

Oral History and Remembering Olala Farms

Introduction

The majority of the footage we produced in the 4 weeks we spent on the farm in the summer of 2015 were moving images of people reminiscing about the past, remembering and telling us their stories about events on and around the farm. This of course has to do with the age of Robyn and Arlo – since they are in their senior years, there is not as much happening on the farm as back when they were farming themselves. Often they have people over, talking about a plethora of things. Having heard of the theory of oral history before, it came to mind on several occasion during filming, but was not reflected until later. So, even though this did not start out as an oral history project, it has many characteristics of one, which is why we'd like to take some time to talk about the theory of oral history, what its peculiarities are, and how it is connected to our project. Whenever possible, we will try to connect the theory with and reflect upon our own work with examples to be found in the contents of this website.

Definition

Valerie Raleigh Vow defines Oral history as follows: “[O]ral history is the recording of personal testimony delivered in oral form” (2005, 3). Lynne Abrams offers a broader definition: “What is oral history? Oral history is a catch-all term applied to two thing. It refers to the process of conducting and recording interviews with people in order to elicit information from them about the past. But an oral history is also the product of that interview, the narrative account of past events. It is then both a research methodology [...] and the result of the research process; [...] it is both the act of recording and the record that is produced” (2010, 2). In short, it is an oral in-depth-interview that deals with events from the past. This definition also makes clear that, even though it's a methodology that emerged from the field of history, it is “embedded not only in historical research but also in a wide range of disciplines including ethnology, anthropology, sociology, health-care studies and psychology” (ibid.). Other methodologies such as the qualitative interview or participant observation might have similarities to oral history e.g. using narrative or informal interviews, but might not be considered oral history if they are not “focused on the act of remembering the past” (ibid, 3). Since our work started out as producing footage for an ethnographic film, we used other methods and tools such as ethnography, participant observation, other forms of interviews

and video (which can be a useful tool in recording oral history). This means that only part of the content of this website can be considered oral history, e.g. the video of Robyn and Arlo looking at pictures in the driveway (which is called Photo-elicitation), talking about the times the photographs were taken. The video of Robyn going to the radio hosting her show on the other hand has nothing to do with reminiscing about the past and thus neither the process of recording it nor the finished video can or should be considered oral history.

Apart from the content oral history focuses on what is said, how it is said and why it is said in this way. A myriad of factors influence this: the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, the language used, the cultural context of all participants among others (cf. *ibid.*, 16). “All of these considerations impact upon how memory is recalled and converted into language. The oral history interview is therefore a complex historical document that contains many layers of meaning and is itself embedded within wider social forces” (*ibid.*). Some of these factors will be considered in more detail on the following pages.

Peculiarities of oral history¹

Since oral history “involves communicating with living, breathing human beings” (Abrams 2010, 18), it is fundamentally different from other history methods and has been defined as a “genre of discourse which orality and writing have developed jointly in order to speak to each other about the past” (Portelli 1991, 25). Extending the list of peculiarities of oral history published by Alessandro Portelli in 1979, Abrams lists the following point as peculiarities of oral history:

Orality

Since oral history deals with the spoken word, orality is a central characteristic of it. Even though the product of oral history most often is a written down transcript of what was said, it is nonetheless rooted in orality. This means that not only the content conveys meaning, but also the way in which something is said, how it is said and what might not be said. Most transcripts of oral history however are “not transcribed as fully verbatim and faithful reproductions of the speech act; the resulting documents provide what might be described as a mediated and often stylized or formulaic version of what was actually said so that much of the orality of the original is lost” (Abrams 2010, 20). In consequence of this, much of the

¹ The following is based on Abrams 2010: 18-32.

character of the narrator is lost as well and the resulting text becomes a seemingly objective document. Working with video like we did has the advantage of being able to preserve most of this orality. However, the process of selection and editing of a filmed interview can be compared to the editing process that happens when producing an oral history text, which means that sentences might be shortened, the order in which things are said might be changed and statements from different interviews might be combined to give more depth to a subject. Even though we tried to minimize editing of interviews and let the people speak in full sentences, what you see in our video sequences can also be considered a mediated and stylized version of what was said. To give you an example of how an unedited answer to an interview question sounds, we uploaded an unedited video of Robyn talking about how they met Michelangelo Antonioni and painted the aeroplanes used in *Zabriskie Point* (USA 1970).

Narrative

Closely related to the concept of orality of the interview is its narrative nature. That means that most questions will be answered with a story. “The story told will be arranged and dramatised in a narrative form with a variety of elements such as reported speech, diversions, commentary, reflection and so on” (ibid., 21). These elements might be distinctive to the culture of the storyteller and can therefore tell us something about his or her culture as a whole. An example of this would be the “normative western model which would conventionally begin with a date and place of birth” (ibid.). Even though narrative is also to be found in textual sources, they have usually been written by academics, clergymen or people in the legal business and not by everyday people, as a consequence “[t]he oral history narrative [...] has a sharper connection to ways of speaking and remembering within societies.” (ibid.)

Performance

These first two points lead to a third peculiarity of oral history – performance. “[W]e form facial expressions as we speak, gesticulate, move our head and arms, we modulate our voice, we present ourselves in a way appropriate to the performance required. All narrators adopt a performance style, some consciously, others not. A performance style will often consist of a combination of narrative form and a particular speech form; hence a clergyperson’s pulpit

sermon would be a recognisable performance style, as would a politician's speech, or a comedian's stage act, or a storyteller surrounded by a group of children" (ibid., 22).

Subjectivity and intersubjectivity

It could be argued that all sources are subjective and that true objectivity is impossible. Objectivity can however be approximated with various methods. In the case of oral history though, the goal is not to produce an objective source of past events, but to participate in a subjective recollection of the past. "We go looking for the personal experience, sometimes as an antidote to generalized accounts of events or to versions of the past produced by those in power. Subjectivity – accessing it, even celebrating it – is the bread and butter of oral history" (ibid.). This is one of the biggest differences of oral history compared to other scientific method, where the approximation of objectivity tends to be one of the highest goals. This is also the case in many theories about ethnographic film, even though a shift away from a seemingly objective style that is more subjective and reflexive has been demanded in recent years (cf. Ruby 2000 and Ruby 2008), a shift that we consider very important for the future of ethnographic film.

In the beginning of our research trip on the farm, we tried to be as objective as possible, not to interfere with the everyday life of our protagonists when the camera was recording and, whenever possible, keep ourselves in the background and not to appear in our own videos, all of that in the name of objectivity. We did not have the time or the resources to go into theories about subjectivity and objectivity while on the farm, but it were concepts that we frequently discussed and always felt a bit uncomfortable with, since the goal of scientific objectivity and the subjective nature of the stories we recorded seemed to be in stark contrast to each other. Knowing this, we soon felt more comfortable with being in the videos ourselves and took more liberties in interviewing people. In our use of the camera, we still adopted a very observational approach however, trying to make the camera invisible not only to the viewer but, maybe even more important, to the people living on the farm. The paradoxical nature of our endeavour, objectively documenting subjective memories, still puzzled us months after we returned home, especially when we began composing sequences from the footage shot and realized that apart from the subjectivity of our protagonist, these sequences were also informed by our own subjectivity in the selection of shots and the arrangement thereof. But our own subjectivity does not solely surface in the finished sequence, it is already inherent in

the footage shot, since it was us who posited the camera, who decided when to record and when not to, who to interview and so on.

As mentioned above, subjectivity is not something to be afraid of in oral history but something to be embraced. The term of intersubjectivity describes “the interaction – the collision, if you will – between the two subjectivities of the interviewer and the interviewee. [...] It has become understood in the oral history community that the interviewer actively constructs a subjectivity for him or herself and respondents actively devise ‘appropriate performances’ in response. [...] In other words, ‘we only know ourselves through a series of interactive moments with others’, and we may invent different selves for each moment or interaction” (Abrams 2010, 58-59). This is to say that the answers of our protagonists and how their memory of past events is recalled are influenced by our relationship to them. They construct and perform a self that they think makes sense to us and our culture, which means the memory or story is a very particular and partial one, a version of the past actively created for an audience.

Interpersonal relationships are affected by age, race, gender, social class, status, ethnicity, and subculture. Generally, there is more open communication when age, gender, class, and race are the same, but in any interview situation, the interviewer must be conscious of the ways in which these basic social attributes impinge. Sensitivity in interpersonal relations and respect create the climate most conducive to a productive interview. (Vow 2005, 179)

The fact that we got to know Robyn and Arlo because of a common friend, Larry Desmond, certainly had a positive effect on our relation to the two. As we found out during our research, Arlo and Robyn are very open people who get along with all kinds of personalities. Whenever Robyn introduced us to people we hadn’t previously met, she said we were “friends from Switzerland making a film about us”, not mentioning anything about the academic background. This certainly had a positive effect on interview situations.

Memory

Since oral history is a subjective recreation of the past, memory needs to be considered. “The oral history interview is an event whereby, through the relationship between the interviewer and the respondent, a memory narrative is actively created in the moment, in response to a whole series of external references that are brought to bear in the interview: the interviewer’s questions, the respondent’s familiarity with media representations of the past, personal

prompts and cues such as photographs and family memorabilia” (Abrams 2010, 23). Since oral history is grounded in memory, there is the possibility of false testimony because the memory of the actual event changed over the years or because it might be “‘infected’ with outside influences”, i.e. “ideas, motifs, sayings and whole memories about the past [borrowed] from their family, community or wider culture [which] reveals much about the collective memory of neighbourhoods, groups and nations” (ibid.).

The story Arlo told us about him giving Charles Manson his middle finger – which we heard a number of times and later found out from Robyn did not happen in this way – is an example of how the collective memory of Charles Manson and the Tate murder influenced Arlo’s memory. For other reasons, considerations about Arlo’s memory were something that accompanied our project from the start. When we met up with Larry a couple of months prior to our time at Olala Farms, he voiced concerns about Arlo’s memory, saying he was in a ‘pre dementia’ stage and that his memory of past events is slowly fading. These concerns persuaded us to visit Olala Farms as soon as possible, being afraid that Arlo won’t be able to tell us stories from the farm and San Francisco. While being on the farm, we experienced first-hand that Larry’s concern were justified and Arlo told us on numerous occasions that he had short-term and long-time memory loss. As you can see in the video of Arlo in the driveway, his daughter Ana has voiced similar concerns. Arlo’s inability to remember past events very clearly sometimes made our work difficult, especially when talking to him alone. There were situations when it was impossible to get him talking when Robyn was not around to jog his memory. We found that, with the right stimulation, e.g. looking at old photographs in the driveway, his memory would work much better and he would participate in discussions more actively. This was interesting for us to see and should be kept in mind when watching videos of Arlo or wondering why Robyn does much more talking when the two of them are in the same shot. What is going on with Arlo’s memory is not the subject of our research, nor is it our intention to make this one of the main issues of our portrait of the farm. From what we have read up on dementia, it seems like Arlo is in a good place with lots of caring friends and family to take care of him, it also seems they are handling it very well.

This connection to memory was one of the reasons we called our website Remembering Olala Farms, thereby stressing the importance of memory. Of course the website itself is also a means of remembering the time we spent on the farm, making the title even more appropriate.

Conclusion

Why is oral history important to our project? As we have seen, “[o]ral history is inevitably subjective” (Vow 2005, 23), which is why it has been of such interest to us. This was our first research trip, which meant we had little experience beforehand. Because we intended to produce an ethnographic film, we neglected other research methodologies to some degree. Being influenced by an observational style of ethnographic film, we aimed at producing an observational film. As described above and elsewhere, the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity accompanied our whole research process, gradually leaning towards a more subjective and reflexive style because of new concepts we discovered in the realm of ethnographic film and ethnography and because of our own experiences and notions about the concepts. When thinking back of what we knew about oral history and reading up on it, we realized that much of what we did can be considered oral history and hence is not only influenced by the subjectivities of Arlo and Robyn and other informants, but also by our own subjectivities and, as a product that will be interpreted, the subjectivities of our audience. Keeping this in mind allowed us to take more liberties in editing, prompted us to write a subjective and reflexive text about the whole research process and made us write and edit ourselves into our project, because we are without a doubt part of the finished project, which is not only the story of Robyn and Arlo but also the story of us being there. Had we known more about oral history before starting the project, we might have gotten more into emotions and feelings during interviews, not only asking what happened, but also asking how the people felt about it.

References:

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