

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Interview and interior: Procedures of narrative surveys around 1900

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Argument

In the spring of 1893, the Austrian writer and critic Hermann Bahr began interviewing various people on antisemitism, a subject of heated discussion in the European feuilleton around 1900. “Once again, I am travelling the world sounding out people’s opinions and listening to what they have to say,” he wrote in his introduction to a series of articles on that issue that appeared in the feuilleton of the *Deutsche Zeitung* between March and September 1893. A year later, the Berlin publishing house S. Fischer turned Bahr’s articles into a book. Bahr conducted a total of thirty-eight interviews with prominent personages, such as August Bebel, Theodor Mommsen, Ernst Haeckel, Henrik Ibsen and Jules Simon. Bahr did not focus on the arguments in favour or against antisemitism. Instead, he set out explicitly to investigate the sentiments, perceptions and opinions on this topic within the cultured classes. Yet, as I will show in this article, Bahr tried to capture not only the “sentiments” [Empfindungen] aired by his interviewees, but also the settings and interiors in which the interviews took place. I argue that these descriptions of physical space served Bahr as authentication, as a three-dimensional certificate for the “facts of opinion” [Meinungstatsachen] he recorded.

Keywords: Interview; journalism; survey; enquête; epistemic practice; interior; materiality; social sciences

Out there in Charlottenburg, hidden beyond sunny gardens . . . [t]hat is where his house stands, humble and obscure, modestly backing away from the others.

I am led into a small parlor: imposing, sombre, dark furniture, rich muted colors; no bric-a-brac anywhere. A solemn joy arises—as though one were to enter the gallery of Count Schack. A fine full copy of a Titian, and all-around, in engravings, the noblest wonders of the Italians beginning with the gaunt nobility of the Pre-Raphaelites. Beauty in these surroundings soars from the first stirrings of desire to its utter fulfilment.

Bent by age, he moves with difficulty, awkwardly and slightly stiff. His stilted politeness is outdated, and his faltering gestures convey a bashful, bemused kindness. Altogether, this is inexorably touching. He has wrapped his frail body in a rich black coat. . . . A shining halo of white curls illuminates his weary head. His head with the long, sharp, pointed nose recalls that of Voltaire . . . and when he lifts his head and gazes at his guest from behind his narrow golden glasses, his blue eyes command such power and kindness that one cannot but ever so slightly bow in respect. He takes a seat, sitting straight and very still as he speaks. Only his bony, thin, arthritic fingers are in constant motion as he presses his hand to his forehead, pats down the long strands of his hair or rests his hand under his quavering chin. . . . He speaks very softly. (Bahr 1979, 26–27)

¹Translated by Michael Thomas Taylor and Susanne Saygin.

Thus begins an interview with the historian Theodor Mommsen, which the author, playwright and literary critic Hermann Bahr published in a collection of interviews entitled *Der Antisemitismus: Ein internationales Interview* (Antisemitism: An international interview) with S. Fischer in Berlin in 1894.² Hermann Bahr had set himself the goal of conducting an enquiry into the virulent and publicly debated antisemitism of the time. Bahr's interview partners included various European intellectuals, among them Theodor Mommsen. An outspoken opponent of antisemitism, Mommsen had been a protagonist in the so-called Berliner *Antisemitismusstreit*, or the Berlin Antisemitism Controversy, some years earlier.³

"You are mistaken if you think that in this matter anything at all can be achieved by reason; I used to believe that too, protesting time and again against the monstrous ignominy that is antisemitism" (ibid., 27). Mommsen, in this conversation, was unequivocal in his belief that logical argument was futile and that there existed no protection against the mob—be it in the streets or the salons. "All means of reason are lost upon this cause. But the authority of big names, their clout, might yield some effect" (ibid., 28).

In this interview, Mommsen argues for an international public declaration to be signed by the "eminent men of Europe." He then reaches out to his interviewer directly: after all, the aged historian suggests, Bahr could "convince many a proud name to support this protest [and t]hat might bring some people to their senses" (ibid.). Mommsen does not conceal his pessimism; he does not see such an international petition as a way out, but considers it at least an opportunity for action in a deadlocked situation.

Bahr's interview with Theodor Mommsen is short, comprising just a few paragraphs. The description of the setting and the interviewee have almost equal weight to the content of the actual conversation. That content is presented as a continuous text: not in the mode of a back and forth of question and answer, but in the form of a portrait that cites Mommsen's contribution to the dialogue as though it were a monologue. The result is a description—detailed yet brief enough for a newspaper—of a scholar, his surroundings, and the views he expressed within those surroundings.

This interview serves as the point of departure for the ensuing discussion of a collection of turn-of-the-century interviews—all on the topic of antisemitism. In this essay, I will highlight how current affairs and feuilleton, journalistic descriptions and procedures in the social sciences merged, and how the "small form" of the interview provided a testing ground for a type of narrative veracity that was, on the one hand, attentive to detail and, on the other, betrayed the trained eye of the expert observer.⁴ These two constituents, namely Bahr's power of observation—honed during his training as a journalist and social scientist—and the insights this very power granted him, are the mainstays of his interviews.

Moreover, I shall focus on the vital importance that Bahr and his contemporaries accorded to the description of their interviews' specific settings. These were mainly the reception rooms, libraries and salons of private homes, and I argue that these interiors served equally as backdrop and object of observation.⁵

²On Hermann Bahr, an Austrian writer, critic and an eminent proponent of Viennese modernism, see the excellent website <https://bahr.univie.ac.at>. This website, and the edition of his writings ("Kritische Schriften in Einzelausgaben", VDG Weimar 2004-2013, 23 volumes) were the product of a working group, led by Claus Pias, together with Martin Anton Müller and Gottfried Schnödl. See also Müller, Pias and Schnödl (2014).

³On the *Antisemitismusstreit*, see the comprehensive collection of sources published by Krieger (2003).

⁴The term *small form* may describe an excerpt, a list, an aphorism, or—as in this essay—the summary of a survey or interrogation. The term refers not only to a text's length (or brevity) but also to the procedures underlying its creation. In the interviews and surveys discussed below, this is a process of intense compression, resulting in a representation that condenses the description of the setting, the interviewee's personality and the interview's actual content in equal measure. On the "small form," including its operations and dispositions, see the introduction in Jäger, Matala de Mazza, and Vogl (2020), 1-12; see also Roach (2018), 10-11, who describes the literary interview as a form (and less as a genre), highlighting its material manifestations and affordances.

⁵I have already described Bahr's publication elsewhere (te Heesen 2014). Here, it serves me as a basis for focusing on the aspect of interiors. For an excellent overview of Bahr—his writings and additional bibliographies and information—see the "Bahr project" of Claus Pias, Martin Anton Müller and Gottfried Schnödl (University of Vienna, <https://www.univie.ac.at/bahr/>).

I aim to examine these interviews in the broader scope of literary surveys so popular in *feuilletons* at the end of the nineteenth century, focusing on their specific procedures and forms of representation. In particular, I want to draw attention to a distinct type of survey, which I identify as “narrative survey.” Based on a condensed account in language, it is constituted equally by the interview’s specific setting, the interviewees, their responses, and a narrative depiction given by the interviewer himself.

According to Rebecca Roach: “Any study of the interview not only invokes ‘comparison with formats oriented towards representation . . . but also requires consideration of more functional informational modes such as the newspaper report, the research paper, or the official memo’ (Roach 2018, 10). I would add a further mode, namely that of the social survey, and contend that the “narrative survey” shares elements of this approach and the literary interview. The narrative survey may thus shed light on the constituents of both these forms. The following case study of a political debate within a literary milieu aims to uncover the characteristics of this nonstatistical, nonnumerical survey.

Collecting “without anger and without partiality”

Hermann Bahr first published the short texts he later collated in the anthology *Der Antisemitismus: Ein internationales Interview* (Antisemitism: An international interview) in a Viennese newspaper between March and September of 1893. Bahr interviewed forty-one persons in total—amongst them two women—ultimately selecting thirty-eight interviews for his volume. “Once again, I am travelling the world sounding out people’s opinions and listening to what they have to say,” he wrote in his introduction to the anthology, adding: “This time, I intend to interview them on antisemitism—not because I wish to gather arguments in favour or against it—but because I want, in these confusing times, to collect, without anger and without partiality, some unique testimonies that reflect the genuine opinions on that issue currently held by the educated minds of various nations” (Bahr 1979, 15).⁶

Indeed, Bahr had travelled extensively for his compilation (although not to every country mentioned below), interviewing both critics and advocates of antisemitism in Germany, England, Spain and France. He publicized his own stance on the issue beforehand: antisemitism was, according to Bahr, above all a psychological problem of the masses, which he saw as being guided by frenzy, intoxication, and passion rather than deliberation, reason, and logic. Bahr here drew on the idea of the time that the “loss of faith and dissolution of ideals” had left a vacuum that needed to be filled by another cause worth fighting for (*ibid.*), and he held that for many, this cause was antisemitism. Bahr thus clearly positioned himself as an opponent to this prejudice.⁷ The men and women he interviewed comprised proponents of antisemitism such as Edmond Picard, Alphonse Daudet, and Adolf Wagner, as well as staunch opponents, including Theodor Mommsen, Jules Simon, and Heinrich Rickert, and figures who hedged their position, like Gustav Schmoller, Sidney Whitman, and Ernst Haeckel.⁸

⁶The antisemitism interviews were first published in 1893. The previous year, Bahr had interviewed various actors and actresses about the so-called “new style” in drama. Similar in structure to the interviews discussed in this article, albeit focused not on a political but an aesthetic issue, these portraits were published from October to December 1892 (see Bahr 2005b).

⁷His opinion was not, however, always this unequivocal. For a discussion of Bahr’s antisemitic statements and attitudes, see the introduction by Herrmann Greive (Bahr 1979, 9) as well as Bahr himself (Bahr 1932, 254). The secondary literature published on this topic has been summarized by Gräfe (2017), 35, footnote 3; Fliedl (2001) especially deserves to be emphasized here. See, more recently, Müller (2014), 177.

⁸A review of Bahr’s articles (and a contemporaneous characterization of the positions he expressed in them) by the journalist József Vészti was published in 1893 in the newspaper *Pester Lloyd* under the title “Eine Reise um den Antisemitismus” (A journey through antisemitism) (see <http://www.pesterlojd.net/html/1893vesztreiseumdenantisemitism.html>, archive of the daily newspaper *Pester Lloyd*, accessed February 22, 2021).

With his series of articles, Bahr was reacting to the latent and explicit hostility toward Jews in the media debate and politics of the German Empire. On the one hand, this hostility found an outlet in the “Jewish question”—the debate on the legal, economic, and social position of Jews that had been ongoing since the Enlightenment. On the other, it referred to current events, such as the Panama scandal in France, that had sparked sensationalist reporting. Outright press campaigns stirred up anti-Jewish resentment in Berlin, as well as in Vienna and Paris. Over and over, negatively charged terms, such as “usury” or “mammon,” were rhetorically interwoven into the reporting, coloring it with latent antisemitic connotations (Gräfe 2017, 38).

At the end of the nineteenth century, one chief protagonist of this publicly fomented antisemitism was the journalist and politician Hermann Ahlwardt. Ahlwardt had been a member of the Reichstag since 1892 and was known as an agitating antisemite who repeatedly sought to expose alleged corruption. On April 2 1893, only a few days after he had embarked on his series on antisemitism, Bahr published an interview with Ahlwardt—albeit not in the feuilleton, but the more prominent politics section.⁹

Ahlwardt subsequently denied that he had ever participated in the interview (Bahr 2013, 169), to which Bahr responded with a rebuttal. In any case, Bahr did not include it in his anthology—probably since, as an editorial note to the publication of April 2, 1893 mentions, Bahr thought it would elicit more of a “psychological, if not pathological interest” (ibid. 163). Moreover, Ahlwardt was, as Bahr’s description indicated, not “educated.” Despite this omission, the absent Reichstag member was still very much present in the interviews published in the anthology, and Bahr’s respondents explicitly referred to him on several occasions in their discussion of antisemitism in Germany and Europe.

Shortly before the Dreyfus Affair, Bahr envisaged his project as providing a cross-section of intellectual opinion—a comparison of European attitudes toward antisemitism at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Ahlwardt’s exclusion from this roster highlighted the line Bahr had purposely drawn: he would grant only rhetorically adept, distinguished intellectuals with the prerequisite bourgeois education a public voice.

“Without either anger or partiality” was Bahr’s professed attitude as a persona in his interviews: He determined the topic, chose his interview partners and sought to reproduce the views they expressed as vividly as possible.

Respectful interrogation

The interview was an invention of the nineteenth century.¹¹ It provided a point of convergence for the nascent mass press, a society defined by population growth and relentless urbanization, and that society’s protagonists, such as politicians, intellectuals, artists, writers, etc. Jointly, they established a “public sphere,” a form of publicity oriented toward discussing current events. As press historian Walter Zechlin explained:

The interview is the questioning of a personality by a newspaper and the reproduction of this conversation. As news reporting gained importance for newspapers, it stood to reason to have someone involved in or knowledgeable about an event talk about it first-hand. This approach endowed the individual news item with a heightened degree of authenticity,

⁹An editorial note highlights that this conversation was not related to the interview series: “Of course, the essay has nothing in common with the *enquête* on antisemitism initiated by Bahr” (*Deutsche Zeitung*, April 2, 1893, no. 7637). The interview is appended to the new edition of Bahr’s anthology on antisemitism (Bahr 2013, 163–171).

¹⁰For more detail than can be provided here, see also an article by Thomas Gräfe detailing the background of Bahr’s project and the political and social foundations of antisemitism at the end of the nineteenth century (Gräfe 2017).

¹¹On the history of the press interview, see Ruchatz (2014); on the importance of the interview in the literary world, see Hoffmann and Kaiser (2014), Marschelein et al. (2014), Roach (2018) and, in the art world, Diers, Blunck, and Obrist (2013). For an overview of the history of the research interview and its lines of tradition, see te Heesen (2013) and te Heesen (2022).

vividness and immediacy, which went well beyond what the mere reporter's account would have achieved. (Zechlin 1939, 89)

Interviews, according to this early definition, thus exhibited two main characteristics: they were related to a current event and thus possessed a certain timeliness, and their subjects were persons of public interest. The interview format as we know it today, with its alternation of questions and answers, had not yet evolved. Instead, journalistic reports with interwoven sequences of quotations or stand-alone portraits of well-known people prevailed.

A closer look at the history of the interview reveals two different traditions: from the 1830s onwards, interviews were part of the emerging penny press in America and served as instruments of authentication for information obtained through investigation. The resulting reports also included descriptions of the subjects' circumstances and experiences. Ultimately, this brought the "American interview" into disrepute at the end of the nineteenth century as an aggressive reporting tool that invaded privacy (Ruchatz 2014, 39-70). In Europe, the interview only gained a foothold during the second half of the nineteenth century—first in England and France, and finally in the German-speaking world.¹² Practitioners of the new format—at least in their public statements—rushed to distinguish their approach from its American antecedents and emphasized their respectful and authentic portrayal of interviewees.

Hence we find the British journalist Raymond Blathwayt, who in 1893 compiled an anthology similar in structure to Bahr's, noting: "Let the interviewer be sedulously careful never to betray a confidence, never to 'give away' his subject; let him respect himself and his companion, and I guarantee that no harm will ever come to the much-abused art of interviewing" (Blathwayt 1893, 354). Hermann Bahr also cast the "American interview" with its disrespectful snooping around for information and its subsequent exposure in print, as a counterfoil of his practice. In his anthology, he quotes August Bebel's comment that: "One's experience with interviews is somewhat mixed. Misunderstandings are frequent, and one cannot rectify all of them immediately. Consequently, the newspapers often print things that lack all foundation in reality, which is vexing" (Bahr 1979, 24). The fact that Bebel opened up to Bahr despite these reservations indicated to readers the familiarity of the two men and underscored Bahr's disassociation from the reporting of the sensational press.

Bahr subscribed to a definition of the interview as a strenuously exact representation in which the interviewer assumed, as Blathwayt put it, the role of a veritable photographer and preserver (see Blathwayt 1893, 349). While the account was to be richly detailed and suffused with atmosphere, it should not offend its subject. What were the foundations of these concepts?

Unmasking inner selves

A text from 1892 may give some indication. A few months before embarking on the antisemitism interviews, Bahr published an article on "the future of literature" in which he discussed the new book of the French journalist Jules Huret *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire* (Huret 1891). For this book, Huret had interviewed leading French writers and intellectuals to record the public debate on evolving trends as they were being discussed in cafés and newspapers, on the streets and in the salons of the time.¹³ The goal was to achieve a kind of snapshot of the attitudes toward literary events and currents, such as naturalism and symbolism, and their potential influence on future developments in literature. Huret's book comprised a mixture of accounts of his visits and interviews with prominent men, as well as letters addressed to the author and opinions he had

¹²As late as 1878, the journalist Johann Hermann Wehle wrote that "in Europe, interviewing has not yet become a stable occupation for any particular person [on the editorial staff, AtH.] Our diplomats and statesmen are too buttoned up for interviewing to flourish" (Wehle 1878, 28).

¹³For the literary interview and the "excesses of optical scrutiny" see Roach (2018), chapter one.

specially solicited. The book's subtitle, *Conversations*, referred both to this material and the interviews as such (Huret 1891).

Bahr called Huret's book a masterpiece of reportage and identified the interview as its basis:

The Frenchman [Huret] has kept company with the artists and drawn from each their secret nature. Not so much from what they told him, but from the way he perceived them and what he [Huret] inferred from subtle signs—the arrangement of furniture, his hosts' ease in his presence, a casual gesture—the aggregate air of sights and sounds. The merit of Huret's book lies thus in the fact that he surprised each of his subjects in their nightgown, as it were. (Bahr 2005a, 10)

The motif of the nightgown evokes American-style interviews: what could indicate a more intimate situation? And it is true that Bahr, too, was interested in details that presented the subject in a highly personal setting. Continuing his review of Huret, he states that “getting answers that can't be gotten” is the task and talent of the reporter (*ibid.*, 11). Yet, Bahr was not concerned with the sensational report or topical news; instead, he called for “truthful description,” in which the fleshed-out details authenticated the account rather than exposed its subject. Information was not to be obtained by invasive practices.

Bahr predicted that, in the future, there would be only this kind of literary description. He argued that the art of the interview consisted in creating a “document of its time” (*ibid.*, 10) by gathering “a thousand opinions” (*ibid.*, 9) and synthesizing them into a personal account. Huret and Bahr thus proceeded similarly: they combined meticulous descriptions of an individual's surroundings with the opinions that person expressed in the interviews. Respondents that were too difficult to get hold of were asked to convey their ideas in writing. Both men aimed to uncover and document what lay beneath the surface, the concealed and unnoticed that did not reveal itself at first glance. And this approach was to be applied not only to individuals and their thinking but also to social currents.

A case in point is Huret's use of the term “Enquête” in the title of his book. It referred to the surveys that had appeared in scores in the French press since the 1880s, sparking a veritable fad for interviewing.¹⁴ A survey usually referred to a series of interviews systematized to the extent it addressed a specific topic. Often these surveys were based on a fixed sequence of questions or even a formal questionnaire. Reportage, *enquête*, interview—these terms were not yet clearly distinguished from one another in the 1890s, and referred primarily to the reporter's first-hand inspection of the location and subject of his enquiry (Kött 2004, 79).

In 1892, the year of Bahr's review of the *Enquête littéraire*, Jules Huret was already conducting a new survey, later to appear under the title *Enquête sur la question sociale en Europe* (Huret 1897). For this *enquête*, he interviewed a wide variety of people from all over Europe (including entrepreneurs, workers, and intellectuals) on the implications of industrialization, the meaning of the proletariat, or socialism. It was characteristic of Huret that he did not devote himself solely to literary themes but also to social issues. In itself, this is indicative of the social research of the time.¹⁵

¹⁴On this point, see Kött (2004), 212. The book is one of the most detailed studies on the French interview of which I am aware, as well as one of the most careful in its attention to conceptual history. It also offers an instructive distinction between interview, *entrevue*, *visite*, *interrogatoire*, *enquête*, *conversation*, and *reportage* (51–89).

¹⁵See Kött (2004), 216f.; see also Requate (1995), Part A. On the connection between reportage and social research since the end of the nineteenth century, see Lindner (1990), who explains the emergence of urban sociology in the work of Robert Ezra Park in Chicago with reference to the format of reportage and the profession of journalism. Lindner identifies the interview as a method complementing on-site investigation and undercover research (Lindner 1990, 46). On reportage, see also Homberg (2017), who describes the figure of the reporter (in most cases, they were men) as an observing, participating, searching, and questioning type of scout (Homberg 2017, 57). Ethel Matala de Mazza (2018) addresses the relationship between the format of the *feuilleton* and emerging mass society since the mid-nineteenth century in turning to Siegfried Kracauer's *feuilletons*, among other things, to ask about the connection between “minor genres” and the reshaping of the public sphere in the

Factual observation and descriptive truthfulness

Inquiries, or *Befragungen* in German, were a tried and tested means of social research that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, and, when concerned with social issues, they were usually associated with government legislation projects. While the term “Befragung” proper initially referred simply to an examination procedure, it became, from the middle of the century onwards, synonymous with a “commission” carrying out a public “investigative procedure for the clarification and collection of information” (Pierer 1858, 770). This commission could conduct interviews, gather documents, hear scientists, and accumulate information.

Social historian Irmela Gorges defined the French term *enquête*, as it was used in the German context, as follows: “In *enquêtes*, mass phenomena are recorded qualitatively by experts who conduct interviews. In addition, statistical data on social issues are surveyed. After the predominantly qualitative analysis of the results, a discussion of the possible consequences of sociopolitical measures ensues between selected experts and those interested in using the results” (Gorges 1986, 2).¹⁶ This definition of “*enquête*” for the 1880s and 1890s does not distinguish between the state-initiated and the private *enquête*, but highlighted its general character: the term denoted surveys that, given correct evaluation, were to furnish information and guidance for the redressing of social ills.

Industrialization and urbanization were the drivers behind the *enquêtes*’ shift of focus to the changing conditions of peasants in the countryside or the living conditions of workers in the cities. In 1872, the “Verein für Socialpolitik” was founded. The English translation of its name both as “Association for Social Policy” and “Association for Social Politics” spells out the duality of that organization’s aims. It drafted a program for social research in the German Empire, defining its methodology and thematic focal points. The association debated pressing current problems that called for long-term state solutions, such as the establishment of old-age and invalidity funds, legislation to regulate factories, or the housing shortage. When indicated, it would also launch an *enquête*, an investigative procedure, on a particular issue. The association obtained information for such investigations through reports requested from individuals specifically designated beforehand. The information received—for instance, on the predicament of certain professions in the countryside—was usually provided in writing. This material served as a point of reference for the consultation of experts within the context of a hearing. Quantitative and qualitative data thus gathered were then consolidated in an *enquête* report and duly assessed by the commission.

Bahr must have been familiar with such procedures and their publications through his academic training in national economics at Berlin’s Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität. Between 1884 and 1887, Bahr had studied and worked with the founding members of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, the national economists Gustav Schmoller and Adolf Wagner.¹⁷

One of the first to note that such social *enquêtes* were not just about numbers but at least as much about language was statistician Gottlieb Schnapper-Arndt. He took a differentiated look at the methodological procedures underlying “numerically determined” and “non-numerically

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (27). In doing so, she explores journalists’ and writers’ interest in “trifles, petty incidents, and subaltern actors” who “engage in an analytics of social relations” (15). In the same vein, Salerno (2007), following Lindner, sees the sociology emerging at the University of Chicago as less connected to elaborate scientific methods than to particular literary narrative forms.

¹⁶See also Bulmer, Bales, and Sklar (1991), who make clear that this phase of surveys at the turn of the century was determined mainly by local focus and by political action and social reform, in contrast to the later representative surveys for the study of social groups that were more associated with the academic social sciences (see page 42). On the importance, around 1900, of interviewing experts and leaders to gain information about the living conditions of the people who were the actual object of study (such as workers), see Savage 2010 (165–186). For a general introduction to the history of social science interviews and thus also of the *enquêtes*, see Platt (2002). For a comparative historical view of sociological research methods overall, see Platt (1996).

¹⁷See Schnödl (2014), who describes Bahr’s view of economics and its relationship to socialism.

determined” surveys.¹⁸ In his *Methodologie sozialer Enquêtes* from 1888, Schnapper-Arndt underscored the importance of the “nonnumerically determined” approach, that is, of the accurate linguistic description of the conditions under scrutiny. This approach had nothing in common, he argued, with an “atmospheric account” [Stimmungsbericht]; instead, as with the numerical material, it aimed to explore what was “factual” (Schnapper-Arndt 1888, 11). To do so, Schnapper-Arndt continued, one had to describe relevant “case studies from first-hand observation” (ibid.), critically assess the evidence from these case studies, and finally, collate this data whilst indicating the area of one’s proper expertise. Schnapper-Arndt repeatedly reiterated the credo that what mattered most was the evidence, the documents and their reproduction. He emphasized that data collection should be as comprehensive as possible, reflecting reality but refraining from a descriptive aggregation of arguments and data. “The enquête must not consist in atmosphere [Stimmung]. Rather its task is exactly to determine what atmosphere [Stimmung] is accurate” (ibid.). Yet, the most imperative requirement for this case study-based methodology was the explicit consideration of “*place and time*” (ibid. 24, emphasis in original).

For Schnapper-Arndt, an *enquête* thus represented a fundamental communication, which situated the enquiry’s result in a particular context authenticated by place and time. Concurrently, it highlighted how the position of the person who carried out and recorded an investigation shaped its outcome. This “methodology” illustrates how empirical social research was to be understood and how its subjective, descriptive procedure was to be transformed into an instrument for arriving at facts that were as truthful and verifiable as possible.

As the sociologist Wolfgang Bonß put it, this method was about practising a particular way of appropriating reality, a “Tatsachenblick” or “factual observation” [literally: “an eye for facts”]” (Bonß 1982).¹⁹ It included a familiarity with the field conditioned by experience, the inclusion of the individual, be it in the form of cases, situations or documents, and the consideration of information that could not be precisely measured or that was situational (ibid., 113), and finally, the self-reflexive recognition of this science as a human science by the observer-investigator.

Bonß dated the formation of this specific cognitive pattern for describing social reality to the second half of the nineteenth century and highlighted its relation to Carlo Ginzburg’s “evidential paradigm” (ibid., 111-115). Ginzburg had described and reclaimed an epistemic model for the human sciences, in which trace reading was the preserve of the accomplished connoisseur. In this model, individual phenomena were inherently irreproducible (Ginzburg 1988, 96) and could not necessarily be transformed into knowledge by following a preformulated rule (ibid., 116). Knowledge-formation, in this model, was thus not based on a Galilean science with its quantification and replicable experiments. Its focus was not on numbers and instruments but on language and its expert use. These characteristics point to the crucial role of the survey at the end of the nineteenth century: at stake was nothing less than providing the human sciences with a codified instrument, albeit one that depended on the observer and which diverted standardization efforts into the method applied to the description and recording of the particular, the individual.

The proponents of this new method unanimously stressed the importance of adhering to its separate procedural stages. First came the collecting, the recording of observation and storing of the resulting “documents”.²⁰ (In Bahr’s words: “I went out, interviewed people and recorded the answers” (Bahr 2005b, 216)). Only in a second step, as Schnapper-Arndt maintained, were these documents used to describe ambience or atmosphere. For a final assessment, the synthesizing review of all documents was imperative.

¹⁸For a discussion of this working method, also called “monographic,” see Desrosières (1991).

¹⁹Poovey (1998) makes a similar argument in describing how the modern concept of a fact emerges from the supposed separability of text and number, observation and analysis, description and interpretation.

²⁰And, one must add, to emulate, with this separation, the legal sciences of the day: “As a device for scientific investigation,” a 1932 survey of social scientific methods observed, the interview “is peculiar to the sociologist. It is his compensation for inability to use the astronomer’s telescope or the bacteriologist’s microscope” (quoted from Savage 2010, 167).

Reporters and early social scientists were equally concerned with gaining recognition for their presentation formats. They relied on sources and depictions of place and time to endow their writing with the validity of fact. In both cases, this required using language that was as attentive, intimate and detailed as possible, balancing comprehensiveness and necessary concision. In both cases, the aim was to engage with manifestations of modernity, such as public opinion and social issues, thereby creating the basis for eventual understanding and problem-solving.

Numbers and descriptions

Let us consider Herman Bahr's series of interviews—equally significant for politics and the feuilleton—as an attempt to apply journalistic and sociographic methods and capture the subjective in large numbers (38 interviews) yet rely on description. Bahr himself described the approach as needing to solicit “a thousand opinions” (Bahr 2005a, 9). Others, such as the folklorist Raimund Friedrich Kaindl, defined such a procedure somewhat later as “a statistic of thoughts” [Gedankenstatistik] that aimed more precisely to ascertain the “diffusion of certain phenomena” (Kaindl 1903, 84) and thus to enable “comparisons” and the taking into account of “personal perceptions” which were as valid as statistical data (Steinmetz 1912/1913, 499). What these perspectives had in common was the intention of assembling as many documents as possible for later appraisal.²¹

Of course, Hermann Bahr was not alone in conducting such an interview series. In addition to the works of the Austrian writer and the abovementioned journalists Huret and Blathwayt, several other interview volumes appeared at the time, collating articles that had initially appeared in newspapers.²² Yet, Bahr's book differed from those of his contemporaries. It was consistent in format—Bahr had met almost all of his informants in person—and it focused on a social phenomenon that concerned an audience beyond the cultured classes. Antisemitism had immense political significance; it sparked disputes among political parties, and a plethora of pamphlets sought to justify or prove it. This, then, was the context in which Bahr, in the preface to his book, stated:

I shall not attempt in any way to 'rebut' antisemitism—that has been done a thousand times and is to no purpose. I shall merely canvass the feelings and opinions of the educated classes in various nations on this phenomenon within the populace [Volk]. Maybe, this will provide, at some date, quite an interesting documentation of the mental state [Verfassung des Geistes] around 1893. (Bahr 1979, 16)

From the outset, Bahr underscored that the purpose of his collection was not to pass judgment. Instead, in the sense of Schnapper-Arndt, Bahr aimed to capture a “*Stimmung*”—here, in the sense of a “sentiment”, and provide a set of data: thirty-eight records of visits, during which Bahr had asked the self-same question: *What is your stand on antisemitism?* But how could one apprehend a *Stimmung* whilst recording thirty-eight opinions?

The interior as object of observation

In his interviews, Hermann Bahr pursued the objective of giving ephemeral phenomena a format worthy of historical documentation. This included depicting “place” in order to establish a constitutive authenticating framework.

²¹On the connection between photography and documents, or photography as a kind of document, see Wöhrer (2015), 10.

²²For an overview, see Ruchatz (2014), 551–555. So regularly was this format featured in the newspapers that in 1927 Alfred Polgar equated public celebrity with “not being left out of the survey solicited by the journals: What is your favorite dessert? What is your profession, and above all, why do you pursue it?” (Polgar 1927, 11). For a discussion of surveys concerned with antisemitism—here, too, Bahr was not alone—see Gräfe (2018), especially the chapter on surveys on antisemitism in the German Empire (24–50).

Bahr sought to create sources that retrospectively preserved the present and thus, at the very moment of their creation, already anticipated their historicization. This approach placed him within the context of historicism and the belief that historical processes were unique, that only recourse to the past made explanations of the present possible in the first place.

For this reason, collecting sources and making them accessible was essential. For this reason, it was vital to record the present as it unfolded against the backdrop of the importance of history. Bahr maintained that the format of a short conversation, the portrait of opinion, allowed him to capture unnoticed details that would otherwise go unrecorded. In a similar vein, Raymond Blathwayt observed on this type of interview: “It is the photographic reproduction of almost unconscious thought, and words and deeds, the faithful rendition of accompanying circumstances and surroundings which seize hold upon the human mind” (Blathwayt 1893, 348). He, too, saw the interviewer as a “preserver of the history of his own time” (ibid., 349). But how does Bahr portray this present—a present to which he attributed such importance for later times?

He begins by describing his reasons for choosing a particular interview partner. In the case of the politician Alfred Naquet, for instance, Bahr notes: “I began the French series of my interviews with Alfred Naquet because, for a start, I wanted to gain a quick overview of the status quo on the issue [antisemitism] in France that covered advocates and opponents alike, so that I would be able to conduct my subsequent interviews with even greater knowledge and skill” (Bahr 1979, 59). Bahr then slowly shifts the focus toward his respective respondent. He reports on that person’s vita, their public opinions, and whether they have previously taken a stand on antisemitism. His respondents include serious, upright politicians (Prince Heinrich zu Schoenaich-Carolath), hardworking and modest leaders (August Bebel), sympathetic scientists (Ernst Haeckel), no-nonsense women’s rights activists (Annie Besant), tough former military men (Moritz von Egidy), discerning *bon vivants* (Maximilian von Harden), and illustrious scholars (Theodor Mommsen). Bebel receives Bahr “with his quiet, heartfelt warmth” (ibid., 24), while Friedrich Spielhagen appears neat “and tight, terse and brisk, straight and sharp” (ibid., 17). About Adolph Wagner, Bahr wrote: “The closer you become with him, the more you will become a keen admirer, even if you refuse to share his opinions. From a distance, he is off-putting. From up close, he is seductive. He is one of those people you must see at home to understand” (ibid., 45).

“Surroundings,” “circumstances,” or “environment” were the keywords used by contemporary press manuals to emphasize the importance of ambiance and setting (Ruchatz 2014, 84, 89; Blathwayt 1893, 348–349). For Bahr, too, the home constitutes a meaningful context for most of the intellectuals presented in his volume. Bahr meets nearly all of his interviewees at their homes and applies the scheme exemplified in the account of his visit to Theodor Mommsen, cited at the beginning of this essay, to the majority of his interviews, thereby rendering them comparable.

And just as Bahr describes an interlocutor’s external appearance, he also subjects their parlor or study to the same detailed observation. Furniture and pictures echo the respondent’s physiognomy. On the environment of the writer Spielhagen, who lived in Berlin, Bahr reports:

I am led into a chamber that is a mixture of a parlor, drawing room, and studio. Its simple, pedantic order conveys bourgeois sobriety, yet there are also chaise longues and loveseats as in the rooms of a lady, while busts and paintings endow the room with a nobler grace. It resembles the home of a well-off, respectable citizen living far from the capital—a man who pursues a prosaic profession but is eager to cultivate beauty in his idle hours; who is level-headed yet occasionally dallies, albeit with moderation and wisdom, in feelings. Diligence will needs feel comfortable here—though, for a finer sensibility, one that lusts after exquisite sensations, this certainly would not do. (Bahr 1979, 17)

It is only after he has thus established the interview setting that Bahr proceeds with the actual verbatim rendering of his interlocutor’s responses—or, in some cases—disagreements.

Bahr executed his brief descriptive physiognomies with linguistic finesse, portraying each interior as if it were a sleeve, fitting its wearer, or, as he observed, “I unconsciously accommodate and accoutre the individuals according to their character” [ich logire und möblire die Leute unwillkürlich nach ihrem Charakter] (Bahr 2005b, 217). He accords no more than half of each interview to dialogue or monologue passages that reflect his interlocutor’s opinions. Demeanour and clothing, gestures and facial expressions, coffee cups and picture frames, chair covers and busts hold almost equal importance.

Bahr thus positions himself largely outside the tradition of the police interrogation, with its unequal relationship between questioner and respondent, targeted questioning, and verbatim report serving solely as a protocol. Instead, he registers all impressions with unflinching attention to detail and cultivates an interview situation in which the questioner retreats into the background. This type of questioning—on an equal footing and without coercion of either questioner or respondent—holds the promise of yielding organized, consistent material that lends itself to systematic comparison. Bahr had modelled this approach on a uniform “observation scheme” previously employed for the survey of countries and states [Staatsbeschreibung] (Stagl 1979, 613). He adapted this scheme to chart an intellectual landscape and represent it in the feuilleton. Bahr thus ventured to record an oral tradition, the terra incognita of antisemitism, which he mapped by describing the surroundings and personalities of his interviewees. The interior served as both the interview’s object and its authenticating instance; it provided the material counterpart to the opinions expressed by the respondent and revealed as much about the educated minds of the time as did their words.²³

The interior as interview setting

Bahr’s conscientious descriptions of his interviewees’ environments and his proper involvement in them, not only enriched the portrayal of each interviewee—they also reflected with equal precision on the interview practice itself. As much as the texts can be read as psychograms of the portrayed intellectuals, they also implicitly point to Bahr’s concept of interview practice at the end of the nineteenth century. How did Bahr obtain, and how did he document the information that practice called for?

He borrowed from the classic format of the *visite*, namely the description of a personal encounter in a specific place, usually introduced, as in the examples above, by establishing a scenic setting. The *visite* can be traced back to two separate historical roots. On the one hand, it is a systematic on-site assessment in the sense of an inspection and examination as they had been customary in institutional audits since the Middle Ages. On the other hand, the *visite* format drew on the bourgeois convention of the courtesy visit, which incorporated ceremonial components and originated in the salon culture of the modern period (Kött 2004, 67). Bahr tried to avoid the impression of a formal inspection, playing instead entirely on the repertoire of the polite bourgeois gentleman. Where Bahr’s contemporary, the folklorist Richard Wossidlo stipulated that the interviewer first learn his subjects’ vernacular dialect to gain their trust (Wossidlo 1906, 8), Bahr had no such need. From the outset, he moved within the fixed framework of bourgeois conversation, a “prototypical medium of sociability” (Linke 1996, 220) that Bahr seemed to have mastered to perfection.

²³On environment and environmental knowledge, see Wessely and Huber (2017), who examine the history of the term “milieu” in its implications for a range of disciplinary perspectives. In addition to an understanding of the milieu in the nascent field of ecology, the milieu of human beings was also described in the second half of the nineteenth century as a “spiritual environment” and as “surrounding cultural conditions” (9). With regard to the (social) milieu and the significance of the home as “the object of continuous work by its inhabitant to fashion it as a space of self-representation, and in its function as an environment that, in turn, refashions that inhabitant” see Jürjens (2020), 16; and for an overview from a gender historical perspective, see the introduction to the NTM issue edited by Schmidt and Malich (2020).

His accounts are focused on taking visual inventory. Bahr even describes the way to his eventual interview locations, for instance, when he crosses the Tiergarten park in Berlin to visit the journalist and politician Theodor Barth (Bahr 1979, 20). Another time, a visit to August Bebel takes Bahr beyond the “outer limits of the city” until “even the last vestiges of urbanity have vanished” (*ibid.*, 23). In Paris, Bahr finds himself standing in front of the “solemn temple of the Madeleine” at “the site of the flower market” before he turns to enter the home of the politician Jules Simon (*ibid.*, 61).

Bahr discloses how he knows his interviewees and describes his relationship with them. Thus he introduces Gustav Schmoller as his former teacher, whom he meets at home in his private library. “So presently, after many years, we are once more sitting across from each other, him still sporting those same soft, slack, baggy clothes that invest him with an American air of nonchalance” (*ibid.*, 29). Adolph Wagner, too, is a figure Bahr knows personally: “I once worked for him at the university [in seinem Seminar] for two years. That’s how I met him. And he is a man for whom I hold a great deal of respect and admiration” (*ibid.*, 45).

Bahr meticulously describes the rooms where his encounters take place and which, as in the case of Alfred Nacquet, lent these meetings a particular air.

I am led into a narrow, bright, silent chamber. Alphonse Hirsch’s portrait of him [Nacquet] reflects the strange mixture of pain and understanding in its subject’s tormented features. The books all around, the heavy armchairs, cushions, and chaiselongues bestow an air of quiet sickliness on the room, as though it were inhabited by one who wishes to contemplate and rest in solitude from suffering. (*ibid.*, 59)

For his meeting with the women’s rights activist Anni Besant, Bahr has to negotiate a quirkily exotic reception room: “One enters a short salon, to whom foreign bronzes, images of wondrous, pale, and rapturous heads, and the colorful delight of Japanese ornaments imbue a refined and bizarre air of sanctity. One forgets the vast, brown wasteland of English apartments, where one always feels as if on the Orient Express” (*ibid.*, 99). The writer Sidney Whitman’s living room, by contrast, radiates the opposite: “A quiet parlor, with that lavish, dark comfort of British taste. Engravings by Whistler, paintings by Lenbach; one with the laconic note: ‘Unsuccessful’—Franz von Lenbach. All kinds of mementoes of Bismarck and Moltke” (*ibid.*, 100).

Bahr’s conversation openings are politely tentative, as with Friedrich Spielhagen: “I don’t know, Sir, if you remember me, but years ago—,” to which, he records, Spielhagen answers, “But of course, in the Literary Society! We are old acquaintances, after all.” Only then does Bahr turn to the purpose of his visit: “We sit down. He offers me a cigarette. And I make my request—that he speak about antisemitism, that he tell me what he thinks about it” (*ibid.*, 18). Bahr adopts the same approach in his interview with Jules Simon: “I solicit him to instruct me on antisemitism in France” (*ibid.*, 62) and the writer Alejandro Sawa: “I tell him about my interview on antisemitism and ask for his opinion” (*ibid.*, 89). In the spirit of polite conversation, Bahr describes himself as a good listener able to remain within the “sociability threshold”: to neither become too intimate by posing probing questions that would invade the subject’s privacy nor touch upon their professional world outside the home.²⁴ He adheres to the bourgeois script for such a visit: the interviews are brief, and Bahr adopts a balanced mix between empathy and distance. In short: he strives through polished conversation to elicit an opinion. Conversation among equals in private, interior settings is his essential tool for building trust and soliciting comments.

By describing the circumstances—the “place and time” according to Schnapper-Arndt—in such detail, Bahr positions himself as both participant and observing journalist/investigator. His interviews are aesthetic miniatures, and an attempt to document a social phenomenon beyond

²⁴The term “sociability threshold” [Geselligkeitsschwelle] was coined by Georg Simmel and is used by Angelika Linke to describe the bourgeois staging of a nonpersonal privacy (see Linke 1996, 176–177).

numerical data. In most cases, the interior he depicts is a parlor or a reception room—a private, albeit, by bourgeois conventions, semipublic space that served for formal visits and provided the requisite setting for the evolution of bourgeois discursive culture (Linke 1996, 170-230). Bahr thus seeks out the bourgeois intellectuals in their environment, their habitat as it were, which provides the home ground for “getting them to talk.” Within this context, the description of the interior assumes particular importance as an instance of authentication. It resembles a journey into the inner world of the bourgeois subject. By consulting them in their private space, Bahr delves into an emotional world that is—much like the newspapers—closed off and open to the public.

Bahr allows his readers to apprehend the construction of his portrayals, showing them the path he takes to the interior of an interview partner’s home and their inner selves.²⁵ He thereby aligns himself with a position in art theory that considers the interior as the “frame of true representation” (Soentgen 2010). Within their own space, the subject is not only fully present and at home, but, as “exhibited interiority,” the interior also allows for “forms of communication that unfold spatially and through body language” (ibid., 54) and—this is crucial—are “a practice of [both] representation and observation” (Brons 2016, 263).²⁶

Moreover, this inner world of the bourgeois subject represents a counter-world to that of the mob-like masses, and thus further distinguishes its inhabitant as being “cultured.”²⁷ Bahr does not focus on the antisemitism of the streets, but on a reflection from the vantage point of the semi-permeable enclosure of intellectual life. He centers not on mass society, but the spatially situated individual. However, where most of his contemporaries painted the interior as a place of retreat, Bahr cast it as a stage for public debate, thereby drawing it into the limelight.

Truthful narration

Interview and interior entered into a close relationship around 1900. Verbal communication and inhabited surroundings, language, and things all merged into small miniatures of opinion, imbued with a strong link to materiality. As a series (thirty-eight items), these miniatures fused into a representation of *Stimmung*—sentiment, ambiance, or atmosphere. The uniform structure of Bahr’s interviews ensured their recognizability in the daily feuilleton and their eventual comparability within the context of the later anthology or a potential survey.

Bahr’s descriptive strategies thus tended towards an alliance that shortly after found its counterpart, amongst others, in contemporary psychology. For Sigmund Freud, too, the interior provided as much the setting for exploring his patients’ minds as was the content of their dreams and obsessive thoughts; it was a bourgeois consultation room and image of the psyche in one (see Müller 2019; Marinelli 2006). Yet, unlike Freud, who understood the human interior as determined by psychological idiosyncrasies and their respective modes of functioning, Bahr interpreted that same interior as an indicator of a person’s degree of culture and education as well as the configuration and embodiment of their inner being; it characterized the intellectual’s personality.

Notwithstanding this difference, Bahr and Freud held in common the practice of inquiry and the concepts associated with it. For, like the statistician Schnapper-Arndt and the folklorist Kaindl, the psychoanalyst Freud and the writer Bahr agreed on one thing: it was vital to become a

²⁵The extent to which these descriptions of place and time support the truthfulness of the statement is also shown by Bahr’s rebuttal of Ahlwardt (Bahr 2013, 169–171).

²⁶For more on interiors, see Lajer-Burcharth and Soentgen (2016), especially the introduction (1-13) that describes the relation between self and space.

²⁷Michael Gamper analogously identifies, for the nineteenth century, the topos, prominent in literature and media, of the “great man” who achieves extraordinary things and, as the antithesis to this figure, the masses: a large crowd that, on the one hand, was perceived as a “phenomenon of the innumerable many” and, on the other hand, left the “impression of a general confusion” (Gamper 2016, 13). On the connection between the masses and the public in the 1890s, see Gamper (2007), 476–484.

“receptive organ” and acknowledge that inquiry consisted in the art of “getting people to talk who are determined to be silent, and specifically talk about the questions on which they prefer to remain silent most” (Bahr 1902, column 1). All these makers of human portraits gathered evidence along the lines suggested by Ginzburg, and they all shared the conviction that the unveiling of unconscious phenomena must not serve the denigration or exposure of their subjects, but should support the “truthful” appraisal of a person and their environment. The practice of skillful questioning, or rather non-insistent listening, the ability discreetly to “get one’s subjects to talk,” was at the core of this specific orality that was yet evolving in so many different disciplines. This practice, and the collection of “facts” it produced, informed the description of case studies (Schnapper-Arndt, Freud), “ordinary people” (Kaindl) or famous persons (Bahr). Bahr translated these facts into illuminating miniature descriptions that satisfied the demands of the feuilleton and, simultaneously, corresponded with the descriptive (and quantitative) paradigm of sociography.

In conclusion: The narrative survey was, first, based on the double figure of the interview *in* the interior and the interview *as* the interior. Secondly, the proponents of this approach obtained their data by simultaneously observing and intervening, describing and intruding. Thirdly, as a form of narrative survey, the interview mediated between the private and the public; it was part of bourgeois sociability and reflected its underpinnings.

The interview *in* the interior and *as* the interior thus constituted an epistemic practice around 1900. It captured the “factual” by means of narrative survey and was a standard tool in journalism and the social sciences. Irreplaceable by numbers and relying on the nuanced and highly differentiated use of language, it provided the ultimate basis for a “unique document,” and formed a new episteme of orality.

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