

Researching the photographic representation of popular music using autoethnography as a research approach

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an example of autoethnography as a research method in photography. I will use my research on photographic representation of popular music to examine the viability of autoethnography as a framework for practice-based research. I focus on the notion of subjectivity, still so contested by proponents of traditional research methods, to show how autoethnography can open up a potential for in-depth political and cultural enquiry that is authentic and ethical. Enquiry via this reflexive method pays due attention to the circumstances of individual cultural production and to its wider cultural, social and affective impacts. I will argue that autoethnography is a valid and effective means of questioning practice and the contexts in which practice exists, thus contributing to knowledge in the cultural field. In this paper, I give practical insights into the process of personal, theoretically-informed writing, exploring how I came to this approach and why.

key words:

authenticity, autoethnography, ethics, fandom, narrative enquiry, photography, popular music, practice-based research, research methods, subjectivity

Locating the self

More than twenty years ago, I started a music fanzine with fellow students. We believed in alternative politics and in creating a counter-argument to mass-media propaganda, by offering a different view on the world through the fanzine. It was a democratic affair, faithful to fanzine ideology. The dominant competitive individualism (Duncombe, 1997: 180) of the outside world had no place in the way we ran the set-up. It was a 'refusal to be passive' (Duncombe, 1997: 179). In order to illustrate my articles, I bought myself an SLR camera and started taking photographs at concerts. No one had any expectations of the pictures, apart from my own limited ambition to take photographs that would survive the coarse black-and-white photocopy printing. I had found something just for me in music, and now in writing and taking photographs for my fanzine. I found a place to be myself with my music, my camera and my words. This, I realised only recently. I still write for my fanzine but publish it online. My articles now bear the signature of my moods, thoughts and personal experiences.

What started as a desideratum for the young fanzine writer armed with a modest SLR camera became a personal belief and a way of being; that is being 'in opposition to the dominant society' (Duncombe, 1997: 179). Today this is a double challenge: to the consumerist representation of popular music and to the dominant academic discourse of popular music studies.

I offer a snippet of my autobiographical past and present only to outline this cultural and political situatedness, which I have constructed, largely unconsciously, as a music fan, fanzine writer and self-taught photographer.

Resisting the dominant utilitarian visual representation of popular music has become a way of being. My aesthetic experience could be seen as the outcome of a series of political decisions (Berleant, 2000). Indeed, it is the ideological environment of the 'defiant' fanzine (Duncombe, 1997: 124) that has framed my cultural production and photographic practice (Jenkins, 1996: 285). It was logical, and also essential, to seek a research method that would embrace my narrative and photographic past and enable me to interrogate it. I needed to explore the possibility that my experience could be a way to further our knowledge and understanding of popular music consumption.

My practice-based research is founded on the argument that the consumerist approach to images of bands and artists establishes a restricted picture of popular music; that the professional music photographer contributes to the rigidity of music genre categorisation and the imposition of totalising popular music theories. My work is based on an autoethnographic interrogation of the body of my photographic production, using writing as a method of enquiry. It reflects the recent rise in the use of autoethnography as a self-contained method in arts-based research practice (Leavy, 2009: 38).

Suzanne Langer wrote in 1957: 'I think every work of art expresses ... not feelings and emotions which the artist has, but feelings and emotions which the artist knows' (Langer, 1957: 91). To me the self-reflexivity inherent in autoethnography is key to understanding our feelings and emotions, thus our practice. Reflexivity through discursive accounts that question the self has enabled me to better understand my past, my feelings and emotions, and why I take the photographs that I take.

The cultural and political position I have constructed as a self-taught photographer, music fan and fanzine writer enables me to explore the relationships between my photographic practice and popular music theories. The use of the 'reflexive self', in which the situatedness of the researcher is central to the research process, is an emerging trend in doctoral theses and an important one (Starfield and Ravelli, 2006).

A practical example of self-reflexivity

I find that writing self-reflexively is affecting. Going back to Langer, self-reflection helped me become aware that my adult emotions were directly linked with earlier events in my life. I had to evoke feelings, reflect on my position - and spend time assimilating theoretical concepts and ideas. I used evocative self-reflecting writing as a method of enquiry (Adams, 2008: 184; Ellis, 2000). Putting all these together made me see my photographs with different eyes. I related the highly personal to the theoretical and the cultural (Richardson, 2000: 931).

I saw the element of isolation in my photographs and realised that the isolation of the artist on stage captured in my photos reflects the political decisions I make as a photographer. Rejecting mainstream media consumerism meant trying to engage with the person behind the persona. Then I wrote: 'What is the artist feeling at this moment? My photographs capture the emotions of a moment, but are they theirs or mine?' I identified the process of selecting my photos for publishing them in my fanzine. I wrote:

'By isolating an image, I choose an emotion. The emotion goes beyond the conventions of musical genres and concert photography to say: 'This is what the music could be about; this is what popular music could be about'.

As Chang argues, it is the framing of the individual story within the societal context that 'makes autoethnography ethnographic' (Chang, 2008: 49); and makes it a research method. Autoethnography not only embraces the researcher's subjectivity but actively places it at the centre of the research and the reflective process (Ellis, 1999: 733-768; Ellis and Bochner, 2000). By narrating the experience the author presents lived experience to the reader. The reader is then enabled to compare that experience with their own.

So, I am the ethnographer but I am also the object of my study, and as Marcus (1998: 391) remarks, we 'can be sure that the object of study always exceeds its analytic circumscription'. It is these conditions that produce 'unexpected connections' and 'new descriptions of old realities' (Marcus, 1998: 393).

Questions of ethics and validity

By taking up autoethnography we researchers engage in a much-needed dialogue around the politics of evidence. Evidence is commonly thought of as countable and measurable (Denzin, 2011: 647), yet ethnographers think differently. Rather, they deal with 'experience, emotions, events, processes, performances, narratives, poetics and the politics of possibilities' (Denzin, 2011: 647).

Denzin maintains that qualitative research has been demoted to the status of 'marginal science', 'second-class citizenship' because it does not fit with traditional scientific notions of validity (Denzin 2011: 651). In this context, how do we approach the issues of validity and ethics when producing autoethnographic accounts?

The way qualitative researchers are being asked to engage with ethics derives from the traditional social sciences model. Yet, this model cannot be wholly applied to humanities-oriented research because 'truth is always partial' and we are 'blinded by our own perspective' (Denzin, 2011: 652-653).

Questions of ethics and validity applied to written narratives present several issues. For example, Wolf (1992: 59-60) is concerned that putting emphasis on a mood may be to the detriment of an observation. For her, the fictioniser has no obligation beyond the act of creating (Wolf, 1992: 131). Thus, she questions the legitimacy of a text which gives precedence 'to form over content' (Wolf, 1992: 59-60).

The argument for validity in autoethnography is that the narrative strategy intends to give the reader confidence in the 'truth of the written word' (Denzin, 1997: 224), rather than the truth of a purportedly objective account. Ellis argues that the validity of the story resides in whether it evokes in the reader 'a feeling that the experience described is authentic, that is, believable and possible' (Ellis, 1995: 318).

Autoethnographic narrative has also been criticised for being self-indulgent and narcissistic (Marcus, 1998: 395). Writing about one's pain and sharing personal experiences with others has placed human sensibilities at the forefront in contemporary ethnography. I contend that autoethnography is not rooted in vanity or selfishness. No.

As Muncey writes, exposing the self comes from a visceral need (Muncey, 2010: 10-25). It is not narcissistic, but is primal.

My self-reflexive accounts certainly came from deep within. I wrote: 'The moment I was abandoned, I was denied the right to determine my part or role. Whichever path would be laid for me at the orphanage would only perpetuate that first injustice'.

Authenticity

It is the authenticity in the epiphanic moment that enables me to reflect on the process of taking and selecting photographs. Through the reflexivity inherent in autoethnography, I realise that I am not just the photographer, but also that abandoned child seeking justice, this mourning sister and 'defiant' fanzine writer. My reflections are so essential in my photographic practice that I choose to exhibit them within the picture frame. These autoethnographic texts and photographs form the complete aesthetic piece. The experiences of my personal past that I bring back to the fore are 'events that have effects at the deep level' (Denzin, 2008: 120) of my life. They did then and still do now.

What is it that my photographs try to achieve? I do not try to find that amazing shot'. Instead, I am more interested in the 'fringes' and in catching what the French would call, 'le moment insolite': the unexpected, the strange, and the inhabitual. For example, The Felice Brothers are renowned for their hyperactive, boisterous and whisky-fired concerts. Yet, the photograph that I chose to exhibit represents a rare moment during the band's highly energetic set at the End Of The Road festival where James Felice took a spontaneous break to rest his head on his accordion.

Concert photography typically embodies camaraderie and energy through movement. In my photographic practice, the spirit of a rock concert is best captured by showing the stillness of the artist, the 'deep level' (Denzin, 2008: 120) of the person on stage. My photograph of James Felice does not meet 'normal' expectations, because it is presented from a different perspective, that of the fan.

Denzin said: 'I want to invent a new version of the past, a new history' (Denzin, 2008: 118). So do I. I want to depart from the condescending cultural divide present in fandom, that of the 'them' (fans as deviant and weak) versus the 'we' (representing psychological stability and normalcy) (Jensen, 1992: 18-29). I want to do what scholarly work has so far failed to do, that is, fully engage with the study of fandom (Monaco, 2010). I want to re-write the history of popular music.

Democratising research

Autoethnographers reject both the canon and essentialising theories (Denzin, 1997: 127). By doing so they seek to foster richer cultural understanding (Foster et al., 2005; Chang, 2008: 54), as well as to democratise the understanding of culture, and in this particular case, the understanding of popular music through the photographic lens. By deconstructing dominant discourses through the self, the autoethnographer 're-makes' and 're-represents' (Marcus, 1998: 399) what society thought was already understood.

Hence, my autoethnographic accounts aim to open up the 'democratic conversation' inherent in fanzine subculture (Atton, 2010). They present a different portrait of those

individuals who play music, creating an alternative narrative which acts as a form of resistance to 'counter the domination of canonical discourses' (Bochner, 2000). My photographs also play a part in enacting that resistance. Photographs can engage viewers to reflect on cultural realities at the margins, because viewers can 'see' how social actions take place (Harper, 2000: 727). The 'reality' encompassed in my texts and my photographs has the potential to make the underrepresented socially visible.

My work shows the complexity of individuals, both myself and the subjects of the photographs. In producing it, presenting it, and interrogating it as an academic researcher, I am enacting the process of autoethnography with its essential aim to act as a 'carrier of culture' (Chang, 2008: 125). It is through the self as 'a carrier of culture' (Chang, 2008: 125) that autoethnography proposes to understand others (Chang, 2008: 48-49). The proposition of autoethnography is therefore inherently political and committed to social justice.

Conclusion

At a time when qualitative research is being dismissed as 'anecdotal' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011: 717), and when in the arts, our research methods have been caricatured as amateurish (Eisner, 2008: 9), it is our duty to ensure that autoethnography, if we adopt it, is a rigorous, secure and credible research methodology.

Autoethnography is founded on the subjectivity of the researcher and its reflective and self-interrogating principles. The use of autobiographical accounts, contextualised in appropriate sociocultural context and academic theoretical framework, enable in-depth cultural analysis negotiated through the self. This approach seeks to challenge dominant academic assumptions and broaden cultural understanding.

When applied to a practice-based research context, autoethnographers question practice and the context within which practice exists. My cultural and political situatedness lie at the heart of my research. Autoethnography enables me to analyse the experience of being a fan and a fanzine writer through my photographs, to further knowledge on fandom and the ethics of visual representation of popular music, in a way that is academically rigorous, politically informed and ethically grounded.

Autoethnography is above all political. The autobiographical element of autoethnographic self-reflection and the method utilised to reveal often emotionally charged topics bring the reader closer to cultural production. Hence, readers and viewers engage with the experience of the researcher in a more direct, thus, democratic manner, and become socially productive themselves.

The process through which the self and individual cultural production contribute to knowledge in the cultural field is based on a renegotiation with academia of the concepts of subjectivity, validity, authenticity and ethics in research. Only when we engage in the much-needed dialogue around the politics of evidence, will we be able to 'honour the voices of those who have been silenced by dominant paradigms' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011: x). It is an act of resistance. This is why I reveal my most private life story: To allow difference to show and be recognised. Once we assimilate difference, we can resist dominance: being dominated and dominating.

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