

Media Reviews

INTERVIEW PROJECT. By David Lynch. Designed and hosted by Knowawall, Inc., New York, NY, 2009. <http://interviewproject.davidlynch.com>.

David Lynch's *Interview Project* is a collection of personal narratives of American men and women who were video-recorded in parking lots, living rooms, front porches, and roadside nooks. Averaging one to two hours in length, the interviews are edited into three- to five-minute video "portraits" which are published as an ongoing Internet series to a media-rich, interactive Web site.

The video portraits intend to "capture the ups and downs of the human experience" as narrators reflect upon their lives in response to questions like "How would you describe yourself?," "What were your dreams growing up?," and "Do you have any regrets?" When producer David Lynch, a filmmaker known for his surreal aesthetic, imparts his signature style to certain elements of the portraits, the effects border on kitsch. However, the strength of the *Interview Project* lies in the unvarnished and surprisingly frank testimony of everyday people living everyday (and not so everyday) lives in modern rural America.

Skillful film techniques contribute to the depth of the interviews, as the film crew took care to document not only the intricacies of each human face but also the mannerisms that convey meanings in addition to, or sometimes in spite of, the verbal narratives. The video portraits, through slowly panned shots of indoor and outdoor lived spaces, embody a sense of place that deepens the experience of looking and listening.

The connection between place, personhood, and narrative is further developed through a central feature of the Web site. The video portraits are located on an interactive map (featuring audio teasers and thumbnail images) that charts the path of the interview crew, a hinterland route of small towns and back roads. The crew traveled for seven days, covered twenty thousand miles, and conducted 124 interviews (121 of which will be published). At the time of this writing, 78 video portraits have been produced, mapped, and published to the Web site.

Crew members occasionally appear in the portraits, providing insight into the interaction between interviewer and narrator. Interviews begin with a series of biographical questions that progress into broad yet profound reflections on personal experience. Clarifying questions are posed to prompt further reflection,

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and a narrator can often be heard repeating the question he or she has, apparently, been asked.

One might be inclined to ask if this project is oral history. Surely not, so far as oral history is defined by an extended reflection between a prepared interviewer and a narrator on a particular historical circumstance. The amount of biographical information published in each video portrait varies; the full interviews are not available, and the project overall is not oriented toward a historical question. Further, the loosely structured interview style is not singularly grounded in oral history methodology.

Though it is clear that narrators understand they will be published to the Internet (one narrator answers her cell phone and explains to the caller what she has gotten herself into while sitting on the courthouse steps), the candid, existential ethic embraced in the video portraits will cause some to wonder if certain narrators are being presented in a manner that is beneficial to them. Why, then, consider the project in the *Oral History Review*? The *Interview Project* is not oral history, per se, but it represents a burgeoning arena for the application of the discipline's theoretical lens.

Seen as a media production with roots in the era of self broadcast¹—marked by unprecedented access to digital devices for recording lived experience and platforms for publishing to the Web—the *Interview Project* becomes a collection of oral material and street-level imagery worthy of consideration by anyone interested in narrative, self representation, and memory.

Considering the problems of doing and thinking about oral history work, Michael Frisch, in his 1972 review of Stud Terkel's *Hard Times*, suggests that oral history is not so much about establishing a crisp historical record through the testimony of historical witnesses but is a framework for understanding how "experience, memory, and history become combined in and digested by people who are bearers of their own history."²

While their scholarly uses may be limited in some circumstances because of the reasons listed above, can five-minute video portraits provide an opportunity to see this individual meaning making in today's social-historical context? I suggest we consider and reapply three simple questions Frisch suggests we ask when attempting to explore the various dynamics at play in Terkel's wide-ranging interviews: "What sort of person is speaking?," "What sort of thing is being talked about?," and "What sort of statements are being made?"

Skillful audio-visual techniques and a commitment to capturing a sense of place make the video portraits produced by *Interview Project* particularly fertile ground for these questions and their resulting insights. While the occasional gimmicks of production will need to be ignored, the inherent spontaneity of the interviews

helps to avoid the rehearsed quality of “precious narratives” some have criticized in the Storycorp project.³

But the question of whether contemporary reflective narratives, as curated in these projects and seen elsewhere as a phenomenon of the digital age, should fall within the disciplinary consideration of oral history is still on the table. The question is not so much whether a given project is or is not oral history, the question is more about how the oral historian-practitioner can impart imperative considerations to collecting and navigating contemporary narrative.

As Frisch noted in 1972, how to ask and what to ask a narrator are by no means readily apparent, nor is how to understand and apply the material. In light of the popularity of narrative projects, this observation is perhaps even more important in 2010. Far from posing a threat to oral history work, the rise of narrative initiatives that deal with the stories of everyday contemporary lives increases the relevance of the discipline’s theories and calls for their further application.

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NOTES

- 1 The “age of self broadcast” can be attributed to Clifford Kuhn, Digital Technology/Archives Synthesis Session, Oral History Association Annual Meeting, October 18, 2009.
- 2 Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 13.
- 3 Nancy Abelmann, Susan Davis, Cara Finnegan, and Peggy Miller, “What is StoryCorps, Anyway?,” *Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (2009): 255–60 at <http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/36/2/255>.