

MULTIMODAL ANTHROPOLOGIES

Film Review

Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival

Fabrizio Terranova, dir. 81 min. English. Brooklyn, NY: Icarus Films, 2017

Dylan Kerrigan

University of the West Indies

Donna Haraway: *Story Telling for Earthly Survival* is an intimate and personal account of storytelling as art, method, theoretical practice, and way of thinking about the world, told through the life stories of Donna Haraway. Professor in the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Haraway is a leading science and technology studies thinker and theorist on feminism, technology, media, and the body. Her seminal essay “The Cyborg Manifesto” (1985) is often found on required-reading lists in most anthropology and cultural studies graduate programs across the nation.

Stylistically, much of the film is captured by director Fabrizio Terranova as one continuous shot of Haraway talking to the camera, sitting comfortably in her neatly cluttered home, laughing, smiling, occasionally swearing, and with her hands passionately animated (Figure 1). Haraway’s personality and thinking are seductive and inspirational. Her monologue captures her loves: her animals, her friends, her lovers, her biological family, her inspirations, her feminism, her home, the inanimate objects she has collected from various cultures throughout her life—all of which, and more, she considers kin and members of her extended family.

The camera often dwells at the end of her many stories to catch the corners of Haraway’s mouth curl upward and her eyes brighten and enlarge as she enjoys the memories and the act of sharing them. This sense of intimacy that the film cultivates, of the viewer being allowed into Haraway’s personal space, listening to her recount stories from her life adventures and her methodological approach to doing anthropology, makes the viewer feel like they are entering into a personal conversation with Haraway, albeit one-sided, transported into her beautiful home located in the lush woodlands of Santa Cruz, California.

The film opens with a story from Haraway’s childhood about teeth, braces, and orthodontics. This opening story blends seamlessly into talking about biological anthropology and then a question about how orthodontists first came to know what is a “correct bite.” The story then connects to the

social history of Western biology and the many racist ideas it held about the world before returning to recollections of Haraway’s childhood and the importance of storytelling in her family life.

With the first of what are several periodical and unhurried transitions from one story to another over the course of the film, this story comes to an end. This first transition is filled with sounds of nature. Bird sounds, wind chimes, crickets, owls, and the slumber to lucidity of Haraway’s cherished dog Cayenne. All combine to suggest to the viewer the importance of the nonhuman around each of us. The nonhuman is a central character alongside the human in this film and is a constant theme threaded throughout. Of course, the nonhuman is also a familiar focus of Haraway’s large anthropological corpus of work. Elements of the natural world—the night, the moon, the forest, insects, floating jellyfish, grass in the wind—are all important to the film’s visual scope. The film also uses green screen occasionally and effectively to challenge the normative documentary styles.

The various stories narrated by Haraway over the course of this film provide a glimpse into her method as she effortlessly combines the personal, the social, the cultural, and the political, making her a masterful storyteller. Her stories are layered, nuanced, and contextualized. She comes armed with metaphors, analogies, and examples to flesh out what she means. Connections are constantly made across layers, details, and cultural differences. Her stories, much like the choices the filmmaker has made to retell them, are not always linear and do not follow a neat beginning, middle, and end story structure. Haraway also tells us about how sci-fi literature and the psychedelic became an important component in her ability to tell effective stories, allowing her to envisage new worlds and think through different ways of being, which she could not do within academic disciplines.

Along with the film being a testament to the necessity of storytelling for saving the world, Haraway also warns us of the dangers in storytelling, in particular of “weak stories” fed to us by the powerful. Haraway then offers the critique of capital as one story she suggests that has made many of today’s smart people “stupid.” It is a story in which we have become trapped. She reminds us that telling stories about



FIGURE 1. Still from film. (Courtesy of Icarus Films) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

what is wrong with capitalism is not enough. We must revolt from being trapped inside such stories. We must tell other stories about the world. She reminds us that the world is not finished because we think we know how it works. Stories, she notes, can be acts of war, and this is the *War of Worlds* (2002) she and her colleagues like Bruno Latour previously wrote about. The stories we have been told about modern capitalism as the only way to organize a modern society, Haraway suggests, trap us in a loop where we become unable to envisage and tell the new stories that we need as a global family of humans and nonhuman kin.

Through Haraway's conviction and life experiences, the film captures an important fact about modern life that has been diluted over the last fifty to sixty years. Haraway is great at demonstrating how our sense of self is not some individualist fantasy about our personal wants and desires, but rather our selves are developed, made, and transformed through our relations to others. This metaphor of the sociological imagination in a world beset and overrun by the psychological imagination of neoliberal capitalism is an implicit and important strand of Haraway's concern. As she notes, "Thinking is what we need to do Thinking is what we are about and thinking is a materialist practice with other thinkers, and some of the best thinking is done as storytelling." By the conclusion of the film, the various elements of the project—the stories, the human and nonhuman kin, the ability of stories to transform their listeners—leave the viewer feeling transient. Can we really move into other worlds, realms, and ways of being? Is storytelling as Haraway describes it really the secret weapon for earthly survival?

The film and Haraway are persuasive. The morals of her tales do make it feel possible that storytelling itself can change the world. Yet my biggest takeaway from the film was not simply the importance of storytelling for earthly survival; as an anthropologist, that is already a given and implicit. Instead, what was most effective about the film for me was the way the filmmaker and Haraway, through her life stories, remind the viewer that our individual self—the "social self," as a sociologist might call it—does not come to be known to us simply through personal triumph, resilience, and endeavor, as the myth of individualism under neoliberal capitalism in Western societies suggests (Cortois 2017; Ehrenberg 1991). Rather, we come to know ourselves through the kin and family we make in the world—through our social relations with others—both the human and nonhuman. Sadly, today, as Haraway reminds us, that is one story many outside anthropology and sociology seem to have forgotten. But for Haraway, such stories and their capacity to change us is why we need storytelling.

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