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Conversation as a (feminist) strategy or why do we talk to each other

These notes, originally assembled for *WE (Not I)*, connect my interest in conversations as a performative situation with my research on the structure of confessional speech acts.ⁱ I want to understand conversations, interviews, and also confessions as cultural techniques as well as to investigate spoken language in relation to its staging. What happens in a conversation? In which sense has it been used as a political instrument? Can talking about oneself in front of a camera have a similar function as the feminist practice of ‘consciousness raising’? The situation of a women-only event, like *WE (not I)*, creates a particular context for exchange among its participants. It probably also evokes different images, stories, and testimonials in each of us from the past (and the present), where women-only groups have not only been an opportunity but an urgent necessity and often a long-term practice to transform the women’s life.

Truth production

In the mid 1970s Michel Foucault publishes “The Will to Knowledge”, the first part of his *The History of Sexuality*. He finds in the discourse of sexuality the twisting of the relation between censorship and coerced speech that characterises confession. Thus his interest in confession primarily regards its control function within specific power relations. The “internal ruse”, he says, lies in seducing the confessing subject into speaking, through the appearance of confession itself as a defiant refusal of a prohibition to speak and think, a prohibition from which one must free oneself. An effect of this trick is the belief that a decision in favour of honest speech is an expression of freedom, when in fact it has long been an internalised command: “The formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does, what one recollects and what one has forgotten.” It does not matter whether the occasion for this speech appears as a need, an invitation or an act of enforcement, or as one of these things dressed up in another: in confession a format is being used, subject to certain limitations determined by its occasion and setting. Foucault makes the concept of ‘truth production’ more complicated (though he also charges it with desire) and claims that self-disclosure is always prompted by internalised control mechanisms. So how can the question one begins to direct towards oneself be located as coming from outside – as an institutionalised structure and cultural convention? How can it then be tied back onto this outside, so that an answer is less a reflex than a positioning? What does it mean when the idea of ritualised speaking confronts an acting person and his or her unpredictable present speech?

Tell it like it is

At around the same time as Foucault’s writing came out in France, the women’s movement in Europe experimented with new forms of organising and talking to each other. Depending on their specific aims, dynamics, and different political circumstances, these practices varied within different groups and countries. ‘Consciousness raising’ is the most prominent term that subsumes the movements’ diverse efforts to establish their own ways of discussing the situation of women. It had first been used by the Women’s Liberation Movement in the US in the 1960s who adopted the practice from the Civil Rights Movement, where it was called “telling it like it is.” Subsequently consciousness raising groups became a political and in particular a feminist instrument to achieve and exercise awareness about one’s situation. The technique was, simply put, to contribute to the regular meetings with a story of one’s own experience and to analyse these personal statements as a group in order to understand the social context of problems otherwise marginalized as private. It came with the experience to cultivate public speaking about these experiences and thus oneself, to learn this, to propagate it and above all, to see it as an opportunity to develop a distinct vocabulary. To explain oneself to another implies belonging to a community through the inherent audience of the others. The technique was adapted and modified by many collectives and groups. For example, in Italy the art critic and feminist Carla Lonzi co-organised the first groups which called their own practice *autocoscienza* (self-consciousness). Later, as a result of an exchange with the French group Psychoanalyse et Politique, initiated by the Women’s Bookstore in Milan in 1972, psychoanalytical techniques were included.ⁱⁱ

Closed rooms

Women groups practiced their personal and candid exchange as excessively as disciplined. Though it was not

connected to a discourse of guilt, I would consider it a confessional way of speaking, in the twisted sense that Foucault proposes. Here, too, there is an offer/demand to speak the truth, an attitude of collecting and analysing information, and drawing conclusions from it – and, not least, these groups were not free of power relations. However, one gets the impression of a more reciprocal dynamic: those who ask questions would not be the addressees of a defense speech but became respondents by telling their own story. The spoken text that is produced in these meetings is at the same time intimate and politicised, the situation is at the same time experimental, staged, and invested in the everyday life of the participants. One problematic aspect of a confession (how Foucault perceives it) is its status as ‘story of a closed room’ – the truth value of a statement made behind closed doors is always suspicious. In the case of consciousness raising groups, which happen behind the closed doors of women-only meetings, this exclusiveness allows for a becoming public and a making public. For example, to speak openly to a larger group of women in contrast to not revealing oneself within the closed circle of a family. The sharing of personal experiences and doing the analysis together is rather a means to sharpen the critique (in that case addressed at husbands, fathers, and also institutions). The conversation is not only the space for critique but also a form of critique.

“School Without End”

I want to point to a film by Italian filmmaker Adriana Monti, *Scuola Senza Fine* (School Without End, Italy 1983). It documents a group of women, who participated in the 150 Hours school programme in Italy. The 150 Hours was an achievement of the worker’s movement and the Italian left in the 1970s, whose purpose was to provide supplementary education in the arts and science for workers and housewives who lacked higher education. The film was shot between 1979 and 81, its final copy was printed in 83, and it is now in the collection of the feminist film and video distributor Cinenova in London. Monti says about the process: “After I had been working with a particular group of housewives for a year we started shooting the film almost casually, in 1979. [...] For many women, rediscovering the mother/teacher relationship meant being able to express thoughts which had often been undervalued or disregarded (most of the housewives attending the course had given up their education to go to work or had not been able to make use of the knowledge they had already, because they stayed at home after getting married). The opportunity to relive that relationship in a learning situation stimulated a very interesting kind of writing and thought.” Through the way Monti portrays them they seem to tell their stories to each other as a form of listening. The film shows how social experiments (educational and filmic) extended into the lives of those taking part.

Representation

In contrast to the exclusive characters of group meetings, film is always a means of publicness. In 1987 Teresa de Lauretis looks back on early feminist film and distinguishes between two concerns of the Women’s Movement and thus two types of films that seem to exclude one another: documentation as part of activist work on the one hand and radical formalist approaches that challenge the cinematic apparatus and its ideological codes on the other. De Lauretis quotes Laura Mulvey: „First, Mulvey states, there was a period marked by the effort to change the content of cinematic representation (to present realistic images of women, to record women talking about their real-life experiences), a period ‘characterized by a mixture of consciousness raising and propaganda’. This was followed by a second moment in which the concern with the language of representation as such became predominant, and the ‚fascination with the cinematic process’ led filmmakers and critics to the ‘use of and interest in the aesthetic principles and terms of reference provided by the avant-garde tradition.’”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Without wanting to negate the label ‘propaganda’ for some of the films of that time, I am interested if filmic work could provide a kind of ‘consciousness raising’. Whether it’s only about a message to the viewer or if the category of aesthetic principles could be applied here as well – not least in regard to the often amazing performances of the speakers (the women), who talk about themselves. Or in terms of the conditions under which they were made: Because the ‘work’ that is the political as well as the artistic work also consists of the situation of recording, how the film is financed, the collaboration between people before and behind the camera and how this reflects in the editing. The moment of making a film creates a specific space: it happens live, a group of people spends time and talks to each other. The team members are the first audience. But it also shifts in time, in the moment of recording everyone is confronted with an undefined, untangible future public and this transforms the narrative into something else. Consciousness raising takes place for everyone involved in the production – and this becomes part of the work.

“Be Pretty And Shut Up”

Delphine Seyrig’s film *Sois belle et tais-toi* (Be Pretty And Shut Up, France 1981) shows excerpts from a series of conversations she conducted over an extended period of time with female film and theatre professionals. The women talk about their work in front of and behind the camera, relationships between actors, directors and the limited choice of roles available to them. One can infer from the answers that Seyrig’s questions, which are not always heard in the film, stem from an overtly feminist position. When the actresses repeatedly mention how rarely films show friendships between women, portraying them as rivals instead, they are criticising the atmosphere of isolation and voicelessness inherent in this professional field. In *Sois belle et tais-toi* the opposite happens, as Seyrig’s editing indirectly engages all the speakers in conversation with one another. She is expressly siding with the protagonists and their stories. And the question-and-answer game of the interview is shown as a situation in which people influence one another as well as the attention of the interviewees to the educational nature of such a project: “You’re asking such fantastic questions! I have to write them down in order to think about them more.”

ⁱ While I revise these notes I realise that the thoughts and materials presented at *WE (not I)* in 2015 intertwined two book projects that looking back to *Return to Inquiry* (Maastricht 2012) and anticipating *A Commentary on “Vai pure”* by *Carla Lonzi* (forthcoming Berlin 2021).

ⁱⁱ The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference, A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, trans. Patricia Cicogna and Teresa de Lauretis, 1990

ⁱⁱⁱ Teresa De Lauretis, “Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women’s Cinema”, in: *New German Critique*, no. 34 (1985): 154-75