

Interview and Narration: a Privileged Source to Learn Current History *by Monica Pacini and Sara Zanisi*

Introduction

Last spring, several meetings dedicated to oral history, video-research and interview collection took place. Suggestions, methodological reflections and best practices illustrating the situation of Italian research through current oral and audiovisual sources. It is commonly believed – after decades of resistance, contradiction and confusion – that audio and audiovisual records are not only historical sources, but should be considered cultural assets and collective heritage. Being a source, a cultural asset, a methodology and a knowledge instrument at the same time, the interviews collected today are valuable for history, but also for anthropology, sociology, ethnography and records studies.

Among all the meetings, which overlapped in the past months, we would like to mention two in particular – one in Rome and the other in Milan – because they traversed different professional and subject fields by communicating through their common denominator, the interview. We would also like to recall the second conference of the Italian Association of Oral History which took place in Padua in May, after which the Association opened its new website: a portal of information, recent news and teaching material regarding the use of interviews for historical research.

The Central Institute for Historical and Audiovisual Assets and the Central National Library in Rome, 5-7 May 2009

Twenty years after the conference *L'intervista strumento di documentazione. Giornalismo, antropologia, storia orale* (1986) (The Interview as a Documentary Instrument: Journalism, Anthropology and Oral History), the State Records Library, currently known as the Central Institute for Audio and Audiovisual Assets (Icbsa), recently organized a meeting in Rome to concentrate on interviewing as a method for historical, anthropological and sociological research and communication: *L'intervista fonte di documentazione: storia orale, giornalismo, antropologia, sociologia* (The Interview as a Documentary Source: Oral History, Journalism, Anthropology and Sociology).

Three theme-based days of meetings and round tables, where it was possible to compare notes and discuss the theme of interviewing as both a source and an instrument for research. The

aim was to meet and initiate a dialogue among a range of diverse professions, disciplines and skills with a common denominator: the use of interview (almost exclusively video-interview).

The hypothesis underlying the conference, which Massimo Pistacchi, director of Icbsa presented in his opening comments – now audio and audiovisual records are not only recognized as a source, but they are also considered cultural assets to be preserved and valorized – was confirmed by the talks that followed. Pistacchi underlined the current ideological continuity with the 1986 conference which was noteworthy for the speeches of outstanding journalists, anthropologists and historians' (Gianni Letta, Enzo Roggi, Walter Mauro, Giovanni Ferrara, Gianni Minà; Diego Carpitella, Danilo Dolci, Luigi Lombardi-Satriani, Nuto Revelli, Domenico De Masi; Paolo Spriano, Lucio Villari, Gabriele De Rosa, Giuseppe Galasso); the Proceedings can be now consulted on Icbsa website. If there was still a great deal of resistance to the use of the interview as a documentary source in the 1980s, especially in history, now there has been an indisputable step forward in viewing audio and audiovisual sources as records sources, at the same level of bibliographic, archival and photographic sources.

Alessandro Portelli played a fundamental role in teaching us to see the interview as a relationship between subjects (interviewee and interviewer) and between past and present, on source subjectivity and on memory. He opened his speech in Rome with a sequence from the film *Little Big Man* by Arthur Penn to remind us that the interview is first of all a meeting between two people whose focal point is mutuality, dialogue, talking through a topic and then beyond it.

The ethic of the interview encounter and the act of listening were reiterated as central points by Pietro Clemente. On the day organized by anthropologists (who focused on the earthquake in Abruzzo): the discussion focused on the co-authorship of life stories and the importance of communicating archives as a “listening project of Italian society”.

Furthermore, the sessions dedicated to sociology and journalism, chaired respectively by Maria Immacolata Macisti and Dino Pesole, helped to retrace the plurality of researchers, projects and institutions working through field research, using the interview as the instrument although with different methods and expectations.

A plurality and a diffusion of archives and collections that need centrally coordinated involvement in order to preserve and enhance them: this was the declared aim of the conference itself, a valuable occasion to share experiences, standard methods and to activate virtuous networks.

The Duccio Bigazzi Association for Research on Business History and on the World of Work, 20th April – 25th May 2009

The Duccio Bigazzi Association, established in memory of the Milan historian and his research organized a series of interdisciplinary meetings last spring on the theme *Il lavoro narrato. Metodologie, ricerche e raccolte, documentari (Narrating Work: Records Methods, Research and Collections)* which took place in Milan and in Sesto San Giovanni, from the 20th of April to the 25th of May 2009.

Welcoming researchers of the history of business, labor unions and work as well as students, teachers and professionals interested in the production, valorization and analysis of oral and audiovisual sources, the meetings revolved around three main themes:

- *Autobiographical Memory and Narration/Recounting*
- *Life Stories and Personal Accounts: Research Practices, Collections and Archives*
- *Personal Accounts and Representations: the Documentary*

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with the aim of linking theoretical considerations about the relationship between individual /collective memory and personal work histories, and the presentation of experiences of research and collection sources, to the activity of archives, associations and foundations operating in Lombardia and Piedmont.

In this field, the following achievements are worthy of mention:

- The completion of the entire digital transcription of the interviews carried out by Duccio Bigazzi about the history of the factory Portello-Alfa Romeo, whose still unexplored potential has been illustrated by Stefano Musso;
- The innovative research and monitoring of sources (pictures, video-interviews, journals, period films, voices of the free radios) carried out in the Turin territory by the Vera Nocentini Foundation, and illustrated by Marcella Filippa, for the completion of a documentary on the history of the electrical appliances factory Singer in Leini: the documentary *RadioSinger* by Pietro Balla, produced by the Foundation with Deriva Film, has recently been shown for the first time at TorinoFilmFestival (Turin, Greenwich Villane, via Po 30) on Saturday, the 14th of November 2009, at 17.30;
- The labor memory collection project of the Dalmine Foundation in Bergamo starting with the picture exhibition *Faccia a faccia*, mounted in 2006 to celebrate the centenary of the company; from this, a series of initiatives began to implement a network of permanent contacts with the exhibition visitors (many of them former employees) to restore photographic materials and to produce accounts on the history of the factory and its workers.

This series of five seminar meetings had the merit of putting the theme of representation/accountability of work into a long-term perspective, developing it with many voices, *areas* of expertise and points of view. Within each section, experts in various subject fields (history, anthropology, theater, cinema...) compared ideas on resources and method issues used by audiovisual sources, not only in relation to research, but also to publicizing, teaching and artistic expression. Starting from Alessandro Portelli's research on the changes of the labor culture in the factory town of Terni, before and after globalization (see *Acciai speciali. Terni, la ThyssenKrupp, la globalizzazione*, Roma, Donzelli, 2008), the course ended with a round table chaired by Luca Mosso on *Il lavoro oggi: esperienze di rappresentazione (Work Today: Representation Experiences)*, aiming at comparing the recent documentary production by Sergio Bologna, Francesca Comencini, Daniele Segre and Federico Rizzo.