and the resulting stories compliment the photos and documents. The timeline reflects the mixing of narratives explored through the autoethnographic process. The timeline production process can be viewed at the Last Argosy website (www.lastargosy.com).

Fragmentation and collision

Everything we experience is subject to decay and although Edward still retains vivid memories of his life and times they are subject to loss, fragmentation and collision. Memories can also be embellished and unpleasant experiences edited or omitted. I have recorded many interviews with Edward and on occasions recorded the same stories to

analyse any fluctuations in the storytelling process. Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000) state that autoethnographic data gathering:

[...] help fill in the richness, nuance, and complexity of the landscape, returning the reflective researcher to a richer, more complex, and puzzling landscape than memory alone is likely to construct.

(2000: 83)

An example that illustrates ways in which stories can be influenced by fading memory and different stimuli happened at one of our recent meetings. I forgot my glasses and had to use a pair belonging to Edward. This ordinary event directly changed one of Edward's consistent narratives and revealed further hidden data shadows. On several occasions Edward has told me the story of leaving the RAF, after suffering migraine problems. This story has elements of drama, chance and fate, as according to RAF regulations, pilots cannot fly if they suffer from migraines (raf.mod.uk 2018: 3). Edward had told me the story of the migraine attack on many occasions. However, the borrowing of the glasses changed this story to one of him leaving the RAF due to failing an eyesight test and not wanting a desk job. On our last meeting, I presented Edward with both versions of the story and managed to unpack the actual sequence of events. At his annual medical Edward passed the eyesight test; as for leaving the RAF, it is a story of finally being diagnosed to be suffering migraines. Edward had bought a flat in Westminster, London, which was on a direct bus route to the Air Ministry. On one particular Tuesday Edward awoke with a terrible migraine and rang the office to say he would not be in. Unfortunately, shortly after telephoning the Ministry, Edward's cleaner arrived at his flat and began to vacuum. This proved too much for Edward and he decided to sit and rest in St. James Park. As he sat on a park bench Edward saw the bus that would normally take

him to the office and decided to board the bus hoping the migraine would subside by the time he arrived at the Ministry. Unfortunately, the migraine was so bad he missed his stop and by chance got off at the Military Hospital a few stops down. Edward sat in the reception room of the hospital for most of the day ignoring repeated enquires regarding his health. Eventually, he was ordered by a Group Captain Doctor to undergo an examination. Within several weeks Edward was discharged from the RAF and found himself in civilian life. Edward insists the arrival at the military hospital was by chance; however we can form alternative theories to this story, was it chance or a deliberate act? Although Edward's stories are based on factual events, they are open to interpretation and further development. Shortly after conducting the interviews, using the video platform, I reflect on the stories and issues they raise, imagining myself in the same situation and reconstructing a visual timeline of the locations and events.

The role of narrative in the design process

As a mode of graphic design communication, narrative is pivotal in establishing the contexts of events, including historical and personal experiences. Techniques of deconstruction and reconstruction are embedded within storytelling practices. Important factors are at play in establishing a sophisticated graphic language. Often when students first encounter graphic design it is from a superficial standpoint believing it to only exist as logos or posters. Storytelling and narrative development can facilitate a deeper and more meaningful experience for the designer and ultimately a more engaging visual encounter for an audience. In the creative industries, holding conversations with the target audience is commonplace to gain insights and generate content. In this respect, autoethnographic research has and is used centrally in the development of design

strategies without being labelled as such. Rather than being called autoethnography, it is often referred to as 'co-create' or 'my story' (Young 2009: 3). As part of my research into generating narrative through graphic design, I introduce students to found items and encourage analysis of materials, time periods, construction, content and possible storytelling. The mechanisms of autoethnography and inter-generational experience are useful in developing insights in the design process. The culture of the self and how the self is connected to others emerges out of this process. For example, in the early stages of narrative development, I often use a vintage leather writing folder circa 1970s, which contains two French train tickets, a writing pad, envelopes and a calendar. I encourage participants to develop personal perspectives and develop characters from the objects. A non-structural methodology is key to generating conversations around the items so as to allow cultural, social and economic factors contained within them to unravel. The interests and backgrounds of participants play an important role in the development process.

The process also highlights the need for historical and cultural research in the graphic design process. According to Ian Noble and Russell Bestley in *Visual Research: An Introduction to Research Methodologies in Graphic Design*, the importance of historical research in design practice helps to 'reveal meaning in the events of the past. Historical researchers interpret the significance of time and place in ways that inform contemporary decision making or put current practices into perspective' (2005: 59). Storying found items and archives thus aid further knowledge of historical and contemporary culture. For instance, I have two shoe boxes of accounts and advertising strategies found in a derelict corner shop in Accrington from the 1940s through to the

1970s. The boxes contain assorted ephemera including football pool coupons. For some students involved in the deconstruction process, this will be the first time they have seen a pools coupon. These glimpses into our past culture helps us establish who we were but also understand the commonalities with contemporary equivalents in on line/mobile betting. These artefacts highlight the need for the designer to understand historical, material and contemporary culture. The weaving of narrative text and image encourages students to transcribe historical content into informed contemporary pieces of design.

Conclusion

My chance encounter with Edward and his archives has been a fabulous experience in terms of discovering and documenting an ordinary yet extraordinary life. Edward's humility towards his career is impressive, as is the amount of planes he has tested and experiences he has had. More impressive is the occurrences that influence and surround his personal story and how this time period has influenced contemporary culture. My research continues to investigate the multifaceted nature of storying the self – the self of the author of the archive (Edward C. Rigg), the self of the researcher as graphic designer and the selves of those audiences who engage with the creative outcomes as part of a wider cultural experience. Narrative development elevates and enriches my graphic design practice. It creates a visual and textual knowledge base, which encourages debate and further contributions. The autoethnographic process has proved valuable in terms of encouraging conversations and ultimately new insights, which continue to inform and influence the design process. The student experience is also improved and enhanced by using narrative as a teaching method. It encourages students to contextualize and measure design outcomes. This mode of teaching ultimately informs commercial design practice,

by creating simple or complex messaging systems, transcribed across a range of media channels. For myself, as a researcher, using narrative development in the graphic design process helps me to connect stories from out of the archive into visual formats to be received by wider cultural audiences. This not only broadens the role of designer to include custodianship of stories and content curation, it also facilitates further collaborations and debates about the many selves at work in the dissemination of archival content.

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