Public Stories, Private Lives: The Importance of Stories to ‘Middle Australia’

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**Keywords** Story, stories, narrative, ethics, values, youth, mimesis, Ricoeur, community arts.

**Abstract** It is argued that the public stories which people access through theatre, film, books, television and other media frequently have a profound impact on their private lives. The personal and social influence of public stories has wide-ranging implications in areas including education, employment and social welfare. It is argued that this impact should be considered when determining government arts policy and the arts and cultural management response, both of which are currently dominated by the economic paradigm.

**Biography** Dr. Julia de Roeper spent ten years working as an administrator in the live performing arts before commencing work in the film and television industry in 1989. She then worked as a producer for five years before joining the South Australian Film Corporation as Marketing Manager. She was subsequently appointed Director of Industry Development, a position she held for four years until leaving to undertake a PhD in 2000. Dr. de Roeper currently holds a position as lecturer in the School of Communication, Information and New Media at the University of South Australia.

**Introduction**

Twenty years of working in the production and management of theatre, film and television alongside people with a burning desire to tell stories, prompted me to wonder about the role that stories actually play in the lives of the audience. Are they just ‘entertainment’ with no real impact on the emotions, values, beliefs and attitudes of the listener/viewer, or do they play a more significant role in our personal and social lives?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘story’ as ‘1. history; 2. past course of person’s or institution’s life; 3. account given of an incident; 4. piece of narrative, tale of any length told or printed in prose or verse of actual or fictitious events, legend, myth, anecdote’ and so on, whilst ‘narrative’ is defined as a ‘tale, story, recital of facts’ (Soanes 2000). The word ‘narrative’ has acquired particular significance in the post-modern discourses of cultural studies; for example in the structuralist work of Todorov (Todorov 1977) and the cognitivist work of Bordwell (Bordwell 1985), but it is not a usage which is widely used or understood outside the discipline. Therefore, I chose to use the more commonly understood and less potentially ambiguous word ‘story’ throughout the process of data-collection, and will use ‘story’ and, in certain contexts, ‘narrative’ more or less interchangeably in this paper. The OED definitions are assumed.

Stories/narratives are delivered in an ever-increasing range of formats, and cover a limitless range of genres and subjects. Roland Barthes offers a comprehensive definition:
The narratives of the world are without number. In the first place the word ‘narrative’ covers an enormous variety of genres which are themselves divided up between different subjects, as if any material was suitable for the composition of the narrative; the narrative may incorporate articulate language, spoken or written; pictures, still or moving; gestures and the ordered arrangement of all the ingredients: it is present in myth, legend, fable, short story, epic, history, tragedy, comedy, pantomime, painting... stained glass windows, cinema, comic strips, journalism, conversation. In addition, under this almost infinite number of forms, the narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; the history of narrative begins with the history of mankind; there does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives. (Barthes 1982: 252)

Many of the forms in which stories can be told are commonly referred to as ‘art’ or ‘the arts’. People who write about the personal and social impact of narrative and story frequently refer to art - the art of storytelling, art as a shorthand way of referring to the various forms and genres in which stories may be recounted, art as an element in the narrative culture of a society, and so on. Hence the word ‘art’ is sometimes used to refer to stories, and ‘artists’ to storytellers. However, the primary concern of this paper is not to examine ‘the arts’ or artists per se, but rather to focus on the role stories play in the everyday lives of middle and working class Australians - the two classes which together represent a majority of Australians (Bennett, Emmison & Frow 1999: 23) and might broadly be referred to as ‘middle Australia’.

A recent report to the Australia Council on Australians and the Arts revealed that, although 35% of Australians have a perception that ‘the arts’ are irrelevant to their lives (Saatchi & Saatchi 2000, Overview: 13), 88% agreed that they ‘look forward to being able to settle into a book, a film or some good music and escape from life for a while’ (Saatchi & Saatchi 2000). Thus a vast majority of Australians acknowledge the importance of stories (and music) in their lives.

Those forms of public storytelling which require some level of subsidy, including drama, literature and film and television drama production, are to a considerable extent influenced by government arts and cultural funding policies. Government policy, through the intermediary management processes of arts and cultural institutions, thus has a significant influence on the genres and content of public stories made available to Australians.

Radbourne and Fraser (1996) identify the role of government arts and cultural policies in defining the national zeitgeist:

A nation’s cultural products help construct its identity. Governments formulating arts and cultural policy and making decisions about funding and development are aware of the role cultural products play in displaying the nation to its people and the world. (Radbourne & Fraser 1996: 1)

Drawing on research involving forty-four Australians aged between fifteen and eighty, living in lower middle and working class suburbs in and around the city of Adelaide in South Australia, this paper argues that the public stories to which people are exposed, rather than being ‘just entertainment’, frequently have a profound personal and social impact on their lives, with potentially wide-ranging implications in areas including mental health, education, employment and social welfare. It is argued in the paper that the significance of this impact should be taken into consideration in determining future government arts policy and the arts and cultural management response to these policies, both of which are currently dominated by the economic paradigm (Caust 2003).
Theoretical background

The work of philosophers, in particular Aristotle, MacIntyre, Taylor, Kearney and Ricoeur provide the most compelling insights into the way individuals assimilate stories into their own lives. The primary function of stories in the lives of people of all ages is to construct an understanding of themselves as individuals, of their place in society, and of the ways of the world. As MacIntyre puts it:

…there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. (MacIntyre 1981: 201)

Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) and Charles Taylor (1989) have asserted that there is a connection between a) our understandings of 'the self', b) our notions of 'the good', c) the kinds of narrative in which we make sense of our lives, and d) conceptions of society (Taylor 1989: 105). MacIntyre (1981) argues that in order to make sense of one’s life as a story it is necessary to understand the various roles into which one has been born, and how others may perceive those roles. He suggests that it is through hearing stories that children:

learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born, and what the ways of the world are. (MacIntyre 1981: 201)

The proposition that the stories available to us provide the basis of our understanding of ourselves, our notion of the good and our conception of society is the model which most elegantly accounts for the findings of this paper and is the pivot for the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Throughout this paper 'the good' is deemed to incorporate not only an individual's commitment to a framework of beliefs, but also what kind of life that individual believes to be worth living within that framework, and how that life should be lived (Taylor 1989: 15-17). The phrases 'good and bad' and 'right and wrong', which respondents often used in the course of interviews were taken to indicate elements of the same bundle of ethical concepts Taylor incorporates in 'the good'.

Discussing 'the modern identity' Taylor suggests that “our modern senses of the self not only are linked to and made possible by new understandings of good but also are accompanied by (i) new forms of narrativity and (ii) new understandings of social bonds and relations” (Taylor 1989: 105). The responses of the people in my study, whose lives encompass some of the most profound social and technological changes to have taken place in human history, demonstrate some of these changes in microcosm.

Aristotle’s concepts of mimesis, catharsis, phronesis and ethos, described more than 2,000 years ago and re-interpreted latterly by MacIntyre, Kearney, Ricoeur and others, became my tools of choice in analysing and interpreting story or mythos in contemporary Australia. Kearney revisits key concepts from Aristotle’s Poetics, and demonstrates their contemporary relevance. Whilst mythos can be simply defined as plot or story, mimesis is the imaginative process of re-creation, or as Kearney puts it, “mimesis re-enacts the real world of action by magnifying its essential traits” (Kearney 2002: 131). It is an important element in the creation of mythos. Preferring to avoid the ‘servile connotations’ of the word ‘imitation’, Kearney suggests that it is the process of structural replotting that Aristotle referred to when he wrote that “poetic narration is the imitation of an action’ (mimesis praxis)’ (Kearney 2002: 132). It is this suggestion that in telling life-stories there is a process of reduction to ‘essential traits’ which is at the core of the concept of mimesis, and it is the principle of Ricoeur’s cycle of triple mimesis: the process of prefiguring the world of action (praxis), configuring the text as we tell the story, and refiguring our own existence as we return to the ‘real world’ (Ricoeur 1991/1980: 150-151).
Mimesis could also be described as a cyclical process of stitching together the ‘real world’ of life as it is lived, with models of plot, character and reasoning which have been shared and accepted in existing and familiar mythos, a process which involves rejecting elements which do not fit and emphasising aspects which are familiar and can be expected to trigger appropriate responses in the listener. Mimesis requires of both storyteller and listener a shared knowledge of acceptable models on which the re-configured story can be based, and it is therefore dependent upon a shared understanding of ‘the good’.

It appears that the refiguring of a person’s own life story in terms which are recognisable in the public sphere, the process which Ricoeur (1991/1980) referred to as mimesis or triple mimesis, is of special importance. I argue in this paper that there is a discernible difference in personal attitude between respondents who were able to express their own situation through personal identification with a public story, even a negative one, and those who were still searching.

Methodology and analysis

The methodology used in this study was qualitative and phenomenological involving the use of narrative inquiry in the form of semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Polkinghorne 1988). The process of analysis was divided into three stages - description, analysis and interpretation (Wolcott 1994). Because of the comparatively large number of interviews and the wide age range of the respondents, it was decided to divide the interviews into smaller groups for analysis and interpretation. Lengthy consideration was given to the categories into which the interviews should be grouped. Following a rough initial coding to identify the dominant themes, it became apparent that the principle differences between respondents were associated with the era during which each one had grown up, and the story formats and technology to which they had been exposed. Consequently interviews were separated into five age cohorts which corresponded roughly with certain key technological developments which framed their relationships with stories and story telling.

The oldest age cohort was comprised of three women and two men who were born between the two World Wars who had all had first or second hand experience of the Second World War. Books, radio and film were available to them as children, but the stories they talked about were predominantly of family, religion and adventure. They did not experience television until well into adulthood, and were all aged over 70 at the time of interview.

The next age cohort was comprised of eight men and thirteen women who were aged between 25 and 56 at the time of interview. This cohort is referred to collectively as the Working Years group, but they are also separated into the three sub-groups listed below for description and analysis of certain aspects of their experiences.

Representing the group sometimes referred to as the Baby Boomers were five men and four women born in the twelve years after World War 2, and aged between 45 and 56 at the time of interview. Their parents had first or second hand experience of war, and one respondent, a 56-year-old man, had had first hand experience of the war in Vietnam. From around the age of ten onwards this group saw the emergence of television as a means of mass communication in Australia.

The second Working Years age cohort comprised five women and two men who were born between 1957 and 1967 and aged between 35 and 45 at the time of interview. This age group was the first to grow up with television from an early age and (later) video and experienced as teenagers the common availability of cheap, reliable birth control in the form of the contraceptive pill.

The group sometimes referred to as Generation X is represented by four women and one man born between 1967 and 1978 and aged from 25 to 35 at the time of interview.
Already accepting television and contraception as normal adjuncts to daily life, this group grew up during a period of rapid technological advances, which further developed mass communications but also reduced employment opportunities for the unskilled. All members of this group were parents of young children.

The final age cohort of my study was comprised of ten boys and eight girls, all of whom were aged between 15 and 19 at the time of interview having been born between 1982 and 1986. All had been brought up with television, video, computers and the internet as part of their world.

Table 1: Factors influencing access to stories in childhood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early childhood</th>
<th>Pre WW2 20s-30s</th>
<th>Post WW2 40s-50s</th>
<th>60s-70s</th>
<th>80s-90s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Babyboomers</td>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>Y Generation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family size</td>
<td>Large families</td>
<td>Smaller families</td>
<td>Family sizes still reducing</td>
<td>Family sizes still small, but some appear larger due to mixed/ merged families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal storytelling</td>
<td>Family storytelling (usually by father) very common</td>
<td>Family storytelling diminishing fast</td>
<td>Family storytelling very rare</td>
<td>No family storytelling mentioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books only mentioned in context of school – ‘too busy to read’</td>
<td>Reading very common</td>
<td>Reading still very common</td>
<td>Reading mainly as required for school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No mention of radio</td>
<td>Listened to radio plays, stories</td>
<td>No mention of radio - probably now used predominantly for music, news</td>
<td>No mention of radio</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious storytelling</td>
<td>Religion referred to by all respondents</td>
<td>A few mention religion</td>
<td>Very few mention religion</td>
<td>Only three out of eighteen mention religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual storytelling</td>
<td>Films are predominantly social occasions</td>
<td>Films are remembered as special treats</td>
<td>Films mentioned frequently as source of stories from early age</td>
<td>Distinction seldom made between films/ video – story more important than format</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television arrived when most were entering teens, access often restricted</td>
<td>Television, video almost universal, but some families restricted children’s viewing</td>
<td>Access to television &amp; video universal from early age, access to computer games increasingly common</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Seeking continuous themes from qualitative research amongst a small group of people whose lives cover a tumultuous period of social and technological development is fraught with difficulty, and conclusions may prove contentious. However, there are some common threads running through the data which can be identified, and are discussed in...
Family, Religion and Adventure: Growing up Between the Two World Wars

The five respondents aged over 70 appeared to support Sarbin’s proposition that:

> It appears indubitable that human beings construct identities not only out of their reading, like Don Quixote, but also out of imaginings stirred by orally told tales or by the direct or vicarious witnessing of the actions of role models. (Sarbin 1986: 17)

Each respondent presented a complete and apparently satisfying self-narrative incorporating elements explicitly derived from a mixture of family stories, public sources (including both fictional and Biblical stories), and role models. The responses of this first group of respondents suggested an intimate connection between the public stories which were the overt topic of the interview, and the private stories of family, friends and personal adventure which were generously volunteered.

There were many similarities between the three women. They all presented self-narratives which clearly focused on traditional family values, and sought to represent themselves as faithful bearers of the maternal torch which had been handed down to them by their mothers. They all told many stories about their families, and about their exploits as young people. They all had a more or less Christian upbringing, although only one remains an active churchgoer. They were all unhappy about the way the world is now and from the perspective of their own value systems were unable to see any solutions to the problems which now confront their children and grandchildren. They were distressed about changing moral values and dubious about the advantages of modern technology. Eileen speaks for all of them when she says:

> I just dread [the future], …I dread what's going to happen to my children, my grandchildren. How things are going to work out money wise. …I think they too much want to be in the limelight, and it's too much money put around for them. … Just money and greed. (Eileen, 73)

The women’s role models were their parents, with Christianity providing an overriding set of values dominated by generosity and a kind of cheerful steadfastness which had helped them through hard times (of which there had obviously been many). Although these women appeared to be strong, self-confident and feisty, none of them had been rebellious, and their lives and self-narratives more or less followed the patterns set by their mothers. The stories they told were about family harmony and reflected values which the women were struggling to apply to the problems their own children were facing. Most of those problems centre around family breakdown and rapidly changing values.

The men’s self-narratives differed markedly from those of the women. Instead of talking about their families, they focused on their own exploits as adventurers and larrikins, with considerable emphasis on evading authority. For instance, Albert told stories about his exploits in the Second World War but it appeared that his self-portrait as larrikin was at least in part a successful measure to ensure his own emotional survival. Ken was too young to go to war, but he also recounted his adventures and admitted that it was ‘doing things you shouldn’t do’ which was the attraction. Neither of the men appeared to hold any religious beliefs, but in different ways both implied that religion had provided them with a set of values.

In general, the stories remembered by this age cohort were derived from family, from the public stories of religion and from personal experience rather than from secular fiction. The childhood stories they remembered and the stories which they told about themselves were inextricably linked, and in this sense they vividly illustrated MacIntyre’s argument that:
it is through hearing stories … that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. (MacIntyre 1981: 201)

Some important differences were noted between the responses of the older group and those in the Working Years cohort.

**Books, Radio and Television: Growing up post World War II**

Reflecting changing expectations and family structures, three of the women in the Working Years cohort had combined motherhood and careers, three had careers and no children, and four had children and no careers. Whilst all three of the women in the older cohort had remembered family story telling as an important part of childhood learning, only four out of the twenty one people in the Working Years group remembered listening to members of their family telling stories. Three other respondents remember being told stories by parent substitutes (teachers, carers, nuns), with grandmothers being especially important to two of the women interviewed (both of whom subsequently expressed the desire for a return to traditional moral and social values). Three of the men interviewed remembered listening to radio dramas in a familial context.

Stories also were instrumental in helping several people in this cohort escape from unpleasant aspects of reality:

Escaping was a big thing because I didn’t have a very happy childhood. My father was quite abusive towards my mother and my brother. I never got abused because I was the little princess, but I was always a viewer of the abuse. Reading took me away from it and I got to escape, and I got to be happy and elated and feel joyous without having to deal with what was really going on in the environment I was in. (Louise, 46)

In contrast, severe trauma seemed to interfere with the ability of some to enjoy stories, and one respondent suggested that this may be because stories make people feel emotions they would prefer not to feel. For others, stories had helped to awaken ‘frozen’ emotions. It appears that for stories to evoke emotions it may be necessary for one to be able to imagine being involved in the story and to empathise with the characters. Several people talked about the emotional benefit of telling their own stories through painting, writing poems and stories or even simply by arranging objects in a room. For example:

The most cathartic one that I ever wrote was a story that ended up being about my father and my third husband. It was a poem, not a story. And I wrote about pissing blood. I was white hot with anger. But I had a problem expressing my feelings because I wasn’t allowed to, so I wrote this poem and it was like, ‘yes, that’s what it feels like’. I’m just longing for a key to let all this shit out. (Michelle, 44)

Several people who had read books or listened to the radio as children credited those early experiences with the development of their imagination. Women more often identified with characters they already resembled, whereas men seemed more likely to identify with characters they admired and might wish to resemble.

All the men and several of the women expressed an interest in adventure of one sort or another, and fourteen respondents talked about childhood stories which, subsequently had seeded their own ambitions for adventure or a career. Their experiences were not limited to the physical, but included intellectual and, in one case, spiritual adventures. Four of the eight men in this group had achieved careers which reflected those early ambitions, while two others talked about early career ambitions based on stories which subsequently had been frustrated.
In contrast to the Over 70s cohort, all of whom acknowledged religion as the source of their moral values, only six respondents in the Working Years group talked about religion. Amongst those who did mention religion there was a surprisingly high association with experiencing some form of trauma. Of the other respondents, two said that they had learnt about morality from relatives, but most described learning about morality (usually referred to as ‘right and wrong’ or ‘good and bad’) from the stories they heard or read as children.

Overall, the responses of this group indicate that stories are an integral part of their lives - developing imagination and moral attitudes, shaping an understanding of history and society, helping them survive trauma and imagine and follow career ambitions.

Children of the Digital Revolution

The final group interviewed consisted of eight girls and ten boys aged between fifteen and nineteen at the time of my study. Eight respondents were attending a large high school in Adelaide’s northern suburbs, four were from a medium sized high school in the Adelaide Hills, and five of the boys were detained at a training centre for a variety of offences. The latter were included to facilitate a comparison between the stories preferred by young people who had so far made ‘successful’ choices in life, and the favourite stories of young people who, for a variety of reasons, had made some inappropriate choices. Permission to interview a similar number of girls in a training centre was received too late for inclusion in the study.

Out of eighteen teenagers, only one mentioned family storytelling. Up until the age of ten, girls were far more likely to have been read to than boys, and oldest or middle children reported being read to more than youngest children. All except one of the respondents who were read to mentioned without prompting that the stories they liked best as small children were those that made them feel happy, and that they had learnt about imagination, respect, acceptance, relationships and how to behave from these stories. The odd one out said that stories made him feel excited and that he had learnt about revenge ‘maybe from television programs’, which he said had resulted in some behavioural problems.

The children who had not been read to had more varied responses to the question about how stories made them feel. One said stories made him happy, but others spoke of feeling ‘interested’, ‘excited’ or amused, some ‘couldn’t remember’. None of them felt they had learnt anything from their favourite stories, most of which had been television cartoons.

By the age of fourteen, most of the girls had moved on from the magic and animal stories they had liked as small children to teenage books, horror, romance and ‘reality’. However, only three were able to talk about what they had learnt from stories at this age, mentioning relationships between people, life and death, and the differences between places and people in the world.

The boys were not changing as fast as the girls in their early teens, liking more complex versions of the same stories and games they had preferred before the age of ten. Overall, most of the boys chose stories which were exciting and adventurous. For the five boys in the training centre, illegal activities appeared, in part, to have been a form of adventure which, for the boys who had not been detained, seemed largely to have been confined to the vicarious experiences of the screen. Two played football, three were involved in car-centred activities with their fathers, and an Aboriginal boy talked about going hunting with his grandfather. Some of the girls were also interested in experiencing the rush of adrenalin but they were more likely to get it from horror stories.

At the time of the interviews some of the girls reported finding life stressful because of school work and outside jobs. Their favourite stories were comedies, musical and dance movies, and stories about teenagers like themselves. Several were interested in
history and ‘what it was like in the past’, and some liked romantic stories although others found romance ‘too predictable’. Only one of the girls shared the boys’ love of action adventure movies. At this age the boys were starting to analyse their favourite stories and some of them talked about feelings and relationships.

The teenagers appeared to make active choices and identify with characters and/or stories which resemble their own situations and personalities. Fourteen respondents were able to nominate a public story or character with which they could identify. Those who had not come across any stories about characters and/or situations which resembled their own did not identify with any characters. Of the four in this situation, two were Aboriginal and one was African Australian, and all three were in detention.

Interestingly, there appears to be a strong correlation between being read to as a small child, having ambitious career plans (paediatrician, actor, international affairs) and dreams of a better life in the realm of fantasy (rock star, owning an island, ‘a place where magic exists’). Those who were not read to as children had relatively traditional career plans (police, army, childcare worker).

Discussion

Taylor suggests a fundamental link between a) understandings of ‘the self’, b) notions of ‘the good’, c) the kinds of narrative in which we make sense of our lives, and d) conceptions of society. This study of the place of stories in the lives three generations of Australians over a period of rapid technological and social change confirms the continuity of such a link, but suggests that the sources and the formats of narrative with which we ‘make sense of our lives’ have changed considerably in the last fifty years.

Every individual has access to both private and public stories. Private stories are those derived within the immediate circle of family and close friends, arising from interactions between members and passed from one generation to another. Public stories, including religious stories, are those which have been available to all three groups through sacred and secular books, theatre, film and radio, with the addition for the middle group of television in the 1950s and, for the youngest group, a multiplicity of new media forms.

But for individuals who are separated from their families at an early age, or who had difficult lives as children, access to private stories can be very restricted, even to the extent of comprising no more than the individual’s own life story. In addition, the public stories accessed by individuals will depend upon cultural practices within the individual’s family and the social group with which the individual identifies (Kearney 2002: 131). For example, access to books will be restricted in a family which does not value reading. Thus in a practical sense access to public stories is often significantly limited.

Private stories were crucial for the oldest group in my study, providing them with a sense of self as they identified with family members and close friends, whilst public stories of religion were fundamental in providing a shared notion of ‘the good’. For the women, films contributed to notions of a fantasy life.

Private stories continued to provide an idea of ‘how we have become’ for some of the group born in the two decades after World War 2, but there was relatively little interest in religion and most had derived their notions of ‘the good’ from children’s story books. Some of the younger members sourced notions of the ‘good’ from film and television, and a few spoke of private stories. Few of the younger members told private stories, but those who were read to tended to derive their notions of the good from the stories they heard as small children. Those who were not read to tended to have far less clearly defined notions of ‘the good’.

It is the articulation that occurs between private stories, public stories and an individual’s own life story which seems to be of special importance. There was a
discernible difference between respondents who were able to express their own situation through personal identification with a public story, even a negative one, and those who were still searching for a public story which contained recognisable elements of their own life story. Those who were unable to identify with a public story seemed often to be expressing a disconnection with society, sometimes in terms which Durkheim (1952) might have identified as indicative of anomie.

In common with the middle group, teenagers who were unable to identify with any public stories tended to be the ones with unresolved problems, whilst for others, telling their own life story by using a public story seemed to be linked, explicitly or implicitly, with the process of resolving personal problems. In this sense they provided support for Kearney’s notion, derived from Aristotle that the art of storytelling provides us with a ‘shareable world’. Kearney suggests that people need a story which is recognisable to others (a public story) on which to model and thus share their own stories. This process of triple mimesis, refiguring one’s own life story in terms which are recognisable in the public sphere, may then provoke catharsis (the ability to ‘feel what wretches feel’) in the listener through phronesis (the application of good judgment in human conduct, and the ability to recognise truth in fiction) and a process of ethical evaluation made possible by a shared ethos.

Albert, a member of the oldest cohort, provides a simple example of this process. Many of his colleagues had been killed during World War II, and the reality of his experience in the war was undoubtedly grim. Indeed, he said “the war disgusted me”. Nevertheless, he refigures his war stories in such a way as to present a story of larrikinism which is recognisable and acceptable, even heroic, to those who share his disdain of authority. It is evident that this refiguring was a necessary factor in his emotional survival of war.

When you are really down and what not, you can tell stories. Show a funny side of life where other people can appreciate the humour of it too. (Albert, 80)

Ken, another man from the oldest cohort, also demonstrates the use of mimesis. It is apparent that Ken did not do especially well at school, but he tells his own life-story in such a way as to suggest that he had too much to do to worry about school work:

I didn’t read much at all, and I wasn’t much good at that side of the subject, at school or anything like that. …No fear, I was too busy to waste time sitting down reading. …we were busy, like going down to watch the blacksmiths, you know, when they were putting shoes on horses. We were busy down the oval, you know, throwing balls and what have you. We didn’t have time. (Ken, 72)

Ken assumes that the listener shares his sense of priorities, understanding that outdoor pursuits were intrinsically more important than books and learning.

Thus it is argued that in order to reduce one’s own story to essential elements which will be recognised and accepted and, therefore, shared with others, it is necessary to have some knowledge of collective (public) stories which provide a framework within which to cast one’s own experience. Two examples from the case studies further illustrate an early stage in a lifelong process of mimesis: Dylan, with a life story of broken home, drugs and armed robbery, identified with a book about a teenager with a similar background.

One book I read, it was about a young guy who was fourteen, fifteen. And he grew up in a bit of a broken home, sort of thing, always fights and arguments. Started getting locked up and doing crime, doing drugs. (Dylan, 16)

Is that what happened to Dylan himself? (Interviewer)

Yeah, pretty much. (Dylan, 16)
Similarly, Emma, who was very withdrawn throughout the interview, said she liked a story about a girl who was bullied at school and engaged in self-harm as a result. She said this was similar to the experience of a friend of hers (perhaps in reality herself).

Yeah, I read this book, it was about this teenage girl. She was bullied at school and suffered from depression I think, and she like, cut herself and stuff. And I liked that book because I actually know somebody like that. I can relate to it. (Emma, 16)

In both cases, these young people were engaged in processing their own life stories and comparing them with public stories. The likelihood that they would begin to see their own life-stories from another perspective as a result of that comparison - the refriguring of existence on return to the real world - is strong. How those lives might be refugured would perhaps in part depend on the outcome of the public stories with which they identified. However, Dylan was already engaged in another stage of mimesis as he reflected on the life of Barry Goode, an ex-criminal who turned to religion and went straight.

I’ve just read a book on this bloke [who] lived in Adelaide too, all his life. It’s called Prisoner of Hope by Barry Goode. He did the first TAB robbery, up in Melbourne. He spent time in Yatala and all that. Then he became a Christian and now he’s got some job, and a family, and whatever else. Writing books. That made me think, that guy, since he was seven or eight he started stealing. He did five years in jail and he got out and swore that he would never go back again, like everyone does. And he gets out and bang, got another five years. That made me think. But it also made me think afterwards how he fully changed his life around, ’cause he was a pretty bad person. And he sort of reminded me of me a bit, too. I’m in for a lot of stuff that he did, armed robberies and stuff like that. I’m facing a long time like he was. If he could, then anyone could. (Dylan, 16)

Conclusion

Australians and the Arts (Saatchi and Saatchi 2000) demonstrated that ‘the arts’ are considered by many Australians to be elitist, pretentious and irrelevant. However this study demonstrates that a group of randomly selected Australians, who by virtue of their demographic characteristics might be considered unlikely to engage with ‘art’, nonetheless engage with stories as an integral part of their daily lives. Although few of them mentioned visual arts, theatre or dance, respondents in the study frequently talked about books, film/video and television drama, and spoke at length about the role stories play in enabling them to make sense of their lives.

Delivery format plays a significant role in making stories relevant, and convenience is increasingly important in busy lives – books, videos and television drama can all be accessed at home, and Bennett et al (Bennett, Emmison & Frow 1999: 84) have demonstrated that the vast majority of Australians view films on video. DVD is now rapidly replacing the video cassette format, and other format changes will unquestionably follow.

Whilst the source and format of stories have undergone major changes over the past fifty years, the role of story in people’s lives appears to have remained constant. The oldest respondents in this study had grown up on a rich diet of family and bible stories, with personal tales of adventure being a dominant feature of men’s lives, whilst many of the younger respondents had experienced a story diet that consisted almost exclusively of digital and electronic media. Those in between had been exposed to a varying mixture of film, radio, books and television. Nonetheless, respondents in all age cohorts tended to extract the same categories of meaning from the stories they preferred. The sharing of moral values (ethos) remains central to the role of stories (mythos) in people’s lives, and of crucial importance is the availability of stories with...
which individuals are able to identify (catharsis) and through which they can share their own stories (mimesis).

However, many of the stories in the mainstream media represent a material culture in which large numbers of less advantaged Australians will always be unable to participate, regardless of their aspirations. For example, research by John Buchanan (2001) demonstrated that the average character in the top-rating American television series *Friends* would have required an annual income of at least US $100,000 to maintain the lifestyle depicted, well beyond the means of the average viewer.

It would be unrealistic to expect the commercial media, driven by the relentless competition for ratings, to address the need for a broad range of stories which depict the lifestyles and meet the personal and social needs of the many Australians who do not fit the mainstream mould. Instead, on the grounds of maintaining social access, equity, and stability, and a strong, independent and diverse Australian culture, this role falls to publicly-funded broadcasters, independent film-makers, television producers, specialist publishers, and experimental theatre companies, all of which require subsidy.

The domination of arts and cultural management by managerialism and the economic paradigm on the one hand, and the post-modern discourse of deconstruction on the other, with an often hazy vision of the transformational nature of creativity and the arts floating somewhere in between, means that too little attention is currently being paid to the grass-roots role that ‘art which tells stories’ actually plays in the real lives of ordinary people. It is argued that serious consideration should be given to the ways in which the stories that are seen, heard and read transform the personal and social lives of the audience and thus, affect the way in which society is shaped by the stock of public stories which “constitute its initial dramatic resources” (MacIntyre 1981: 201).

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