

Vintage TVs and under-represented memories

A participatory practice to portray the impact of the Italian right-wing political violence (1969-1980) on collective memory.

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The short film *Fuori Programma* [*Unscheduled or Off Plan*] and the interactive installation *Siamo in Linea* [*We are online*] are creative outcomes of the AHRC-SGSAH-funded PhD project 'Performing Stragismo and Counter-spectacularisation: Italian right-wing Terrorism and Its Legacies', which investigates the collective memory of the spectacular Italian right-wing terrorist attacks (1969-1980). This paper will give an account of the methodology employed in creating the artworks, the goals set, the challenges faced, their reception and their impact on the research.

Through a participatory practice that included video-recorded Zoom conversations with 20 participants, the project encompasses the under-represented narratives of Italian women who were young adults in the Seventies and who belong to the majority of the population, i.e. people who were not involved in political violence.

Academic research on Italian terrorism usually engages with the main actors of these events, namely the victims, their families, and the former terrorists; furthermore, the media's discourse about terrorism calls women into question only to play the role of victims (grieving mothers, wives, daughters) or sexually deviated former terrorists. My project intends to offer an alternative to the predominantly man-centred discourse and to present/represent the participants as political subjects.

. Introduction: Practice in Research and Participation

The practice is theoretically and methodologically informed by scholars contributing to Theatre and Performance Studies. More specifically, the research employs Nelson's (2013) definition of Academic Practice in and as Research as "a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry" and also "submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry". In the context of this project, the submitted practice is an artistic reproduction of the conversations with the participants, hence the practice is the process of creating the outcomes with the material collected during the process.

Drawing from Bishop's (2012) definition of participation as a practice in which "people constitute the central artistic medium and material, in the manner of theatre and performance", I consider the conversations to be also part of the practice, for the "rigour of method" (Spatz, 2018) with which they were conducted.

The project employs oral history as a methodology (Thompson, 2000), but it distances itself from an oral history project for the deliberate and openly stated intention of using the material to create artwork. The methodology was chosen on the belief that - as a result of the binary division that characterises Western knowledge - oral history is an 'unmarked' domain that pertains to the feminine, as opposed to the 'epistemologically violent' (Conquerhood 2002) written page, building on Phelan's (1996) distinction between marked and unmarked.

"As Lacanian and Derridean deconstruction have demonstrated, the epistemological, psychic, and political binaries of Western metaphysics create distinctions and evaluations across two terms. One term of the binary is marked with value, the other is unmarked. The

male is marked with value; the female is unmarked, lacking measured value and meaning”.

Phelan 1996, 5

.Oral History as a Methodology

The project started in February 2021: during the online conversations, I had to acknowledge that some participants were experiencing isolation due to the covid-19 lockdown, and I consequently designed the conversations as semi-structured interviews. The flexibility and open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews allowed me to consider the participants' need to feel listened to and to welcome the participants' different ways to participate.

The first nine participants were recruited through personal connections, and the conversations started with some bias; knowing some of them since I was a child or through their 'children', I assumed, sometimes wrongly, their economic, cultural and political positions. The following participants were mostly recruited through the first group, and these assumptions were mitigated.

This recruitment model proved successful in terms of the number of participants with whom I engaged, but the specimen is not representative of Italian women in their entirety. Although I recognise as *women* anyone self-defining themselves as such, almost all the participants were married to someone of the opposite sex and had children. Recruiting participants through friends from my generation (in their late thirties or early forties), I could not reach LGBTQA+ parents, since gay adoptions were not legally possible when we were children¹. Immigrant women – of any colour and background - are also missing from the picture: born and raised in predominantly white northern Italy, I could not count on direct contact with women of colour who lived in Italy through the 1970s. No participant presented a visible disability. Moreover, the project posed positionality issues: being a white, Italian woman and mother, I considered myself an insider, although the generation gap and my immigrant status made my position liminal and fluctuating.

The majority of the participant sat through three one-hour meetings: the first was focused on their background, exploring the relationship of their family of origin with the legacy of the Second World War, the patterns of memory transmission, their childhood, youth and adulthood. The second unravelled from an object they were invited to bring in as a memento of their lives in the 70s. From the object and the memories connected to it, I encouraged them to identify some starting points (characters and events) to narrate Italy in the 70s. Each participant unfolded the narration differently, some entangled their personal stories with historical events, whereas others outlined a more conventional narration of the historical facts, and some described those years only through personal memories. In the third conversation, the daughters or sons – if the participants had any - were invited to join, and I addressed some of the same questions I asked the women to their children (Did you talk about politics in your family? Were people profiled according to their political beliefs?). The first nine interviews flew into a ten-minute film - *Fuori Programma*² - in which the participants' contributions were edited in a dialogue.

¹ Gay weddings have been celebrated in Italy only since 2016, although the law still uses a different vocabulary for them (*unioni civili* [civil unions] instead of *matrimonio* [marriage]). Similarly, adoption was officially possible for gay parents only since 2016, but with several restrictions that do not apply to straight couples.

² *Fuori Programma* is available at the following link: <https://bit.ly/3zZ0QoV> The film was selected from the Luleå International Film Festival and the Boden International Film Festival

.Making: ethics and aesthetics

The participants informed the shape and content of *Fuori Programma*; the aesthetics sprang out from the first conversation I had with the first participant (*Figure 01*) and accompanied me throughout the creation.

“I remember that we had, at one point... we were the only ones with a television - you know there were those famous tv shows - so they came in the summer... we put the tv near the window and the courtyard - it looks like a movie, but it was like this - it was full: about fifteen, twenty people with their chairs to watch the tv with us.³”

Participant A, 25 February 2021

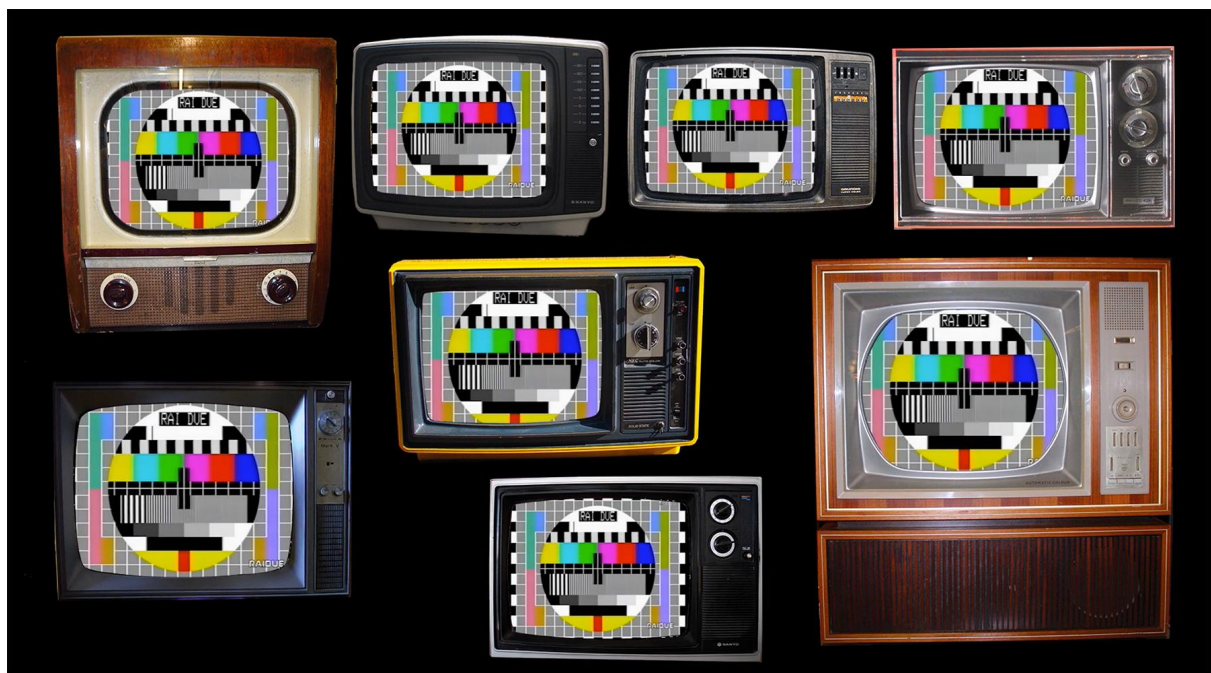


Figure 1 - frame from the film Fuori Programma

By moving the participants to the foreground - each framed by an old television - and everything else to the background (archive footage and pictures showing the aftermath of the attacks), the aesthetics reflect the goal of the project: to challenge the concept of ‘political subject’ and to represent - or, better, to create a space to self-represent - the participants as such. Through the televisions’ “vintage vibe”, the low quality of the videos finds its reason for being.

Although the aesthetics were inspired by the participants, during the artistic process they were only consulted on the content of the outcomes to make sure they did not feel misrepresented⁴. This process was a consequence of time constraints but also an

³ “Io mi ricordo questo: avevamo, ad un certo punto... eravamo solo noi che avevamo la televisione - sai che c'era lascia e raddoppia, quelle trasmissioni famose - allora venivano d'estate, mettevamo la televisione vicino alla finestra e il cortile... sembra un film ma era così... era pieno: una quindicina, una ventina di persone con le sedie a guardare la televisione con noi.” Partecipante A, 25 February 2021

⁴ At the end of the conversations, the participants received their audio recording, to be able to request to erase specific parts and give their consent for the future employment of the material. They also received the creative outcomes, to review them and express their opinion on the way they were portrayed before they were shared with anyone else.

acknowledgement of my role as an artist; I consider the artist's responsibility to create a visually engaging framework for the participants' work – or content – to be received with the highest-possible artistic standards.

I do not believe that this understanding of participation disavows the co-creation of artistic work. In fact, the semi-structured interviews eased the co-creation and proved effective when, during the conversations, the participants' collective memory proved to be not only *divided*⁵ (Foot, 2009) but often erased. This method widened the discussions about the 1970s, introducing in the conversation the memories that 'over-wrote' the right-wing bombing attacks.

The dialogue in the short film emerged from comparing the transcriptions: the sentences I found more interesting or resonated with those of other participants were copied into a document, and a different colour was assigned to each participant, to give equal representation to everyone (*Figures 02 and 03*). Although my work does not fulfil the demands of Bergenstråhle's (2022) 'Cinematic World-Building', I believe that my method similarly challenges the "hegemony of classical dramaturgy", employing aesthetics as a starting point and refusing a linear narrative that relies on a few main characters, conversely entrusting a choir.

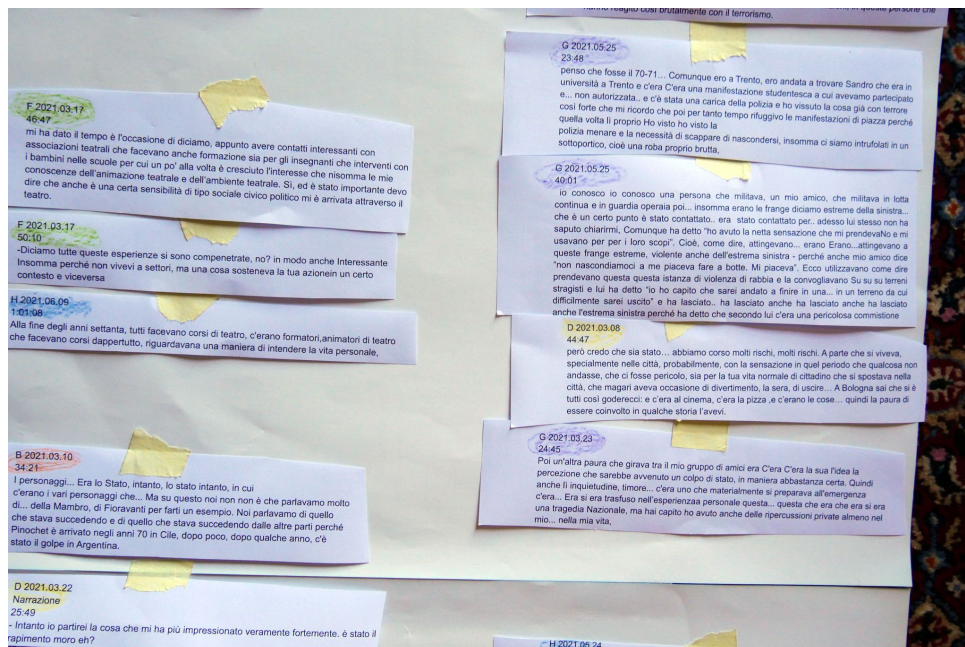


Figure 2 - transcriptions of the conversations

The same choral aesthetics was employed for *Siamo in Linea*: the installation included five tablets, each dedicated to a new participant. The audience could select a question or more (out of six), having an "interview-like experience". More than *Fuori Programma*, the installation exposes the process: the answers often result from assembling different bits of conversations, laying bare in front of the audience the incompleteness and partiality of the material with which they engage. Furthermore, the cuts reveal the power structure and

⁵ I employ Foot's definition of Italian collective memory of the Second World War to address that of the 1970s: although the judicial processes often determined the responsibilities for the right-wing bombing attacks, the identity of the instigators, perpetrators and the motivations behind the political violence that happened during this decade are still a reason for dissent amongst Italian population.

encourage a reflection on agency in participatory practices, making myself *present* even though I do not appear in the outcomes.



Figure 3 - transcriptions of the conversations

In the installation, the participants answer questions that create connections with the present, to improve the audience's engagement with the material (*Figure 04*); the memories from their childhood (the late 1950s and early 1960s) were selected to highlight the technological and societal change that took place in the past 50 years, in the belief they would resonate with the memories the audience heard from parents or grandparents.



Figure 4 - frame from the interactive installation *Siamo in Linea*

. Challenges: the ‘truth effect’

Drawing again from Theatre and Performance studies, I acknowledge that the participants' virtual presence gives the sensation of *authenticity* and *truth-telling* given by testimonial theatre plays, in which the presence of the witnesses is at the centre of the work, as Fisher Stuart (2020) asserts:

“The discourses of authenticity associated with verbatim theatre tend to circulate around two interconnecting ‘promises’ that disclose different kinds of truth claims” (Stuart Fisher 2020, 81)

The two promises are to show the audience a source of truth and the *sincerity* of the personal narratives. These claims do not consider the possibility of faulty and altered (i.e. *performed*) memories, which could be mitigated if they are put in conversation with original documents, a strategy employed in *Fuori Programma*, but not in *Siamo in Linea*.

Although the participants were subject to what Loughran, Mahoney and Payling describe as the “online disinhibition effect” (*Oral History*, Spring 2022, Vol.50), they were aware of being recorded and hence were, to different degrees, *performing* themselves. However, *I* shaped their visibility as political subjects based on what I determined to be *representable* and *relatable*, and also challenging and of interest to my research.

I want to stress that my research does not advance a different version of history but only explores how historical episodes are remembered. The choice to edit out from the outcomes all the flawed memories (wrong dates, inaccurate terminology, i.e. addressing right-wing terrorists with the term forged for left-wing terrorists) was, therefore, one dictated by artistic and narrative consistency, as I was unable to offer the audience enough context to explain the reasons behind these inaccuracies.

While editing the women’s narratives, I was aware that women’s voices have historically and systematically been “perceived as being informal and lacking in authority” (Heddon 2008):

how could my practice challenge this sensation of lack of authority, still recognising the memories' limitations? What constitutes a *legitimate* historical truth?

During the SGSSS-SGSAH-funded Symposium *Doing Feminist Research* (4-6 May 2022, Edinburgh), Rashné Limki suggested that "It is better to do good work than legitimate work". Without disavowing the existence of historical truth, I hope this project will allow me to do some good work, i.e. work that can start a conversation about the collective memory of traumatic events and that can impact future research.

.Response

The response to the artworks was mostly ephemeral. The participants' reaction to the film was not documented, as they previewed it on their own. Some emailed me a few lines after:

"It's interesting to hear all of our memories. Well done to insert Gaber! [Italian songwriter]. Very representative of the 70s! After our talks, I started listening to him again...with nostalgia. I'm sure you'll get excellent results from this job and you'll be satisfied."

Participant E

"Congratulations, effective and very nice. I'm rooting for the continuation of the work."

Participant G

"Beautiful! Beautiful dialogue and presentation! I'm glad I was part of your project."

Participant C

"I really like the editing, I think that even if it's not finished, through the women's narratives, it represents the historical period well. (...) I really liked it, the graphic solutions are original. Compliments! A lot of work!"⁶

Participant F

Fuori Programma was presented for the first time during a Being Human event at the Scottish Oral History Society, Glasgow, November 2021, but the hybrid event (partly online and partly in person) was not recorded.

The ConnectFest (Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, June 2022), was instead recorded; the evening included several works in progress and two panellists (theatre and performance

⁶ "È interessante ascoltare l'insieme dei nostri ricordi. Brava ad inserire Gaber! Molto rappresentativo degli anni 70! Dopo le nostre chiacchierate ho ripreso ad ascoltarlo...con nostalgia. Sono sicura che avrai un ottimo risultato da questo lavoro e ne sarai soddisfatta. Buon proseguimento"

Partecipante E

"Ciao Irene, complimenti, efficace e molto carino. Faccio il tifo per il proseguimento del lavoro"

Partecipante G

"Bello il dialogo e bella la presentazione! Sono contenta di aver fatto parte di questo tuo progetto."

Partecipante C

"Mi piace molto il montaggio, credo che anche se non è finito, nelle narrazioni delle donne, rende bene il periodo storico. (...) mi è molto piaciuto, originali le soluzioni grafiche. Complimenti! Quanto lavoro!"

Partecipante F

producers) gave some feedback. *Fuori Programma* was presented in a shorter 8-minute version.

“It was interesting and engaging enough to have a bit more (...) I would have liked to have the names because people react better when there is a name to the face, even only a first name. I don’t think we need any more information. The context was there. (...) Fantastic representation of Zoom conversation, I would not have engaged with a bunch of talking heads.”

Frodo McDaniel

“I would have liked to know the geographic region from which the women were from.”

Vendetta Vain

Similarly to the short film, the participants did not experience the installation, but they accessed the material through a web page. A participant wrote to me that the cuts puzzled her, and I explained how the installation was to be accessed, with the audience standing in front of the tablets so that longer answers would have penalised the work.

Siamo in Linea also received less feedback from the audience, given the contexts in which it was presented - the conference of the Society for Italian Studies, April 2022, and the Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities Summer School, June 2022 (*Figure 05*) - in which many other events happened simultaneously. Although the audience was asked to fill out a questionnaire by the tablets, only one audience member filled it out (*Figure 06*).



Figure 5 - Audience engaging with the installation at the SGSAH Summer School

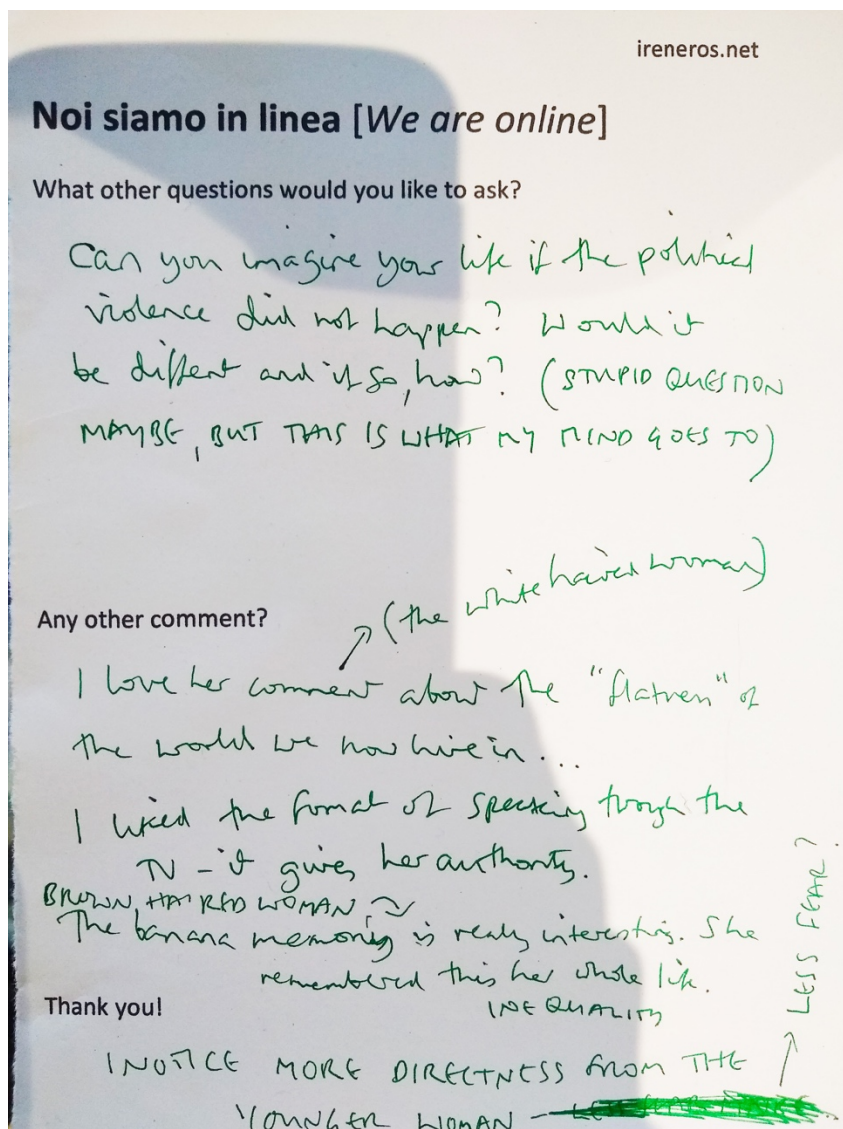


Figure 6 - an audience member's response to the installation

.Contribution to the research

The participatory practice contributed to my research by showing that Italian collective memory is not only 'divided' (Foot, 2009) between people who, in the present time, sympathise with right or left-wing parties, but it was erased by the left-wing political violence that peaked in 1978 with the abduction and killing of the Christian Democrats' president Aldo Moro.

These considerations led me to question what made this last event more memorable and to look more closely at the amplification of the terrorists' spectacularity (Baudrillard, 2002); in fact, I argue that the reason why Moro's abduction and killing are so well ingrained into people's memories is the unprecedented media attention that it received.

The project will hopefully contribute to the wider research on the mechanism of collective memory, posing as an example of how Practice in Research can explore the patterns of traumatic memories and their transmission. In these patterns and in the possibility to express them through documentary work sits the potential about which Hagerman (2022) writes:

"(...) documentary film has the potential to convey knowledge about our past and how archival footage allows us to better understand the constantly evolving present".

.Conclusions and future developments

The participatory practice that, in the context of the project ‘Performing Stragismo and Counter-spectacularisation: Italian right-wing Terrorism and Its Legacies’ resulted in the short film *Fuori Programma* and the participatory installation *Siamo in Linea*.

The practice engaged with 20 Italian women who lived through the political violence of the 70s without being directly involved, and aimed at challenging the concept of ‘political subject’.

The content and aesthetic of the artworks were participants-informed and bore traces of the editing process and the power structure embedded in it, highlighting the difficulties of participatory practices.

By employing the video recordings, the outcomes gave the audience the sensation of truth-telling, raising the question of what represents a legitimate source of knowledge and how to deal with the historical inaccuracies present in the participants’ memories.

The conversations showed the flaws of Italian collective memory and shed light on the reasons for its incompleteness, directing my research on the relationship between political violence and its representation in the media. The project aims to be a model to explore the collective memory of traumatic historical events, the patterns of memory transmission, and how they can be represented in documentary artworks.

I am currently employing the participants’ memories to create a live performance. This allows me to include controversial and inaccurate memories, giving them context. Since the participants’ stronger memories originated from a physical engagement with the senses, I wish to offer the audience the gift of presence and to re-present memories through the ephemerality of performance.

Additional Keywords and Phrases: collective memory, collective trauma, practice as research, interdisciplinary research, Italian politics, theatre and performance studies, multimedia

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