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The Interview as Genre: Notes on Form, Praxeology, and Epistemology

1 Theorizing the Interview as Genre

It is almost too much of a cliché to start the introduction of this companion to interview research by mobilizing the topos of ubiquity. Nonetheless, you might ask yourself: when did you last read, hear, watch, and analyze, or even conduct and participate in an interview? Most likely recently. We encounter interviews frequently. They seem to be everywhere in our “interview society” (Atkinson and Silverman 305). As products of contemporary media, interviews feature prominently in political, business, and sports journalism. They also give voice to personalities in culture sections of newspapers and magazines and to celebrities on television and in social media. Interviews play a crucial role in many areas of the highly mediated worlds we inhabit.

But interviews are not only “structured products (*opus operatum*)” (Bourdieu 140), they also serve as “structuring structure (*modus operandi*)” (140). With respect to the latter, the interview continues to serve as an essential means of collecting and generating research data, for instance, and as a significant frame for the production of knowledge in different disciplines of the social sciences and the humanities (see Punzi; Brauer and Sendatzki; Maffeis; Warnke et al., in this volume). Conducting interviews can serve cultural historiographers to reconstruct history (see Basiuk, in this volume) and archive historically situated performance practices (see Akkermann, in this volume). The “critical interview” (see Williams, in this volume) has become a privileged site to learn about cultural theorists’ works, the “essayistic interview” (see Aquilina et al., in this volume) and the “literary interview” give us insights into how literary authors position themselves in the cultural sphere (see Roach; Yanoshevsky, in this volume), and the “imagined interview” has come to be considered a literary genre in its own right (see Gallerani, in this volume). I suggest subsuming these manifold uses and forms of the interview under the term of *genre* in a broad sense. Understood as a genre, the interview serves as a knowledge interface: it transforms personal experience into socially expected scripts, converts particular situations into generalizable settings, and translates contingency into linear orders, for instance, narratives. Considering the ubiquity and multiformity of the interview genre as a knowledge

interface, the interview seems to respond to the demands of our highly media-tized world in particularly useful and versatile ways.

These demands are not only relevant in the present. The interview has a long history. From a Eurocentric historical perspective, practices of the interview—avant la lettre—have been traced as far back as population censuses in ancient Egypt and the dialogues of Socrates (see Masschelein et al., “Hybrid Genre” 6). The term “interview” itself arose in the early sixteenth century from the French term *entrevue*, from *s’entrevoir* (to see each other), and in its earliest uses referred to a ceremonial face-to-face meeting or conference between persons of the same rank such as sovereigns and nobles (see “interview, n., sense 1.a”). The visual aspects in the semantics of the term refer to a constitutive aspect of the interview which is of crucial importance when analyzing it: the looking relations between the participants of an interview, interviewer and interviewee. These relations can be marked by an unequal distribution of social power and discursive authority. Therefore, the interview seemed predestined for such powerful dynamics in later uses. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, for example, its practices included the formal questioning or interrogation of a person by the police or a formal meeting in which applicants for a paid position or for a course of study at an institution of higher learning were asked questions to assess their suitability (see “interview, n., sense 4.a”; “interview, n., sense 4.b”). When the interview refers to a meeting or conversation in which a journalist asks questions of a person of public interest for the purpose of publication or broadcasting (see “interview, n., sense 4.c”), the interview sets up a seemingly less hierarchical force field, but one in which its participants nevertheless negotiate the extent to which they are endowed with discursive authority. Power dynamics also unfold beyond the interview setting itself when the question arises of who takes control of editing the published version of an interactive encounter and benefits from its distribution and public availability.

Uses and manifestations of the form can be related directly to changing media landscapes in the past two centuries: “the interview is an American creation that coincides with the rise of the penny press (boulevard press) in the 1830s” (Masschelein et al., “Hybrid Genre” 6). While the modern interview “was originally a *journalistic* genre, born in the pages of the journal as a subgenre of investigative journalism” (Yanoshevsky, “On the Literariness” 182, emphasis in original), its functions and related power dynamics diversified when it crossed over from print media to radio in the 1920s and television a few decades later, all the way to the Internet today. From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, the media interview covered a spectrum of poles between documentation and supposed objectivity on one end and overtly subjective, literary forms of

interviewing that centered individuals (for instance, in the New Journalism starting in the 1960s) on the other end of the spectrum. In the latter cases, interviewers have made use of the form to leave their mark (see Masschelein et al., “Hybrid Genre” 7–8).

This brief overview gives an idea of the sheer variety of styles and methods of the interview, not to mention the various fields and domains in which it has been and continues to be of importance. When inspecting the interview, where does one begin to adequately map it, let alone theorize the broad range of its uses, purposes, and effects? The interview as genre includes all of its thinkable types, and yet, different disciplines assume respective prototypes of the form. This is the case, for example, when communication scholars Philip Bell and Theo van Leeuwen address media interviews and their functions: “What media interviews do [...] is give the public a perspective on the *social actors interviewed* and/or the field of their expertise or experience—a perspective from which to judge what they do and what they have to say” (22, emphasis in original). I may assume a different prototype of the genre of interview from my perspective as a literary and cultural studies scholar, and this can yet differ in relation to forms of the interview that are considered prototypical in the social sciences. What, then, do different prototypes of the interview look like in different fields? This volume invites such questions on grounds of the assumption that it is impossible, and arguably undesirable, to provide a comprehensive classification and categorization of the interview. Rather, what this volume seeks to highlight are specific examples of formalization as well as diverse functions of the interview in place and time. By engaging specific bodies of texts as well as singular instances related to clearly delimited contexts of use in a range of disciplines from the humanities and social sciences, this companion aims to make visible particular patterns of use. Without aiming to give exhaustive answers, the observation of these patterns can contribute to a better grasp of the interview as a practice in general.

2 Considering Form

A conceptualization of the interview as *genre* allows us to link questions of formalization, praxis/practice, and the production of knowledge. I foreground a state-of-the-art approach to genre here that rejects a normative focus on the classification of the formal features of genres in favor of an interest in the “manifest [...] and latent functions” (Merton 117) of genre. Such an approach can take its cue from a pragmatic perspective on genre as “social action” (see Miller; Freedman et al.). It can thus open up an attention to formal features, such as the dialogic

structure of the interview, to broader interests in the discursive and social impact a form can afford those who employ it in specific spatiotemporal and discursive contexts—not least in scenarios in which power is distributed unevenly. As John Frow has influentially pointed out, theorizing genre can foreground an exploration of how genres “create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility” (2). This, then, is an approach that relates questions of generic function to a wider interest in the ways in which knowledge, power, and the authorization of discursive positions are formalized. This understanding of genre finds resonance in conceptual reconfigurations of what Caroline Levine has termed “‘politically minded’ new formalisms” (12), which have generated recent work on social and political aspects of form. For instance, Ramzi Fawaz sees “the political aspect of forms [...] in their capacity to make public and circulate ‘figures of the newly thinkable’ that facilitate innovative thought and collective action” (378n47). While Levine argues for an expansive concept of form, broadening the meaning of the term to include questions concerning the organizing and ordering mechanisms of social arrangements, Fawaz makes the term “form” productive in its reference to “an everyday inventive practice of conceiving something differently or anew in the mind’s eye” (378n47). By rejecting one-sided approaches to genre that constrain themselves to defining and classifying formal features, such current approaches have immensely invigorated and dynamized considerations of form.

Interview research gains much from striking a balance between a traditional grasp limited to a normative classification of the formal features of genre, and new formalist approaches to functions of form concerned with sociopolitical arrangements in a broad sense. The point is to conceptualize the genre of the interview by connecting questions of form with the social and discursive impact of generic practice. Masschelein et al. speak of “genericity”: as they point out, referencing Jean-Michel Adam and Ute Heidmann, “it makes more sense to look for [...] ‘effects of genericity’ that appear in a dynamic process, on different levels of editing, production, and reception, than to try to define the genre as an essential category” (“Hybrid Genre” 18; see Adam and Heidemann 25). Such an approach to the interview enables an understanding of the ways that recurrent generic patterns give formal shape to and generate discourses, including assigning speakers different positions in discourse. Discourse here is understood not only as public debate powered by sociopolitical attitudes but more broadly in a Foucauldian vein as specialized, regulated speech that shapes what we can know. Considering various formal manifestations of the interview as genre thus also brings to the fore broader epistemological perspectives.

A general understanding of genre that connects the study of patterns of formalization with an account of their social, discursive, and disciplinary functions also provides an apt background for research on the genre of interview with respect to its uses as a method of knowledge production. Disciplinary differences are key here. Assuming that disciplines construct the objects they study in the first place, different fields create research about *and* through the interview, both as an object and as a means of study in ways that differ in outlook. The interview in literary studies and cultural historiography, for example, can and should be differentiated from approaches to the interview in other areas of research. Taking an interest in the formal aspects of an interview as part of a narrative text should be distinguished from, but also juxtaposed and compared with, an interest in the interview as journalistic text. And this is a different focus than one on the interview as a journalistic method, as a means of testifying in a public hearing or a court case, as a diagnostic tool in medicine, and as an instrument for collecting research data. Formal aspects relate to different conceptualizations of interview functions across diverging fields.

With respect to method and methodology, the social sciences in particular have generated ample scholarship that addresses the interview as an instrument with which to gather and interpret data. (Handbooks addressing the history, types, methods, and ethics of interviewing include Gubrium and Holstein; Fontana and Prokis; Gubrium et al.; Denzin and Lincoln). Rather than drawing disciplinary boundaries, however, it promises to be beneficial to take note of the various framings of the interview as an instrument across fields (see, e.g., Love). Work in social-science research alone is broad and highly diverse. We only need to consider quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as various types of interviewing techniques from structured to semi-structured to unstructured and informal types (see Fontana and Prokis 111), which have contributed fundamentally to a conceptualization of the interview as a form with respect to its methodical affordances. Crucial methodological questions that have been raised in the social sciences and in anthropology, pedagogy, media studies, and sociolinguistics, among others, can give impetus to adjacent areas of research in the humanities. Examples here include approaches in biographical research that address how participants in an interview co-generate data (see, e.g., Grenz), reflections in education theory that consider interviewing as a tool for developing critical literacy among students (see, e.g., Ohmann et al. 34), media-discourse-analytical approaches to the news interview (see Weizman) and the interview in political debate (see, e.g., Chilton; Blas Arroyo), reflections on the interview in ethnographic participant observation (see, e.g., Ahmed 9–12), as well as the sociolinguistic observer's paradox and its repercussions for an interview setting. To consider this

foundational position from the history of sociolinguistics: “the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain this data by systematic observation” (Labov 209). The observer’s paradox, for instance, prompts a consideration of the functions of the interview in the realm of the humanities more broadly. Its methodological and epistemological implications can also help to gain a better understanding of the interview as a literary and/or journalistic or hybrid form that formalizes dyadic communication and generates and authorizes knowledge in specific ways in cultural fields. Different disciplines raise comparable questions about the formalization of the relationship—the looking relations—between the participating parties, about who observes and who is being observed, about the extent to which interviewer and interviewee are endowed with or divested of discursive clout respectively, about the degree to which the former can make claims to objectivity, and so on. Scholars from different fields find dissimilar answers to similar questions, for instance to the question of how to transcribe spoken words: while linguists may decide to pay attention to and record an interviewee’s accent, tone, vocal noises, and pauses, among other aspects (see Du Bois et al.), psychologists may show no interest in such data. The overall point is that distinct fields may nonetheless share related sets of questions about formalization that drive their respective production of knowledge, even if they don’t share the same methods to answer those questions.

Diverging disciplinary practices can yield different results, but what they have in common is the epistemological assumption that acts of interviewing and transcribing perform the interview as a knowledge interface. This image of performance is intended to illustrate that the dynamics that take place in an interview cannot be grasped beyond their formalization. They are to be understood explicitly as a question of form. One crucial aspect introduced above concerns the formal framing of power (im)balances in the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, the more or less explicit “competition” that “takes place over the command of the interview (Yanoshevsky, “On the Literariness,” 208). John Rodden highlights this dynamic with respect to the literary interview, which he reads as “[p]ublic [p]erformance,” as a “serious art form” with “diverse patterns of literary performance” (402). Conceptualizing these interviews as performance stresses the formal aspects by which interviewees manifest their positions. This formal dimension becomes obvious in the tentative typology of interviewee personae Rodden develops: while those he classifies as “traditionalists *downplay* their personalities,” those he types as “*raconteurs display* them [and] ‘take control’” (“The Literary Interview” 403). Other types in this typology, especially the “provocateur” (404), highlight that interviewees can deliberately attempt to project

an image not only for those who interview them but also for an audience who see them perform a certain way. As this taxonomy suggests, interviews can be witnessed as acts that formalize not only a dialogic but also a triangular communicative structure (see Masschelein et al., “Hybrid Genre” 23). The dyadic relationship of the interview opens up to the broader public setting within which it is performed and received by its addressees. It is enacted—formalized—in a force field of tensions.

Another way to conceptualize this force field is by picturing it as a network of spectra constituted by opposite poles: oral versus written, fixed versus open, factual versus fictional/narrativized, objective versus subjective, autonomous versus heteronomous, singular versus collective, private versus public. The list goes on. The image of these spectra can only serve heuristic purposes. It should also be noted that the binary logic implied by a spectrum should be deconstructed. Take the oral-versus-written spectrum, for instance: while an interview may be read as a spontaneous dialogue, it is often carefully edited to give an impression of orality, creating an authenticating effect of immediacy and spontaneity which can be achieved by both editing in *or* out markers of orality. As this intended effect is a formal strategy of discursive authorization, it raises questions about the formal dimensions by which an interlocutor can be granted discursive clout. Or, regarding the spectrum spanning fact and fiction: as Stuart Hall once put it paradoxically, “the event must become a ‘story’ before it can become a communicative event” (164). In other words, facts can only be signified when they are emplotted within a specific discourse. The interview is one site where that happens.

It is the spectrum between the private and the public, perhaps more than any other factor, that accounts for the high visibility of the interview across diverse media-formatted public domains of which we are all part. The private-public nexus also explains why the interview has driven research across scholarly fields for decades. It demonstrates why the interview is of such relevance as a knowledge interface in areas that work with and on the interview. Among other functions, the interview can respond to an apparent need for personal encounters and self-expression as well as to a desire for insights into private and oftentimes individual life worlds. Obtaining personal insights—be it for entertainment or reference and analysis—from those who impart intimate facts and personal stories runs counter to the sense of alienation that can result from social media technologies, an effect of what media scholars have called “deep mediatization” (see Hepp). An emphasis on the personal presumably alleviates experiences of anonymity related to our parameterized, “algorithmic” lives (see Bucher) and oftentimes faceless interactions.

Accordingly, the interview—as a formalized encounter between individual people—has been read as an index of a person-centric culture. The interview can translate public concerns to the personal, or rather, it can help to infer general issues from particular, personal instances, much like what the late Lauren Berlant discussed with reference to “the case,” which can make abstract ideas familiar and in turn fold “the singular into the general” (663). The interview oftentimes revolves around the particular case of an individual person. But it does more than that. We continue to live, as noted above, in the “interview society” that sociologists Paul Atkinson and David Silberman identified in their 1997 article, which brought together social-science research and literary and cultural studies scholarship more than a quarter of a century ago. In an anonymous world of mass culture, they argued, access to the personal lives of individuals is luring. In light of the ubiquity of digital media and the concomitant awareness of how highly mediated our lives and perceptions are, the “collection and celebration of personal narratives” (304) was then a relevant preoccupation, and protocolling the personal continues to this day to arouse scholars’ ongoing attention to the interview.

The “centrality of the interview culture” prompted Atkinson and Silberman to critically address scholarship that assumed it was possible to access personal experience as supposedly authentic by way of the interview. They thus criticized “an implicit appeal to the authenticity of narrated experience in the dialogic revelation of selves” (305). As the present volume attests, the interview is indeed a matter of conscious formalization, not of simple exposure and unmediated reflection. All contributions assembled here highlight, from a variety of different angles, that the interview always arranges standpoints, thoughts, and data, and that it relates one speaker to another in orchestrated interactions. They show that it affords speaking positions in a generic framework and thus also provides specific formal conditions for the articulation, negotiation, and circulation of ideas. What emerges, then, is an understanding of the interview as a form that situates and regulates knowledge and, at the same time, is itself situated in and regulated by textual, institutional, and discursive settings in which stylized selves and their viewpoints become readable.

3 Questions of Praxis/Practice

While a publicly accessible interview may project an impression of tapping an individual's private life, the impression of public revelation is always already a mediated effect in communicative processes. This is the case not least because such interviews are made for audiences. Accordingly, private selves emerge as actors in public domains. They figure as personae of communicative conventions, representational patterns, and discursive assumptions that interviewers and interviewees share with their audiences. Likewise, the interview does not simply present a dialogue. Understood as a generic framework for which an interaction is foundational, it provides formal conditions for the staging of such a dialogue. This staging can be altered in the process leading up to the publication of its finalized version and beyond, for instance if we take into consideration procedures of cross-medial (re)contextualization (for a discourse-analytical understanding of "contextualization" in linguistics see, e.g., van Dijk). Interviews generate knowledge about personal experience and about an interviewee's work, for instance, according to historically and culturally specific scripts. Conceptualizing the interview as a form within a pragmatic genre-theoretical framework opens up an additional dimension to Atkinson and Silberman's assumption that "the personal and the private enter into public discourse through shared expectations and a common stock of narrative formulations" (316): in each new take on the interview, in every instance of genre use, cultural scripts can also get adjusted and modified. This way, any occasion of reformatization also updates and transforms the genre of the interview itself. Key questions that arise here include: how and to what effect do interviews shape speaking subjects' selves and the ways they share knowledge? How can participants in the interview process use the form to position themselves in public domains? How can they impact the dynamics in which interviews are then circulated and consumed? A performative, pragmatic approach to the interview as genre adds a further crucial question: how do singular interviews reperform and update the interview as a genre?

These are questions of praxis. To put it differently, considerations concerning the manifest and latent functions of the interview are a matter of the practical use to which the genre of interview is put: who, what, when, where, how, and why are obvious points to address, and they do not only relate to the practice of interviewing itself, but also to other stages in a larger process of enacting the interview as genre. For some, this includes preparing, holding and giving, transcribing, editing, publishing, and distributing it; for others, what matters is analyzing, interpreting, theorizing, and contextualizing the work performed by an interview. This, as discussed above, has to do with domains such as the journalistic and the

literary domains, as well as with fields, understood here as academic disciplines. We might extend the trope of performance to say figuratively that domains and disciplines want the interview to take on different roles. Sciences that collect and analyze data in large quantities, for instance, will cast the interview as data collector. Literary studies are divided over its role (for a comprehensive annotated bibliography on the “literary interview,” see Masschelein et al., “Annotated Bibliography”). Should it serve as “metatext” that yields theory about the literary field and contributes to writing literary history, or should it rather be cast as literature in its own right, as “another form of fiction” (Yanoshevsky, “On the Literariness” 201, 208)? Yanoshevsky here suggests that we consider the interview *beyond* its function as an epitextual paratext in the sense of literary theorist Gérard Genette: “a text about the work but outside the bound volume of the work” (“On the Literariness” 201n36; see Genette 407). As such a paratext, the interview can provide insights, for instance, into how authors’ works and authors themselves can be positioned in the cultural sphere.

Michel Foucault’s notion of the commentary function as delineated in his “Orders of Discourse” comes to mind here: Linking it to the genre of the interview, we can say that the interview—as discursive commentary—becomes central to discourse itself: “Not a few major texts become blurred and disappear, and commentaries sometimes come to occupy the former position” (Foucault 13). If we understand the interview to perform the “infinite rippling of commentary,” then we can also assume, with Foucault, that it turns into a central text itself through its own acts of repeating and reciting a “primary text” (13): “The novelty lies no longer in what is said, but in its reappearance” (14). This, then, turns our attention to the reperformance of the interview as a form, especially in the sense of its repeated uses and the consequences that this can have for a broader assessment of the interview as genre.

Assessing the significance of reperformance, that is, of what happens to the genre when it is being updated through individual reenactments of interviews, prompts us to take up a very basic differentiation here made in the area of praxeology (or practice theory) between *praxis* and *practice*. The idea is that concrete acts of praxis reenact abstract patterns of practice. As Alkemeyer et al. elaborate from a sociological point of view, praxis refers to particular activities, to “contingent events of execution,” whereas practices can be conceptualized to refer to recurring and identifiable patterns, to “typified and socially intelligible bundles of linguistic and non-linguistic activities” (see 27, translation CJ). Transferring this to the interview allows us to highlight that a theorization of the interview can examine singular instances of genre use—specific examples of interviews in praxis—to then reconstruct them within the larger framework of the genre of

interview as a practice that contributes to the discursive formalization of social dynamics, a practice that is historically situated as well as culturally and socially relevant. Thus, “acting out” does not only mean concrete doing, it also means realizing formats and patterns of communicative action, in our case of genre. For this reason, it is important to distinguish two aspects concerning the interview on two levels: on the level of its situational realization and on the level of its epistemically-bound typicality. Genre encompasses both aspects, for genre exists neither without praxis nor without practice.

4 Epistemological Interfaces

The interview, as form in praxis/practice, including its circulation, provides specific modalities of knowledge production. Hence, this volume aims to contribute to nothing less than the crucial epistemological question of how we can know. Akin to an interface in computing, the interview connects various “items,” strands of knowledge, so that they can jointly operate: for instance, in the various stages of enacting the interview as form, someone’s personal experience can be translated into experiential knowledge shared by many. Protocolling this—linking someone’s individual experiences to larger questions of knowledge—is one of many aspects that complicate theorizing about how we can know. The protocol must involve more than one variable: how a person’s experience relates to knowledge is not least a matter of who can claim to know what from what perspective. The concept of “lived experience,” addressed here in all due brevity, cannot be conceptualized independently of a consideration of the positioning of subjects in social arrangements and discursive settings nor of the parameters that always already prescribe certain scripts by which that experience can be transformed into generalizable knowledge. As historian Joan Scott had convincingly argued years before Atkinson and Silverman, and with reference to marginalized groups and subjects, the appeal to experience “as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation” (777) should not preclude an examination of the discursive conditions that shape perceptions of experiences of marginalization and exclusion in the first place. Genre provides such a discursive condition, in part because it regulates access to and organizes knowledge production.

This way, the genre of the interview also serves as an interface between subjects and discourses: Let us consider, as one specific example, to what effect the form was put to use in the United States in the cold-war 1950s, when the so-called Red Scare mobilized fears of communism and the so-called Lavender Scare caused anxieties about homosexuality. At that paranoid time, the US senate

resolved to launch two congressional investigations whose aim it was to identify women and men as “homosexuals and other sex perverts” (Adkins) in the federal government workforce—not least by way of the interview. The committees operated on the assumption that people ostracized as “moral perverts” were vulnerable to communist blackmail (Adkins). Branding them as supposed security risks, they were to be ousted from their jobs. Documents retrieved from the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C., show how the congressional investigations operated: committee members heard testimonies (themselves a kind of interview) to gather information from representatives of “federal agencies, law enforcement, judicial authorities, and the medical community”; the committees followed a procedure by which their members spoke about, not with “gay men or lesbians” (Adkins). They thus confirmed and stabilized a discourse that pathologized and criminalized people by assigning them object positions in discourse.

However, while the US senate manifested its institutional and discursive power to record and stabilize hegemonic knowledge, epistemic orders were also unsettled. In particular, one representative of the medical discourse of the time (Dr. Leonard Scheele, Surgeon General of the US Public Health Service from 1947–1956) complicated the committee members’ work of unambiguously identifying homosexuality. He “underscored the sketchiness of knowledge about the issue: ‘We are dealing in a gap area in large degree’” (Adkins), and suggested that such matters of ascription should be juxtaposed with the perspectives of those spoken about—perspectives that were to be retrieved by way of the interview:

The committee, it seemed, hoped [...] for clarity, simplicity, and straightforward solutions. Senator [Margaret Chase] Smith asked Dr. Scheele, “There is no quick test like an x-ray that discloses these things?”

“No, unfortunately,” he replied, “it is a long interview affair.” (Adkins)

The use of the interview in the context of the Lavender Scare apparently held the potential to destabilize dominant epistemic orders. The interview’s setting did not only open up a space for experts to elicit their expertise (and disclose “these things”). Perhaps it enabled those who were interviewed to resist normative interrogation, modify dominant perspectives, and ultimately complicate assumptions that their interviewers brought to the table in a drawn-out interviewing process. By being interviewed, interviewees could articulate their own points of view. However, it is likely that they also had to fight off shame and other affects, and it would be credulous to assume that they could use the interview to access discourse on their own terms, simply reject their assigned object position and change discursive positioning practices, thereby subverting knowledge

production. The “interview affair” suggested by the Surgeon General would articulate glaring power differentials and serve the committee members’ interests in maintaining an oppressive knowledge regime. Participants would enter the interview setting with varying degrees of discursive authority. For instance, interviewers could focus attention on topics of their choice, determine the length and scope of responses to their questions, and set the tone of the interview. As medical experts of their time, they had the final say, both literally and figuratively, in conducting the interviews. The interview here comes to serve as an instrument of surveilling and regulating a demographic group.

Asymmetries of power are not only at play *within* interview situations; power dynamics also take shape *beyond* the interview, in domains in which interviews are recontextualized. This includes matters concerning the negotiation of norms about what can or should happen in an individual interview, as well as of the modality of the interview as a genre more generally. In other words, interviewing constitutes a communicative practice that is embedded in dynamics of discursive and structural power on a broader scale. Interviews manifest what anthropologist Charles L. Briggs calls “metacommunicative norms” (911). These norms can consolidate hierarchical relations not least when those interviewed are seen as representing a particular subject position or demographic group, as was the case when interviews aided the construction of “moral perverts” in the 1950s (Adkins). While the interviewees in principle spoke for themselves and likely hoped that their life stories would be publicly recognized in a way that corresponded to their own narratives, the epistemic and political scenario of the time in which the interviews were embedded probably made this almost impossible. Instead, medical experts as intermediaries used the interview to speak vicariously for the interviewees. This is corroborated by Briggs’s general epistemological observation: “The power invested in interviews to construct discourses that are then legitimated as the words of others points to their effectiveness as technologies that can be used in naturalizing the role of specialists in creating systems of difference” (913).

As I argue elsewhere with respect to the interview as genre in the framework of a cultural historiography that traces the legacies of transatlantic enslavement in the United States, an interview featuring marginalized subjects can be read for its investments in centering them in discourse: “The material could be read for its documentary evidence, for the ways in which it provides a platform for interviewees to articulate themselves, as it seems to give voice to them, heaving them into speech by providing them with speaking positions from which they can give accounts of themselves” (Junker, “Interrogating” 312). At the same time, the material “may also be read—and this makes the picture more composite—for the ways in which its interviewers interrogate their interviewees and frame their

articulations, speaking for them and appropriating their life accounts for their own interests” (312). The point here is not so much that interviews should be read with suspicion, but rather that it is useful to place them in an overarching discursive setting in which the interview as knowledge interface contributes to the negotiation of power differentials, including dynamics involving the recognition of subjects and groups and the concomitant potential redistribution of attention in political or disciplinary settings in which attention is a scarce resource. Cases in which interviewers speak *for* interviewees raise general issues related to a problem of vicariousness that extends beyond the genre of interview across various forms (see Junker, “Vicarious”).

Following Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse as political technology and Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualization of communicative competence as symbolic capital, research on the interview, such as Briggs’s, has contributed to a better understanding of the ways in which interviews are recontextualized to serve shifting and emerging scholarly paradigms or consolidate epistemic orders. Much more than an instrument for the objective collection of data in various scholarly disciplines—or a frame for presenting political positions in the nightly news or exchanging views at eye level in talk shows—the interview is a highly instructive object of inquiry that provides insights into discursive dynamics, including the positions assigned to subjects and groups in discursive arrangements. For instance, interviewees may well shape the course of an interview and be in a position to determine how an interview is edited, interpreted, and where it is published—including cases in which famous interviewees retract pieces because they do not see their positions adequately represented, which can result in broader discussions of free speech (see, e.g., Moynihan). Interviews can also circulate and be recontextualized in medial and discursive frameworks, especially in social media, in ways that neither interviewees nor even interviewers can control.

Under the current impression of geopolitical conflicts as well as divisions within democratic societies, it seems that what should not be left out of sight when we consider how the interview formalizes knowledge production is how interlocutors interact, especially when *conflictual* dynamics are negotiated in and beyond the interview. This includes meta-generic debates over how contested matters should be formalized in an interview. Take political interviews between journalists and politicians, the performative dimensions of which are stressed by discourse-analytical linguists when they refer to them as “highly rule-governed [and we might add, rule-governing] discourse activities” (Blas Arroyo 405) and which—considering the interview as a matter of genre—pre-structure audience expectations. Audiences may anticipate certain ways in which interviewer and interviewee should or should not interact in political interviews. Modality here is

shaped by multiple flexible factors such as historical, cultural, medial, national, political, or ideological ones. These factors can also shift over time: “deep changes in the political and ideological makeup of a country also account for changes in preferences for certain types of interviews over others” (Blas Arroyo 407). Audiences may expect interviewed politicians to cooperate and comply with interviewing journalists or, inversely, expect interviewees to disturb expectations set by interviewers, with the latter in turn challenging the former critically. Interlocutors in political interviews can thus be situated on a spectrum between friendly and hostile—consensual or conflictual—interaction, they can confront each other to different degrees on what has been called “the scale of interactional cooperation” (Blas Arroyo 406). I forward as a hypothesis here that norms of what is sayable within certain medial and national contexts become particularly salient when interlocutors display especially low or especially high degrees of cooperation.

Closely inspecting how the interview as genre formalizes political discourse, and also bringing into view normative standpoints about debate culture, contributes to a better understanding of the role of the interview in fraught debates over contested issues not only *in* democracies, but also *about* the state of democracy itself, when freedom of speech and of the press (as they are protected, taking the example of the United States, by the First Amendment) are turned into points of controversy. Such debates include questions of whether and how to go about interviewing political opponents, populist politicians, and demagogues. What if “systematic verbal violence [...] is not only sanctioned but even rewarded in accordance with the rules and expectations of the corresponding political [and medial] institutions” (426)? If the interview becomes a site for interlocutors to stage aggressive behavior, how can its functions be assessed in relation to political cultures? Moreover, when commentators of interviews express concern about a leveling out of differences and hierarchies between interviewers and interviewees, and about the former not making sufficient use of the possibilities of critical investigation, to what extent do they make a valid point about risks to democracy? Observations about frictions and antagonistic dynamics in an interview, or lenient and harmonious ones, for that matter, can hardly serve as the ultimate index of the overall state of political polarization in democratic debate cultures, let alone of current states of democracy. But the interview remains a site for close inspection of what we can know and of how knowledge making takes shape.

One iconic instance of the interview stands as a testament to the possibilities of organizing knowledge, paradoxically by playfully denying the possibilities that the interview offers: a shrewd satirical series that combines text-based dialogue and visual caricature by Mexican artist and anthropologist Miguel

Covarrubias (1904–1957). Provisionally titled *Imaginary Interviews* in its first installment and thenceforward published as *Impossible Interviews*, the series toys with the interview as a platform of affordances that, indeed, offers potentialities for bringing into dialogue positions that would otherwise be considered diametrically opposed or unmatchable (see “Legends at Loggerheads”). The series appeared in *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* magazines in the 1930s, starting with “Imaginary Interviews—no. 1: Aimée Semple McPherson vs. Mahatma (Stick) Ghandi” in *Vanity Fair* in Dec. 1931, and ending with the “Impossible Interview: Stalin versus Schiaparelli” published in *Vogue*, 15 Jun. 1936 (for a detailed publishing history, see Bevan 122–23). In the title of the pieces, Covarrubias relates the names of the two characters by the conjunction “vs.,” so they are contrasted. He makes the impossible possible. *Impossible Interviews* may have surprised and entertained its audience because it presents unlikely pairs: a politician with a show business celebrity or a sports star, a social reformer with a child movie star, a fascist dictator with an industry tycoon, a nuclear physicist with an astrologer. It brings together characters that represent different fields, from politics, business, and science to sports and entertainment.

These caricatures are part of early mass media celebrity culture; what makes them both entertainingly funny as well as ambivalently enlightening is their visualization: Covarrubias uses an artistic language of exaggeration. We see exaggerated proportions and striking facial expressions. Some illustrations show overstated stereotypical gender images, while others echo and expose the stylized racializing depictions of modernist primitivism. Every interview displays two well-known characters as representatives of a larger professional group and social type, a political attitude or totalitarian ideological position. Not only is the improbability of the encounter completely obvious, but the impossible conditions under which the pairs meet are at times highlighted in a spectacular way: in the final installment of the series, Josef Stalin meets Elsa Schiaparelli, the famous fashion designer of the time, during a parachute jump. The interviews entertain, but more so, they exploit the critical potential of satire. They provide sharp-witted, biting comments on the characters and what they stand for, demonstrating their naivety, their ordinariness, and yet their dangerousness. Amusement turns into mockery. In the *Impossible Interviews*, Covarrubias resorts to the genre of interview to turn it into the form par excellence for the creation of unlikely couples. In this incarnation of the form, the artist does not only illustrate, embody, or mock. He also brings discursive positions into dialogue, playfully taking up the notion of the interview in the original etymological sense of two interlocutors seeing each other. As we observe them interviewing each other, we are invited to grapple with the vagaries of epistemology. As it turns out, we

can also witness the interview—in its function as epistemic interface—emerging as the protagonist of knowledge production.

5 Rationale of the Volume

This companion presents state-of-the-art contributions that address demands met by the interview. The collection includes an international and interdisciplinary roster of contributors who theorize various uses and functions of the interview from the perspectives of different fields in the social sciences and humanities. In its interdisciplinary outlook, the volume brings together theoreticians and practitioners from across literary studies, cultural studies, and historiography, as well as philosophy, psychology, linguistics, and musicology. It presents the interview as an object of study by conceptualizing it as a genre that traverses disciplinary boundaries. In this interdisciplinary framing, it inspects various manifestations and meanings of the interview—as form, but also as praxis/practice, and as epistemic site and ubiquitous knowledge interface. The chapters are organized into two main parts. Part one—Staging Culture and the Interview as Form—examines the interview primarily in its manifold manifestations as a specific form of cultural expression. Part two—Creating Knowledge and the Interview as Praxis/Practice—principally considers uses of the form as well as homing in on its methodological and epistemic implications. The title of the volume, *Inspecting the Interview*, takes up the visual dimensions provided by the original early-modern meaning of the term “interview,” from *s’entrevoir*, to see each other. These dimensions are understood here in a metaphorical way as a cue to take a close analytical look at the looking relations in the interview, one among the many aspects that make the genre an important object of study across fields.

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