Transparency, power and digital gifts in the context of the digital commons

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Public digital culture, commons and openness

The domain of digital media commons[1] has been expanding since the emergence of alternatives to intellectual property rights management of digital media. In the field of software production, the free and open source software movement established the copyleft, GNU/GPL licenses in the early 1980s to guarantee distribution of computer code in ways that allow its reuse, sharing and development without the need to ask authors for permissions. Following a wave of increasing criminalisation of digital media content, such as music and film, in the early 2000s the GNU/GPL served as an inspiration for the open culture movement to develop the widely popular today Creative Commons licenses. They allowed creators to share their works under terms that safeguard the unrestricted use, altering and circulation of digital media content. The licenses have been since regarded as a mechanism to create broader spaces of access to experimention with creativity, and are frequently regarded as critical alternatives to the models of distributing media content that are practiced by the media industris (Benkler, 2006; Björgvinsson, 2014; Rennie, 2005, p. 47). Since then, the emergence of the digital commons has been invoking imaginaries by the public as well as academics about the potential formation of novel “cultures of remixability” (Manovich, 2005); and about emerging spaces of independent digital media production anchored in the principles of a public, visible and accessible digital culture (Lessig, 2004). By the end of 2015 the number of works online licensed under a Creative Commons license is estimated to pass beyond one billion (Creative Commons, 2015).

However, a closer look at the media content that is shared online as commons shows that in most cases its producers adopt a rather narrow understanding of openness of culture. Music that is shared as commons could be marked by its creators as an object of “free culture”, available for reuse and remix, but it is often circulated without the digital tracks or annotations that make the

1 By the term digital media commons I refer to media content or technologies which are shared in public under a license that allows their use, modification and reproduction without the permission of the author

piece. Most of the nearly two million videos and animations that are shared under a CreativeCommons license on YouTube do not disclose or make public any of the thousands of media files that comprise them. The technology used to make them is also rarely shared, or even mentioned, making the reuse of these types of media more difficult in practice. Hence, coming with the promise to make digital culture public, open, or more transparent, much of the media content that constitutes it is rather opaque. It discloses predominantly just the final product of creative work and clearly prioritises circulation rather than other forms of engagement with the work.

Yet, in the genre of digital visual media there have been emerging projects that experiment with higher degrees of openness in the context of producing commons. In the scope of this paper I will focus on one such project from the field of animation film production, and discuss it in relation to transparency.

A case of an open film

The case in focus is an animation film with the name, Cosmos Laundromat, produced and developed by the independent Amsterdam-based animation studio, the Blender Institute, a "studio for open 3D projects", as it calls itself. The film was made in the period of one year, between 2014 and 2015. It was conceived as "a free and open source film'", meant to be the first ten minutes of the

> world's first free/open source animated feature-film production...which means that not only will the final movie and all its assets be freely distributed (under a Creative Commons license) for personal viewing and use, but the entire production process is open to the eyes of the public (Blender Institute, 2015).

The project had multiple goals; technical such as to improve the 3D animation software Blender through developing a film script that includes high technical challenges which would bring up the need to develop the software further; artistic goals in terms of establishing high production values, as well as 3D photo-realistic, Hollywood animation style aesthetics. The project also had educational goals, such as to increase the knowledge and skills among individual media producers and small animation studios around the world about the technical aspects that concern computer graphics production. Lastly, it was meant to be a demonstration, a statement about the possibilities of a small team to produce large-scale animation project with autonomously developed non-proprietary technology (for more details , see Velkova and Jakobsson (2015).

The plan was to realise these goals through, not only making the film, but also by sharing the production process, media files and technologies developed in public, as commons. The project

was working to continuously illuminate three aspects of the film production: the labor and creative processes; the production software Blender and its improvements; and the artwork/media content in progress that were being made.

In the next section I provide a brief historical context that situates this project in the broader history of transparency, and connects it to some articulations of this ideal in modernity. With this discussion as a starting point, I then sketch out some specifics and tensions related to making media transparent and public, and simultaneously share it as commons.

Glimpses from history: transparency in art and early computer cultures

Historically, transparency has been associated to practices of good governance, and to a broader ideological project for promoting public access to knowledge that would allow individuals to gain more autonomy, and build a more fair society (Bennington, 2011; Birchall, 2011; Hood, 2006; Tsoukas, 1997, p. 828). Emerging from the project of Enlightenment, and traced back to the works of Kant and Rousseau, transparency is conceived as the belief in the possibility of ever-increasing insight and clarity through disclosure of knowledge, and information. The transparency ideal has been seen as a linear progression from disclosure of information to empancipation, one that Christensen and Cornelissen (2015, p. 140) summarise as follows: “if you have information, you have access; if you have access, you can see; if you can see, you understand; and if you understand, you are free”.

This belief flourished as a core ideal of the modernity project, and its practical implementation implied the development of practices of examining, recording and description of visibility(Strathern, 2000, p. 312). These practices were cultivated through multiple political initiatives of auditing, information disclosure, financial transparency, or public access to government information (Birchall, 2011; Hood, 2006).

But, beyond governance, the ideal of transparency found fruitful ground also in the modernist art project that aimed to encourage self-reflexivity through disclosing and explicitly making visible the techniques and materials through which art was made. Drawing on modernist art theory and the work of Eugene Lunn, Graham Kirkpaatrik (2003) reminds how modern artists, writers and composes were often drawing attention to the media and materials with which they were working, as well as to the very process of producing the art, insisting that modern art is inseparable from “questions of technique and of practical involvement in the world” (182). Establishing connections to materiality and the process of making has been part of a larger artisitc project of making art more transparent, disclosing to the audience “the true character of what is being represented” (182) with the aim of provoking more critical engagement with art. This ideal,

Kirkpaatrick argues, has been later carried further by some technical cultures, such as those of hackers, who insisted on keeping computer technologies visible and subject to critical interrogation, and autonomous creative engagement. The ways in which they safeguarded this possibility was through inventing legal mechanisms such as the GNU/GPL that would make technology non-proprietary, yet licensed. Accessibility to computer code, and autonomous technological production would be a way to resist strategies of conceilment of software employed through the processes of commodifying and enclosing computer code from the 1980s and onwards.

When the computer started to become ubiquitous, it brought about a different digital aesthetics, and with it, a different understanding of transparency of media. Digital media has started to resemble the logics of “transparent immediacy” (Bolter & Grusin, 2003), or media that erases all traces of mediation. As Bolter and Grusin argue, in the strive for realism and for creating new forms of digital spectacle, contemporary media has become about the transparent presentation of the real, as well as about the enjoyment of the opacity of surfaces, and complexity of media themselves (Bolter & Grusin, 2003, p. 21)). In this sense, computer graphics visual media that saturates the mediascape today has redefined the meaning that transparency had in the modern art project, by hiding its technicality and the labor that enters it, in favor of smoother, faster, better, yet opaque, visual representations.

In this context, the case of Cosmos Laundromat seems to stand at the crossing between the modernist art project of transparency, and the new logic of transparent immediacy. On one hand it employs an aesthetics of immediacy by trying to resemble Hollywood animation studios aesthetics; and at the same time it encourages a critical interrogation by exposing the process and technologies of making the film. It speaks to the modernist ideal of transparent art, but instead of working with different aesthetics, it challenges the opacity of media today through a critique 'from within', through applying industry-dominant aesthetics and showing that it could be achieved, equally well, through public technology and media.

A point of distinction from the modernist art project of transparency is though, the attempt to go beyond the disclosure of the production process, and, in addition to it, also actively engage in intense distribution of the technologies and media part of the film, as well as to circulate them as digital commons. The latter provokes some tensions related to issues of power.

Tensions

The act of sharing media and software as commons signified the desire of the producers of Cosmos Laundromat to go beyond the mere act of communication, and attempt to actively invoke relationships with the audience, and the techno-artistic communities involved in computer graphics

production. By presenting an ambitious film, and simultaneously giving away the technology used to make it, alongside with the media assets produced, the project has been a demonstration of the technical and artistic power, skills and the creative vision of its authors; a confirmation of the approach they have taken; and a provocation to others to embrace it. The intention to share the assets of the film as commons, or public gifts could be seen in Baudrillard's terms (1981, p. 65) as an attempt to establish a form of symbolic exchange, one in which the commons represent a gift, an object of communication and of relation. Once taken, the gift would establish a relationship and an emotional connection in relation to the gift-giver. The gift exposes relationships, and has the capacity to illuminate “the transparency of social relations in a dual or integrated relationship” whereas the commodity and sign exchange resemble “the opacity of social relations of production and the reality of the division of labor” (65) The relationship established through the exchange of the gift can be of fullness and of positive communication, but is not devoid of antagonism; it carries a transformative charge, and embeds a struggle for power, rank, recognition and humanity (Merrin, 2005, p. 18).

The active, and continuous production of “digital gifts” within Cosmos Laundromat therefore resembles both the desire for positive communication, a commitment to the project of knowledge, emancipation and critical engagement; and simultaneously is an act of a provocation that tries to press technological and media commons on internet audiences and expand its community through trying to invoke the obligation to reciprocate. The film project attempted to circulate technology that would push computer graphics development in a particular direction and aesthetics, and that would simultaneously provoke a critical engagement with technology. Those media producers who would decide to embrace the technology for their own creative visions would be engaged in a relationship with the Blender community and film studio by, strenghtening the technology but most of all, contributing to the public recognition of its original creators and their work, themselves often remaining in the shadow of this recognition.

Marylin Strathern reminds how strategies of public performance and distrbution of wealth have, similarly, been used in the past in order to encourage audiences to reciprocate at a later occasion, or otherwise admit the donor's power by not being able to match his or her power and prestige (Strathern, 2000, p. 311). Thus, the commons are not only about positive communication, but also configure relationships between those who take, and those who give, creating hierarchies of power.

At the same time, transparency is not only about insight and clarity, it is also about boundaries, regulation and control (Flyverbom, Christensen, & Hansen, 2015). The production of Cosmos Laundromat foregrounded another tension, provoked by the way in which the illumination

of the labor and sharing of commons was organised. Each Friday during the production, the team of animators, script writer, programers, director, producer, who were gathered in Amsterdam from different countries in the world would disclose their work on the film in a public video report through YouTube. Each of them would communicate what they have been working on, show concept art being drawn, report on changes in the script, and discuss pieces of software code being written that would make possible the artistic visions of the film. The video recordings, and the media artifacts presented in these reports, such as software, computer graphics, and texts were subsequently organised and put online as commons in a cloud service that grew into a substantial archive in the course of the production progressing.

These forms of disclosure provoked in the team senses of emancipation, as their intense labor was made visible, conversely to the general practices of opacity of labor in the media industries. They also encouraged external critique and comments on the work in progress, engaging more audience and bringing constructive feedback to the project. Yet, if the YouTube streaming has been conceived internally as an act of positive communication, a ritual of accomplishment, progress and an act of public performance of transparency and accountability, it also played a subtle function of maintaining control and structure over the work process and over the team members within the production. The public reporting created intensities of pressure and obligations within the team to actually have something to share, to present, to report and to admit progress in a very accessible form, on a weekly basis. Many team members experienced stress, and developed strategies to manage the pressure of sharing unfinished work by internalising control.

As one of them said, "Putting work-in-progress online is not really an issue for me. My artworks are often little stand-alone finished piece in themselves ; I never posted a half painted picture". Flyverbom et al. (2015) call this form of self-control regularizing, in which those who are subjected to its effects manifest it in processes of self-examination, confession, and self-regulation, one that penetrates the whole social and work practice of the subjects of this control.

From this perspective, the rituralistic acts of public disclosure on YouTube affected positively the efficiency of the production. The livecasts created a subtle work structure that pushed the project forward through the pressure to report increasing progress each week. The form of visibility adopted by the project was framed as inward-oriented, meaning that the those outside of the organisation were able to observe what was happening inside. While such form of transparency has the benefits of allowing peer-control, as David Heald suggests (2006, p. 28) it also subjects its participants to mechanisms of social control that enforce behaviour patterns and in some cases, can result in self-regularizing behaviour. Such control may not always be experienced directly by the participants, particularly in cases when the commitment to publicness is large enough that it takes

the form of an ideology. As such, transparency becomes a communication system that remains hidden or invisible to its participants, and is therefore sustained regardless of doubt or conflicting evidence (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015). When the myth is about openness and transparency, those become core cultural and moral values embedded in organisational contexts and they sustain the ideals about how organizations ought to function (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015). These more subtle control effects of transparency may remain unrecognized in the practices of producing digital commons since they are usually committed to making things public on the grounds of ideology rather than enforced by external actors.

Conclusions

The proliferation of different projects of open, free and public culture online embody imaginaries that connect to the emancipatory visions of a transparent society that is empowered by the publicness of knowledge, culture and technology. The example discussed briefly in this paper shows that the digital media commons are not exempted from some of the dualities and paradoxes of transparency. Transparency, and gifts, are both about emancipation, and of demonstrating and enforcing power. Importantly, public digital culture is not separated from issues of surveillance and control, and struggles for power and recognition. Even if its producers conceive openness as a core positive value, a necessity for an empowered digital society, and demonstrate in practice the positive effects of transparency through raising the efficiency and quality of their projects, there seems to be the need to become more reflexive about the ways in which these practices configure relationships and control inwardly. A more sustained discussion about what strategies do the producers of commons use to cope when locked between the pressures of being monitored and criticized from outside, and at the same time pushed to produce more public culture from within, is needed.

Even in the projects of the digital commons transparency comes at multiple layers, provoking questions of what is obscured by the light of openness, a discussion that is rarely held. Such a critical discussion seems to be timely and highly needed, as it would help the commons to become more sustainable, and integrated more firmly in contemporary digital culture.

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