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Before the Antelope: Robert Pagès on Documents

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Introduction: Briet and the antelope

In 1951 the French librarian, Suzanne Briet published a manifesto on the nature of documents, documentalists, and documentation entitled *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* [What is documentation?] (Briet 1951; English translation Briet 2006). In an important passage, Briet gives examples of what can or cannot be considered a document:

“Is a star a document? Is a pebble rolled by a torrent a document? Is a living animal a document? No. But the photographs and catalogues of stars, the stones in a museum of mineralogy, and the animals that are catalogued and shown in a zoo, are documents” (Briet 1951, 7; Briet 2006, 10).

Briet further states that the antelope is an initial document and that documents describing the antelope are derived (or secondary) documents. Briet presents these striking assertions without citing any sources or reference to antecedents. Her manifesto received very little attention until the 1990s, forty years later, when Briet and her antelope-as-a-document became well-known image in library and information science literature.

Briet published more than a hundred articles and books (Buckland 2005; Briet 2006, 65-69). Most of them are conventional professional papers or reports on bibliography, documentation, or library services. Many others are on the history and literature of the Ardennes region near Charlesville-Mézières between the rivers Aisne and Marne, or about Arthur Rimbaud, the poet from there. These writings follow standard scholarly practice with carefully cited sources. In her manifesto on documentation, however, and some other more personal writing, sources are mostly absent or only hinted at (Buckland, in press). In particular, no sources are given for the examples given above (star, rock, antelope) or for the distinction between primary and secondary documents.

In French, and in this paper, the word *technique* is used to include both the English terms technique (method) and technology (tools). *Culture* and *cultural* are used here in a broad anthropological sense to include personal and social life broadly.

Robert Pagès

In her old age, Briet published a book of meditations, *Direction concorde* [Toward harmony] (Briet 1979). In it, she states that Robert Pagès (1919-2007) was insightful concerning introspection and meditation. And indeed, Pagès did publish a thoughtful and impressive book, *Itinéraire du seul; essai* [loosely translated: Roadmap for the individual: Essay] on making sense of making sense, and also a novel, *L'exigence, roman* [The need: a novel], about a husband and wife who decide separately to seek more meaning in life (Pagès 1962; 1964).

In his youth Pagès had been a Trotskyist and then a clandestine anarchist activist under the pseudonym Rodion. He later founded and directed a major social psychology research laboratory (Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale) supported by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (the French Nation Center for Scientific Research). However, in between these two careers, he enrolled as a student in the program of professional education for documentation organized by Briet and others for the French Union of Documentation Organizations (Union Française des Organismes de Documentation, (UFOD)) at the National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts (Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, CNAM), the very large and respected college dedicated to education and research for the promotion of science and industry. In 1951 this program became the present National Institute for Techniques for Documentation (Institut National des Techniques de Documentation, INTD).

Documentary transformations and cultural context

While a student in Briet's documentation program, Pagès wrote two theses. The first, completed in 1947, was published the following year as an article entitled "Transformations documentaires et milieu culturel (Essai de documentologie)" [Documentary transformations and cultural context (Essay on documentology)]. *Documentology* was then a term of choice in France for the study of documents and documentation, corresponding loosely to a broad sense of what is now called library and information science. The article appeared in the *Review of documentation* published by the International Federation for Documentation and then the leading journal in the field (Pagès 1947; 1948). The article is long, wide-ranging, and rather tersely written.

Pagès' objective is to relate the emerging field of documentology to theories of human cultures, a larger, older, and rather diffuse field. Like Briet he saw documentation as cultural technique. He writes that documents are to culture what machinery is to industry and that there is nothing more important in the study of culture than examination of its infrastructure, which is becoming more technological, more controlled, and more organized methodologically ("sa 'base' technique, de plus en plus équipée, réglée et méthodiquement organisée" (p. 53)).

Pagès grew up in Europe during the rise of fascist regimes and studied philosophy and psychology. He brought a different perspective than counterpart commentators in North America who were more narrowly focused on technology and the needs of scientists and engineers. He comments that documentation activities expanded after the end of the First World War in 1918 as mass production, mass political movements, total warfare, and mass media became massive social forces within encompassing regimes, making the work of documentalists into an industry. Society was increasingly cultivated by the media, with a shift in emphasis from traditional literacy to multi-media fluency. The widespread use of documents

for cultural and social purposes drives the work of documentalists. Librarians, archivists, and managers of museums, monuments, and zoos are pre-documentalist occupations.

Pagès on documents

What follows is a discussion of Pagès' ideas about documents.

Graphic documents

Ordinarily “document” refers to a text, image, or data recorded on some medium. The inclusion of images and diagrams led to the use of *graphic documents* for this category, even though, as Paul Otlet liked to point out, plastic and kinetic expressions (sculpture, educational toys) ought also to be included (Buckland 1997). What graphic documents have in common is that they are always about something. They are descriptive and, therefore, can be seen as derived from, or secondary to, whatever they are about. In addition, Pagès notes, written documents are constrained by the limitations of language.

Non-graphic documents

Acknowledging the existence of graphic documents implies the possibility of *non-graphic documents*. Any physical entity might in some imaginable circumstances be perceived as interesting, significant, or instructive as a sign or document. Smoke may indicate a fire and we might see mineral ores in a rock sample. Non-graphic documents are not descriptive. Pagès distinguishes two kinds of non-graphic documents: particulars and specimens.

Non-graphic particulars (“autodocuments”)

For something to be an identifiable object it needs to be distinguishable from its context and when any object has a unique, distinct identity we can call it a *particular*. Pagès cites Napoleon’s hat and a unique meteorite as examples of unique, particular objects. Such an object is not graphic and so it cannot be said to be descriptive of something else and it is not a secondary or derived document. It can, however, be considered as illustrative, revealing something about itself. Figuratively it “speaks for itself” and Pagès calls it an *autodocument*.

Sameness and specimens

Strictly speaking, no two distinguishable objects (no two particulars) can be entirely the same. If they were, they would not be distinguishable objects. When we refer to two or more objects as being “the same,” we are not using “same” in a strict sense. Instead we mean that they are equally acceptable for some purpose (Hayes 2011). If offered a choice between two or more similar alternatives we may be indifferent and respond, “It is all the same to me,” meaning that in the

circumstances each is equally acceptable. Two U.S. 25 cent coins, for example, necessarily differ spatially because they cannot both occupy the exact same physical space at the same time. They might also differ in other ways, such as the year that they were minted, in being worn, or by belonging to different owners. But ordinarily, for most purposes, they are acceptable alternatives when paying for something. So, in this situation, their significance lies in their being members of the set of 25 cent coins. They are *specimens* of the same class of thing: *tokens* of a *type*. Pagès gives, as examples of specimens, an unidentified Egyptian mummy, a gorilla in a zoo, and piece of spar (*spath*, rock crystal). This assumes that it does not matter which actual mummy, gorilla, or piece of spar is used. Any mummy, any gorilla or any piece of spar would serve sufficiently as a specimen. Each represents (“speaks for”) the set of which it is a member.

Note, however, that the difference between a particular and a specimen is not essential to the object, but follows from the perceiver’s purpose. Every gorilla – and every mummy – is a distinct individual with a unique personality and personal life story, a *particular*. Only if the interest of the perceiver is at a more general level, an interest in the characteristics of a population, does a particular become a specimen. Any particular may share one or more attributes with other particulars. Recognizing that relationship establishes a class (set) of objects with a shared characteristic and, when viewed from that perspective, each particular becomes a specimen of that class. As a member of a class, as a specimen, it “speaks for” the class, not just itself.

Pagès cited Napoleon’s hat as an autodocument. But Napoleon presumably had more than one hat in which case each hat is specimen of his headwear. Or we can associate his hat with other French hats or with clothing made with felt and again it becomes a specimen. Even a unique meteorite is a specimen of meteorites generally. But when shared characteristics are disregarded the object not a specimen, but a particular.

Objects and subjects

An object is just that, an object and we can act upon on it in different ways:

1. Changed object. We can attempt to change it directly by modifying it into some altered state.
2. Derived object. We can derive another, more or less changed object from it. This is a standard software operation: an algorithm derives a new version.
3. Repositioning. A different kind of descriptive move is to reposition the object in relation to one or more other existing objects.

4. Description or representation. We can make a description of the aspects of it that are of interest to us. This description is a new object, a text or image about the object, a graphic document.

In each case the object has been acted upon and so, although it remains an object, it has been treated as a *subject*. (This approach differs from Ferraris' discussion of tokens as either objects or subjects (Ferraris 2013, 11 & 322n7)).

Lived experience and bookish learning

Pagès comments on concerns by philosophers, notably Descartes, at the separation between lived experience and bookish learning, meaning received authority. How are we to bridge the gap between what we ourselves perceive and what others have asserted. Why should we believe statements in the texts we read if we do not have our own first-hand validation. The statements in graphic documents are second-hand knowledge, mere assertions. Pagès notes that the rise of experimental science addresses that question. His answer, if I understand it correctly, lies in the role of non-graphic documents. We can have more confidence in what we experience directly than in what is reported to us and the graphic parts of graphic objects are merely the claims of others. Yet we do not comprehend objects directly by extrasensory perception. Rather, we construct meaning based on our prior beliefs and understandings of symbols. Objects are documents, therefore, only in relation to systems of symbols. The rise of graphic documents enriches the system of symbols and thereby can be considered agents enabling non-graphic documents (specimens and particulars) to become meaningful. Similarly, our perceptions of non-graphic objects will make graphic documents (bookish learning) more or less credible.

Increasingly, Pagès notes, museums, heritage sites, exhibitions, and the promotion of tourism make use of objects for educational and commercial purposes. They “documentify” objects to persuade us for educational and commercial reasons. As in education, contemporary cultural practices promote particular life-styles through multiple vicarious experiences (*quasi-expériences*) using new documentary techniques with major cognitive, cultural, and social consequences. Photographs and cinema produce new (vicarious) experiences that are reinforced by multimedia combinations. Media presentations allow a selective emphasis.

Other work by Pagès

Pagès' second thesis as a student of documentation, a treatise on problems of classification, was also published (Pagès 1955). He also wrote many publications on social psychology.

Within library and information science, Pagès has been remembered, if at all, for an indexing language he developed for the documents collected for his social psychology research laboratory. An *indexing vocabulary* is a list of terms, ordinarily of things. An *indexing language* differs in having grammatical elements expressing relationships. In natural language grammar is often expressed through word order as in the difference between *Blind Venetian* and *Venetian blind*. Pagès' developed a complex indexing language named Coded Analysis ("l'Analyse codée" or CODOC). It is characterized by a very small vocabulary of entities and an emphasis on grammatical (syntactical) relationships. In its unusually concise notation letters denote entities, superior numerals denote relationships, and punctuation (e.g. parentheses) denote syntactical relationships, e.g.

(ra⁹a)⁵i Philosophy of science applied to behavior
ra⁹(a⁵i) Philosophy of the science of behavior

The power and flexibility of relational systems of this type makes them difficult to use and they have been eclipsed by keyword searching.

Conclusion

Robert Pagès' thesis of 1947, published as an article in 1948, anticipates and explains Suzanne Briet's famous example of an antelope as a document and also the distinction between initial and secondary documents. This priority suggests that these ideas originate with him, but does not prove it since he was at the time a student in Briet's program and he later acknowledged her influence: "I express my admiring gratitude to Madame Suzanne Briet who directed my initiation into documentation and encouraged my efforts" ["ma gratitude admirative à Madame Suzanne Briet qui dirigea mon initiation à la documentation et encouragea mes efforts"] (Pagès 1955, 3). The ideas might have come to him from Briet as his teacher or from one or more other sources. Regardless of its origins, Pagès' overlooked article is a valuable contribution to document theory.

Resources

Materials relating to Pagès work on documents and documentation are mostly hard to find, but there is an archive in Paris with a website: <http://www.robert-pages.com/>

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