Revisiting Robert Pagès: Documents and Culture

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Cover Page Footnote

In 1954 Suzanne Briet urged us to "revisit" the writings of Robert Pagès: "We have to come back to Pagès. His message did not have, at the time he launched it, all the impact it deserved, because he did not find an audience prepared to receive it. [...] The dialectic and axioms of Pagès are absolutely irrefutable."[1] Unfortunately, the writings of both Pagès and Briet were, instead, neglected for the next several decades. To remedy this neglect a brief introduction will be provided to Robert Pagès' life and his interest in documents and culture.

Robert Pagès

Pagès was born in the south of France in 1919. His first language was Occitan, the indigenous language of that region. French was his second language. He grew up during the rise of authoritarian regimes in Spain, Italy, Germany, the USSR, and elsewhere, developed strongly left-wing political views and became an activist (Enckell 2020). Pagès studied philosophy and sociology, was influenced by Georges Canguilhem (1904-1995), and completed a thesis in 1942 on the origins of myths and stories (*Genèse et sens du myth et de la fabulation*).

In 1946 after being dismissed following a strike in a metallurgical factory, Pagès enrolled in the program for professional education in documentation which had been founded in 1945 by Suzanne Briet and others and which became the present-day Institut National des Sciences et Techniques de la Documentation (INTD). While a student in this program he developed a close and lasting friendship with Briet and wrote two theses, both of which were later published.

Pagès was hired to work at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and in 1952 was charged by Daniel Lagache, professor of psychology, to establish a laboratory for social psychology. In 1954 Pagès was designated head of the laboratory, which he directed until his retirement in 1985. The laboratory closed soon after his retirement.

Pagès was very active in academic and professional circles relating to psychology and sociology. He was also interested in methodological issues. Rather than reliance on mathematical models, which could be considered one-degree removed from reality, he preferred observation of actual social experiments. This led him to a deep interest in the utopian socialist ideas of Charles Fourier (1772-1837) and, especially, the Familistère de Guise, a community of employees of industrialist J. B. A. Godin (1817 – 1888) which had a population of 1,200 and was a self-governing commune from 1858 – 1883.

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[1] "Il faut en revenir à Pagès. Son message n'a pas eu, au moment où il l'a lancé, tout le retentissement qu'il méritait, parce qu'il ne trouva pas d'audience préparée à la recevoir. [...] La dialectique et les axiomes de PAGES sont absolument irréfutables." (Briet, 1954, 43.)

Organization of knowledge and CODOC

After completing his program in documentation in 1948, Pagès taught in the program for a number of years. He also published a lightly revised version of his second thesis, issued in a very small edition as *Problèmes de classification culturelle et documentaire* (Pagès 1955). It is an encyclopedic analysis of documentary classification with an emphasis of problems of the humanities.

At the laboratory for social psychology, he and others developed an indexing language for the laboratory's collections, known as CODOC (for COde DOCumentaire) or as "l'Analyse Codée" (Demailly, 1992).

CODOC had some interesting features and seems influenced by the work of Gérard Cordonnier (1907-1977). It emphasized grammatical relations over vocabulary following Pagès' view that in social psychology relationships were particularly important and that a limited vocabulary would suffice. The syntactic structure was algebraic and infixes (codes inserted within a character string) were used to denote relationships. It was also exceptionally concise, e.g.,

$(ra^9a)^5i$ Philosophy of science applied to behavior
$ra^9(a^5i)$ Philosophy of the science of behavior

CODOC was one of several indexing languages developed in that period and, like the others, was very powerful but too laborious to find wider use.

Documents and society

The first of Pagès' two theses in the documentation program was submitted in 1947 and published in 1948 as "Transformations documentaires et milieu culturel (Essai de documentologie)" (Documentary Transformations and Cultural Context) in the *Review of documentation* (Pagès, 1948). It is a remarkable, wide-ranging, densely written overview of the changing role of documents in society, with an emphasis on the shaping of culture. It is not an easy read. It has a declarative style. Statements are made, but not justified and often not easily understood. This paper appears to have been almost entirely ignored for the next seven decades until it was republished with an English translation and a brief introduction as a special issue of the *Proceedings from the Document Academy* in 2021. A central theme is that there had been a transformation over time of the role of documents in social culture.

Pagès takes as a point of departure a simple dichotomy between lived experience and bookish learning which he attributes to Descartes. Developments since then, he argues, have changed that dichotomy into a continuum. Scientific experiments generate artificial experiences. New media such as images, sound recordings, and, especially, the cinema, generate vicarious experiences that

increasingly resemble lived experience, but with the important difference that these mediated experiences may feel very real to the individual and yet have little or no grounding in reality. Collages and manipulation of the choice and sequencing of images allow ever more powerful vicarous experiences to get people's attention. In addition, mainly as a result of technological changes, governments and other organizations are able to impose division of labor and coordination in such a way as to undermine individual autonomy. Pagès' grew up during the rise of fascist regimes in Spain, Italy, and Germany, and the totalitarian Soviet Union. Totalitarian societies involve mass production, mass politics, military conscription, total warfare, and mass communication. And this was not simply a governmental matter.

The pervasive nature of new media influenced all sectors of life. Marketing experts would use merchandizing to transform purchasing into culturally-charged experience. Tourist agencies, for example, would transform a decayed village into a charming symbol of cultural heritage, a process Pagès' called "documentification." As a result the initial dichotomy attributed to Descartes' time had been increasingly displaced by overwhelmingly influential mediated experiences in planned societies. George Orwell's *1984*, published the year after Pagès article, would not have surprised him. Nor would the more recent rise of social media.

The influence of media is so effective and pervasive, in Pagès' view, that he wrote, pithily, that "Documentation is to culture what machinery is to industry." ("La documentation est à la culture ce que la machinerie est à l'industrie" (Pagès, 1948, p. 53). Figure 1 provides a view of Pagès' views.

| Lived experience | A dichotomy for Descartes. | Bookish knowledge |

A continuum for Pagès.
Transformative changes in 18th, 19th & 20th centuries:
- Evidence from science experiments = Artificial experience.
- New media (photography, cinema, radio, television, printing) combine for new experiences & new forms of evidence.
- Collages & sequences create new meanings.
- Totalitarian society: mass production, mass politics, military conscription, total warfare, … *mass communication*.

Continuum, not dichotomy, of mediated experiences.

Lived   *Experience and documents converge*   Bookish
Vicarious experiences through new media
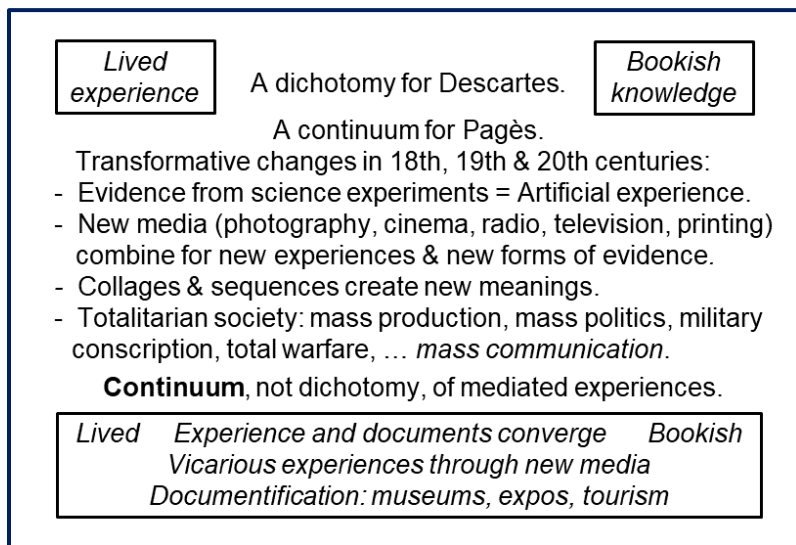*Documentification: museums, expos, tourism*

Figure 1. From lived experience to mediated experience.

Unique objects and specimens

Pagès' 1948 article also includes a brief, but striking passage on the distinction between particulars (unique objects) and specimens (any set of objects sharing some property (p. 60).

> A "unique object" or member of a collection of similars. … In the first case the document transmits information about itself (Napoleon's hat, a unique meteorite). It is, therefore, an 'auto-document'. … In the second case it is matter of a specimen: an anonymous Egyptian mummy, a gorilla in a cage, a piece of rock crystal.

> Un "objet unique" ou membre d'une collection de semblables. … Dans le premier cas le document transmet des renseignements sur lui-même (chapeau de Napoléon, aérolithe singulier). C'est alors un "auto-document." Dans le second cas il s'agit d'un échantillon : une momie anonyme d'Egypte, un gorille dans une cage, un morceau de spath. (Pagès, 1948, p. 60.)

> Pagès' refers to particulars as "autodocuments" on the grounds that, unlike specimens, they reveal only information about themselves, not about any other object or group of objects. Autodocuments achieve this only through the assignment of representations of its properties. (... "moyennant l'adjonction de symboles verbaux ou plus élaborés … qui le relient à des ensembles symboliques différents.") He does not develop this distinction within this article, nor, it seems, later, but it has significant consequences for both documentation and ontology. We can add, for example, that any material object can be regarded as a particular *or* as a specimen. It is our choice to view the gorilla as an individual or as a specimen. The distinction between particulars and specimens resembles the better known distinctions between type and token or individual and kind, where the tokens (individual instances) are indistinguishable in logic. Real world specimens may share a property but may otherwise be quite different. Some fifty years later, the roles and powers of "particulars" has become of interest in the philosophy of science (de Fremery & Buckland, 2022; Lowe, 2006).

In documentation, the distinction between particulars and specimens can be combined with the distinction between material objects and their properties:

1. Physical attributes, "brute facts." For example, for books, this would include the title as printed, the author's name as given, the literal text, height, pages, binding, and other objective characteristics.

2. Any imaginable characteristics other than material properties, e.g., ownership, topics, point of view, copyright status, genre, and the language of the text.

These two distinctions provides a useful basis framework for the analysis of bibliographic searches (Buckland, forthcoming). See Figure 2.

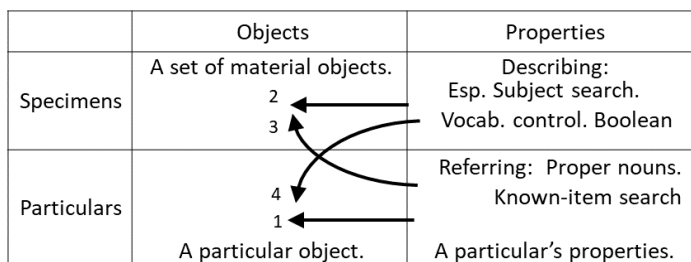|	Objects	Properties
Specimens	A set of material objects. 2 3	Describing: Esp. Subject search. Vocab. control. Boolean
Particulars	4 1 A particular object.	Referring: Proper nouns. Known-item search A particular's properties.

Figure 2. A framework for the analysis of searches: 1. Known item search; 2. Subject search; 3. Via known item to a set; and 4. Via a set to a known item. (Based on Buckland, forthcoming).

Sources for Pagès

Introductions to Robert Pagès' life and work are provided by Le Deuff (2018), Demailly (1992, 1993), and Hommage (2009). For his political activities see Enckel (2020).

Pagès wrote or co-authored over 300 texts, but the great majority were unpublished typescripts, and, unfortunately, he did not write a synthesis of his ideas. Noteworthy non-fiction includes *Itinéraire du seul; essai* (1962) on how we make sense, and La méditation sauvage (1977), on meditation. Fictional books include *L'Exigence, roman* (1964), about a midlife crisis and a guru; *L'ordre du silence, de Gurdjieff à Melchisédech* (1980), about meditation; and *L'Homme frontière* (1981), a futurist utopian fiction. For a checklist of his writings see Buckland (2022). Most of his unpublished writings are preserved among the collection of his papers in the Fonds Robert Pagès at the Bibliothèque Henri Piéron, Université Paris Descartes in Boulogne-Billancourt http://www.calames.abes.fr/pub/#details?id=FileId-2950.

Conclusion

After his intense engagement with documentation in the late 1940s Pagès turned increasingly to social psychology. Nevertheless, Suzanne Briet was right: The writings of Robert Pagès are worth revisiting. In particular his penetrating analysis of documentation and culture remains relevant and fertile.

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