7
Telling materials

Mike Crang

Introduction

In Part II of this book you have been concerned with field*work* but now you are ready to move on and address what to do with material you have created out in the field. The way this chapter will approach this is by thinking about the actions involved in analysis: the stage when you make sense out of the material you have so painstakingly gathered. However, I am not going to present a discussion of the criteria of a 'good' or 'valid' analysis, since there are many types of epistemological theory that underlie different sorts of analysis. That is, there are theories about how we know what we can claim to know, about how we judge truth claims and assess the reliability or validity of our work. The sorts of claim you can then make and the type of analysis needed are thus going to vary according to your approach, your questions and hence the data, and the sorts of answer, you need. So rather than work through a list of philosophies and their assumptions about validity, this chapter will focus on the actual activity of analysis, as a material process, an idea we will come back to shortly in the next section. When we write research proposals and timetables we often pencil some period for 'analysis of data'. This chapter is going to unpack this process, first by suggesting that analysis is a messier business than this suggests and, secondly, by highlighting the tangible processes of interpretation.

There is a certain moment of pleasure that often occurs in projects when we complete fieldwork and with satisfaction look at the mass of accumulated materials – be they questionnaires or field notes, tape or transcripts, copied documents, pictures or whatever – and think of what we have achieved. This is the lull before the storm, the moment before a rising anxiety starts tapping on our shoulders (well, it does mine anyway) and asks what are we now to do with all this stuff. How are we to turn this mass of material into some cogent, hopefully illuminating, maybe even impressive, 'findings'? And, of course, we realize the one thing they are not is findings – findings, like questions, require work. It is better to think that through analysis we make interpretations, not find answers.

The process I am going to discuss is one of producing order out of our materials, of making sense. And this making sense is a creative process.

Now this is not to say that our materials are in total chaos beforehand, as often quite the contrary is true; our materials are structured by our questions, our methods, by our respondents, by external forces, say in official documents, and so on. Yet, to make them work for us, we have to reconfigure them, perhaps decontextualize then recontextualize different parts to make them say new things.

This chapter is structured around some of the key tensions in this process of disciplining our material, of creating order from our work and sustaining that order. The next section offers a way into these tensions by considering what counts as analysis. Then we shall look at the way most accounts see order emerging from data and suggest that some sort of 'natural order' does not automatically flow from the materials you have gathered. We move on to consider the disciplining of materials, by looking at pre-existing order and disorder in our material using an example of archival work. In the following section we offer an alternative vision from Walter Benjamin, who in many ways sought to present disorder as a finding, or to reveal the fragmentary nature of order. We then present a critical look at how fragments are made into smoother wholes through the work of Michel de Certeau. The aim is to think about the implications of how we shape our material. This is not, then, about assessing the limits or applicability here of different analytical techniques, but rather the generic processes of analysis. The chapter is going to suggest that this is a creative process of producing meaning, and one where we need to be clear about what is involved in producing order. One outcome of this analysis of 'analysis' is to suggest that thinking and analysis are not abstract processes or theoretical models or rules that occur purely in our heads, but involve the manipulation and orchestration of a range of materials that occur in specific places. It suggests that we need to start with the actual stuff of our interpretations, in terms of how we get to grips with (literally and figuratively) all the material we so diligently made in the field.

What counts as analysis?

If for a moment you do not believe that the issues of how you store, write down and recompose material have an impact, then just imagine doing all your interpretation in your head, as though you were forbidden any notes. Imagine trying to communicate your ideas without writing or drawing at all. So if we acknowledge that the techniques of writing, storing and moving information play a role in 'processing' our material, it seems beholden upon us to understand what role they play. Now with statistics there are well-worn rules, but my aim here is to think how we get to the stage of statistics or of a final report. Just cast your eye over an imaginary desk: scattered about are index cards – perhaps with just a title of a work, perhaps quotes – elsewhere are long-hand notes from a library book on file paper, perhaps photocopies marked up with coloured pens, the odd post-it

note sticking from a book to mark a key passage, all burying a well-worn and intermittently legible field diary. Let me dramatize it further, let us suppose we are part of a team. Then we have notes to other members, notes from other members and photocopies with their red biro, overlain by our fluorescent highlighter. What the stuff on our desk and our fellow team-members seem to be asking is: 'What counts as "**analysis**"?'

analysis

We might begin our answer by suggesting that these material objects are the means through which ideas are bandied about – between team members most obviously but even just sustaining our 'internal' dialogue. In fact if we look at how 'information' has been defined, we can see that it is linked to a range of specific material practices (Nunberg, 1997). Thus for example, when we ask each other whether we have got sufficient data, or in a research proposal we talk of information, what we are actually referring to are specific forms of acceptable or even permissible data. Thus conversations, our memory of the weather, often our emotions, or even gossip we hear, tend not to be counted as information or data. However, by following certain rules of analysis, say, by putting those observations in a field diary (bound between covers or maybe just floating on bits of paper) or when interviews become tapes, which in turn become transcripts, they become sanctified as information: they become data. To this way of thinking about analysis, then, what counts is clear-cut. Yet, this approach tends not to recognize the range of materials from which ideas may emerge. Some pieces of paper are indeed clearly formal records or 'calculations', but others might be, say, a scribbled note in a margin 'compare this idea with X', some bits of paper might be laser-printed, and some even with formal headings and citations, but others may be much more informal, or a formal record might be annotated. There is, then, a need to think about the variations and types of material used in paper work and what each signifies – the informality of a post-it note, the finality of a signed thesis for submission (Pellegram, 1998). Typically, then, if we are to follow this approach further, analysis tends to be a progression from 'data' through informal notes to more and more formal outputs, the shape of which will be taken up in the next chapter. Yet, what gets dignified with being 'data' is itself an issue worth reflecting on for, as we have seen, the work of the field itself transforms material into 'useful' (to us) information. So our material has already begun to be shaped prior to analysis. Our analysis then goes on by phases, becoming more and more formal outputs. If we recognize this prior stage, then we should question accounts that divide research into discrete 'theory', 'empirical' and 'analytical' sections – as though we might say 'and now the analysis bit'. Instead, we might think of the analytical approaches as activities, as the practice of weaving the material into a text.

What this implies is a set of fuzzy rather than clear-cut boundaries around our 'analysis' as a stage in the research project. So let's keep thinking of our papers, notebooks with more or less fastidious field notes and jottings, possibly some newspaper cuttings, maybe our notes on some

archival sources. All these we might call data (though we might indeed want to tidy them up before suggesting they were really ready to stand up to scrutiny as data). Moreover, such tidied notes may well already contain our reflections, either explicitly or implicitly, for instance in our decisions on what is worth including or discarding, and quite probably then our thinking through of the questions we are posing. Our notes thus bear traces of our starting to recompose them. We may well then have notes specifically thinking through material, specifically notes on reflections. Now, this suggests a different approach to analysis, one that has been called '**grounded theory**' (Strauss, 1987). This approach encourages us to keep writing these so-called theoretical memos as we transcribe and work to code and mark up materials. They are designed as an aide to our evolving thought; so we do not forget ideas that seemed important and we can develop them systematically.

grounded theory

Let's move this on a stage and suppose these notes and materials begin to be put together into drafts, by taking, say, lots of informant quotes on a topic, some bits of literature, all the time trying to develop an argument. If you are like me, then, you will have one go, look at it with disgust and move it all around. If you are part of a team, like me, other people will make suggestions and more or less helpful comments. What we are doing is reworking, re-working (and re-re-working) drafts. Analysis is not simply an issue of developing an idea and writing it up. Rather, it is thinking by writing that tends to reveal the flaws, the contradictions in our ideas, forcing us to look, to analyse in different ways and rethink. The question that quickly emerges is how on earth are we meant to separate 'analysis' from 'writing' – a question I often pose to students who say they plan to finish their analysis before they 'write up'. And this blurring of clearly marked sections in the interpretative process has grown greater with the advent of word-processors. As Jacques Derrida notes, this has enabled a new rhythm to working through materials:

> With the computer, everything is so quick and easy, one is led to believe that revision could go on indefinitely. An interminable revision, an infinite analysis is already signalled, held in reserve as it were. . . . Before crossings out and superimposed corrections left something like a scar on the paper or a visible image in the memory. There was a resistance of time, a thickness in the duration of the crossing out. (Derrida, 1999, p.8)

There is now an immediacy, a de-distancing, that brings the objective text closer to us yet at the same time makes it somehow 'weightless'. It seems we can play with meanings almost endlessly, composing and recomposing our material. With echoes of Chapter 2, this seems a state of boundless play, in one sense exhilarating, yet also scaring and debilitating in equal measure, since after a while it can be quite difficult to recall whether something occurred to you, when it occurred and how the idea developed and, amid all these proliferating versions and permutations, we

must eventually send one final (at least for now) interpretation out into the world. In fact one of the temptations of analysis is just that: to keep playing around, to keep seeing if something else better might be done, if more might not be included, if only there was a little more time. But whether it be writing a chapter for a book, or a dissertation, eventually time pressures tend to push to a closure, however provisional, however many holes we think may still be lurking in our interpretation.

Analysis as building theory

As the previous section suggests, analysis depends on a variety of things and, as the stress on re-reworking drafts emphasizes, a natural order does not just leap out of the material. This section is going to develop our discussion of analysis by looking at thinking through some qualitative materials. And to ensure that I do not make this into just a token or a foil for some later 'cleverer' approaches, I am going to use research I have actually done to exemplify this. What I am going to try to illustrate is the effort and dynamics it takes to produce – what I at least like to think was – a coherent account from materials. The issues I will be flagging are not to do with either the mechanics or straight epistemology but with a range of choices a researcher faces about how they shape the material. In later sections I will suggest some alternative strategies to the ones I used on this occasion.

So let us envisage a researcher sitting at a desk. This person has been doing fieldwork. He/she has, in fact, been told that this stage is complete and it is time to move on to 'analysis'. He/she might be quite relieved that someone else is telling him/her to do this. For this part of his/her research, he/she is staring at something like 400 pages of transcript, two field notebooks, some notes from newspapers and observation records (oh, and an archive of some 5,000 photographs, but that topic is for the next section). The pile on the desk has a comforting solidity, neatly (and laboriously) transcribed and numbered by line, labelled by source. Yet it also has to be made into something that will justify the project to both academics *and* the respondents. And, as will be discussed in Chapter 9, the analysis can be driven by, in this case, two divergent audiences and in fact two products will come from this analysis – an academic piece and a piece to return to informants. More immediately, let us suppose we have been reading something on grounded theory as a style of analysis (for example, Strauss, 1987, or for my own summary of the approach adopted, see Crang, 1997, 2001).

We thus set out to read our materials intensely, working through them line by line, writing notes to ourselves in margins, on cards and so on, as we develop a set of categories about what was said, categories that form the building-blocks of an interpretation. Here I want to focus upon a couple of issues in the background of this process. First, one of 'where do

the categories come from?' and secondly, 'what we do with them?' The first is something of a vexed issue, with Strauss pushing a process of constant comparison, where we develop categories to describe parts of our materials and then test them to see if they hold water. Thus we look at the data, develop an idea and see if it holds true – hence the idea of 'grounded theory'. This is somewhere between deduction – testing a previously formed question – and 'abduction'. The latter is the term used by the philosopher C.S. Peirce, for developing knowledge where we are not trying to falsify hypotheses, but to develop plausible explanations through the data, to examine which ones are worth following up – what in Chapter 1 we saw discussed as the way in which we pose questions that anticipate answers. Well here, too, we are posing questions of our data that may lead us down different paths. This runs counter to what others claim should be nearer induction, where we let our categories form through the data and we do not impose our ideas upon it. This is a vexed issue. Indeed, the first book defining 'grounded theory' was written by Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser (1967) who later parted company over which way to lean, with Glaser rejecting 'forcing' our concepts on to the data. The issue here is very much whether, or how far, the analytic framework we develop should come from our agenda or emerge from our materials. For our researcher this issue is compounded by the fact that respondents really wanted to see just what they said, never mind some university-type's ideas; while for the academy a different set of rules and audience expectations tend to dominate. So the ethical issues raised by Nigel Thrift in Chapter 6 are not confined to the field and they are present in our analysis as we think about our responsibilities in relation to people with whom we worked – to ask what information different people want, and possibly whether some information may harm the interests of some people.

So far we have really been discussing the basic blocks of analysis, and we now have to think how they are put together. So the next step is to think through the relationships between these blocks. One obvious pattern is categories and subcategories, and then sets of continuums and oppositions – so some categories grade across from one to another, others indicate opposite sentiments, say. So we think, we work, we sift the ideas as we move large number of bits of paper or text around. If we are using software to do this on screen then the limits to categorizing and recategorizing are fewer, which is both liberating and tormenting. In the end, however, something must be produced. So our researcher begins to put related categories together and try to string an argument across them. One approach is to build directly out of the categories we have used to manage our data. This results in collating relevant material into a series of subheadings based on our categories that form the thematic parts of our analysis. Our researcher puts all this together and produces a document of some 80,000 words. It quickly becomes apparent that there is a need both to select among the material and also to transform the categories into a linear argument. Sometimes it is easy, for example when one group of

material leads into another, but inevitably we end up selecting which bits follow which and which bits are important.

So, as in Chapter 1, which spoke of Rorty and pragmatism, analysis is not just holding up a mirror to give a 'true picture', but a practical action of describing and relating things to answer specific needs and questions. And so the crux of analysis becomes transforming these chunks and bits of material – some empirical, some theoretical – into a plausible and persuasive whole. Having broken down our field data into topic-based 'chunks' or fragments, they get recontextualized and rebuilt into an interpretation. In other words, this process of analysis works by taking an existing pattern of material and breaking it down, and then recomposing a new one. I want to look at this recontextualizing in a little more detail, drawing upon work in archives.

Analysis as disciplining material

The sense of contexts and relationships between bits of information can be examined a little more clearly if we use literature that thinks about archives – both as an empirical source and as a scholarly practice. You will recall that confronting the researcher are not only piles of notes but some 5,000 pictures, all archived, and many now collected and published. The question of analysis does not just mean looking to see what is in the pictures, but rather to ask questions of *why* pictures are included or excluded from the archive, *why* that one is chosen to be put next to another, *why* one is published, in what forum, and so forth. Historical researchers have thus argued that studying collections means we end up studying how they label and organize the world. Allan Sekula has pointed out that this tends to mean creating relationships of equivalence by reducing knowledge to bits of commensurable information or, as Pinney put it, the catalogue is a 'linguistic grid enmeshing otherwise volatile images' (cited in Rose, 2000, p.559). As Gillian Rose has argued, we need to think rather carefully about how cataloguing and archiving work is used to frame and discipline material, with the result that each document is classified under a specific scheme, is made uniform and thus into a coherent collection. Documents and materials, which outside the archive had one set of meanings, are invested with new ones and are now transformed within it. Rose (2000) argues that we need to see the **archive** as very much one of the areas where knowledge is shaped, but that the 'disciplining' of knowledge through the collection's categories does not always succeed since, for instance, the presence of the researcher with his/her own questions, background and knowledge may disrupt the neat categories. She suggests that analysis thus combines three sets of orders: that of the archive itself; the visual and spatial resources of its contents (the actual pictures held in it); and the desires and imperatives of the researcher. Put together,

archive

this suggests that the meaning we gain from material in an archive exceeds its classifications (Rose, 2000, p.567).

Let us take the account of Alice Kaplan (1990) working in Parisian archives to illustrate the way in which the division of data and ideas can be over-stated, with archives being all too glibly labelled as 'data' over and against a cerebral, '**speculative theory**' (1990, p.104), and how ideas, circumstance and theory come together. She notes that the tendency is to write up what you found, what you concluded, and not the processes in between – of finding and thinking. The result tends to be a suppression of the actual practices of thinking, which again leaves data and conclusions seemingly sharply divided. This tends to take out what Chapter 1 used Rorty to describe – the fragility and contingency of our ideas. Hence, we tend to edit out how our ideas evolved in non-linear fashions, since to proceed in this way would 'not only gum up the narrative, it would threaten its credibility, by showing on what thin strands of coincidence, accident, or on what unfair forms of friendship, ownership, [and] geographical proximity, the discoveries were made' (Kaplan, 1990, p.104). So archives are not just about disciplining and stratifying meanings, they are places where connections – between ideas, different kinds of facts and emotions – are made. In some sense the archives are anti-disciplinary places where tracking down materials leads to surprising connections, new sources in obscure locations, even for Kaplan. Midnight walks retracing the steps of a writer on Montmartre, which gave her new insights on her subject's outlook, led Kaplan into a maze of frustrations and sudden elations as her ideas developed. Kaplan concludes that the 'archive is constituted by these errors, these pieces out of place, which are then reintegrated into a story of some kind . . . [these incidents] are fragile but necessary contingent ingredients to archival work' (1990, p.115). She suggests that developing ideas is not separate from the archive, nor is it entirely a disciplined process, but one that starts connecting diverging elements. The issue for us here is to see that in all our work, however contemporary, in our offices, files and studies, we to tend to be producing archives, albeit less systematically and more chaotically than official ones. We, too, are collating documents, taking and transforming them, reordering them in our new classification schemes, taking 'ownership' of them and making them speak to each other in new relationships.

speculative theory

Analysis as assemblage, ideas as montage

So how might we see this leading to different ways of working, different ways of making sense of the world? Well one approach is to think about us writing through materials – both theoretical and empirical. Let us think how, through the course of a research project, you have developed sets of notes – maybe filed on a computer, maybe on A4 sheets, maybe on cards, annotating books and papers you have read. From these you are going to

try to stitch together an argument and an account about the topic you have studied. Let's look at an example of this sort of process.

The theorist Walter Benjamin worked in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s and is often associated with the Marxist Frankfurt School of critical theory, though he was never formally a member of it. Benjamin was a voracious reader of theory, journalism and historical documents – indeed almost anything became 'data' for his project on reconceptualizing urbanism. Benjamin offers us an example of interpretation pursued almost entirely through notions of conjunction and recontextualization, arguing that it was by taking what seemed common and unexceptional and putting it in a new context – alongside other unremarkable events and information – that you could reveal previously hidden dynamics. He spent considerable amounts of time working through the relationships between finding and making order, as well as the techniques of representing his ideas. His working method was to file items from a vast variety of sources in different registers (called *Konvolut*). Each responded not to a 'source type' but rather to a theme of analysis. He likened his work to that of a collector because for him the key element of his work was not finding new material (though he researched archives tirelessly) but its transformation back in the 'cabinet': 'The true method of making things present is to represent them in our space (not represent ourselves in their space)' (Benjamin, 1999, p.206, H2, 3). That is, he argues, we reconfigure things, materials from their original contexts and recontextualize them in new relationships and thereby produce insights. This transformation is not 'distancing' data from the field but creating it afresh. He describes, perhaps with too much relish, the 'dark pleasures of discovery' (Benjamin, 1979, p.314), working in the archives, suggesting that these delights are not derived from specific pieces of information, but are very much created through the process of finding the archival materials which become invested with meaning and gain significance through being seen in a new light. As Benjamin put it, facts become significant 'posthumously, as it were. . . . A historian who takes this as his [*sic*] point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like beads of a rosary. Instead he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one' (1973b, p.255).

Benjamin thus argued that the materials developed meaning only in the tension between their own framework of intelligibility and that brought by the researcher. In other words, each researcher at different periods, with different questions, and working in different intellectual and historical contexts, makes something different out of the same document or piece of information. Benjamin (1979) focused upon the way in which information moved through contexts and suggested that we can think of all our reading and work through this lens, so that even scholarly books, what we may think of as final products of research, are just a momentary pause in an endless flow. The books are just an in-between stage, produced from the author's collection of note files and waiting to be transformed into some future reader's collection of notes. As he put it:

> The card index marks the conquest of three-dimensional writing, and so presents an astonishing counterpoint to the three-dimensionality of script in its original form as rune or knot notation. And today the book is already, as the present mode of scholarly production demonstrates, an outdated mediation between two different filing systems. For everything that matters is to be found in the card box of the researcher who wrote it, and the scholar studying it assimilates it into his own card index. (Benjamin, 1979, p.62)

linear writing style

Here, then, he highlights both the sense of continual translation and transformation of meaning, but also a sense of the multidirectional, complex linkages that he felt were inhibited by a **linear writing style**. Benjamin pushed a writing practice that sought to engage with what he saw as a fragmented and objectified world by using material in the same style – through fragments and moments. What makes him interesting for us is that he saw this as necessitating a break from linear styles of configuring arguments. That linearity he saw as imposing a structure necessitated by the conventions of books on to material that was linked in more complex, multidirectional ways. Benjamin thus highlights a moment of tension in research felt by many of us when we have to try to push our ideas into a linear argument. His response was that instead of building a linear argument, he would work through images of juxtaposition and collage that would alter the meaning of each fragment and that this procedure would make new truths erupt, and, he hoped, disrupt the *status quo*, from the conjunctures and disjunctures between elements. Notably he refuses to prioritize either archive or interpreter: 'It isn't that the past casts its light on the present or that what is present casts its light on what is past; rather an image is that in which the Then and the Now come together in a constellation like a flash of lightning' (cited in Smith, 1989, p.50). Thus, for instance, he would present the latest shopping fad, next to what seemed a dowdy and obsolescent product to point out that both had made the same promise. It was a 'method [that] created ''dialectical images'' in which the old-fashioned, undesirable, suddenly appeared current, or the new, desired suddenly appeared as a repetition of the same' (Buck-Morss, 1986, p.100). The dialectical image sought to use contrast and comparison between things that were normally thought of as opposites (if put together at all) – the clashing and jarring of them would, he hoped, spark insights. Thus, Buck-Morss argues, he deploys historical material on prostitution alongside material on a rising consumer society to suggest how people are becoming commodified. As Benjamin himself described this practice:

> Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them. (Benjamin, 1999, p.460, N1a, 8)

Given the period of the 1920s, Benjamin's scholarly thinking was linked to the then emergent aesthetic practice of surrealism and collage. We might think of the latter, where we have fragments of one material, from one context, taken and reused in another, with the effect of creating a new meaning, and Benjamin spent a lot of time exploring devices such as allegory as interpretative strategies. The task of analysing the city – Benjamin's project – becomes one of finding a way of putting together the material to express the urban reality.

Benjamin thus did not just think through a three-dimensional tangle of relationships, he also tried to perform it in his text. The method of collage was meant not just to discuss trends in the city, but to perform, exemplify and show the fragmented and disjunctural nature of that life, by not having theoretical approaches standing over, reflecting upon, the world but rather having ideas *emerge* from among and through the materials. Now this approach is not easy, nor is it always successful. Sometimes, it can become a surrender to the difficult and complex nature of our material, and sometimes it can be mistakenly taken as an abdication of the researcher's role in shaping the material. Benjamin, however, comes close to suggesting that shaping and juxtaposing is all the researcher really does. This is not without problems, since it means there is very little explication (as he said above: say nothing, only show), very little help for the reader who is meant to pick out the meaning for him/herself. Famously, Benjamin's friend, the critical theorist Theodor Adorno, accused his style of standing at the crossroads of positivism and mysticism, risking just reproducing empirical data in the hope of producing a revelation for the reader. But that was very much Benjamin's point – that the city did combine hard-edged capitalism along with almost mystical dreams and desires pushed by advertising. In this sense Benjamin is trying to find a mode of representation and analysis that fits his ontology – one that, as was noted in Chapter 5, allows the world to impact on our mode of analysis. The danger with Benjamin's method of piling up the *actualité* of experience and trying to get ideas to speak through the fragments is that it can come dangerously close to simply being an empirical assemblage. But it was Benjamin's answer to balancing theoretical clarity with empirical complexity, a dilemma with the twin dangers of surrendering to the '*mêlée*' or forcing things into too simple a framework. So, thinking through Benjamin is *not* to say 'anything goes'. Benjamin himself rather (un)helpfully pointed out that there is all the difference in the world between a confused presentation and the presentation of confusion.

So how does Benjamin help us think through research? Well, he offers a sense that the meaning of the materials we develop may burst out of pre-existing frameworks, that novelty may emerge through analysis, rather than it being about working out prior theories or prepared explanations. His analytical practice of using collage breaks down the divisions of concepts and materials to suggest that we create ideas from the juxta-position of very different types of materials, producing new interpretations

between academic sources, observations, archives, documents and so on. He does not privilege either the 'empirical' or the 'theoretical' side of the material that is involved in analysis. In this sense he begins to suggest our analysis is crowded with materials, jostling together and he suggests we need to think about the multiple interrelationships of material, rather than seeing ideas emerging in some straightforward sequence from question, to field, to data, to written account.

Analysis as making narratives and coherent stories

Benjamin highlights the importance of how we order our concepts and ideas and the relationship of that ordering to our analysis. We have seen that he was unhappy with linear presentations, preferring instead a collage where elements related in multiple directions rather than just in sequence. One way of developing this notion of the importance of ordering to analysis, then, is to think of the 'fictive' quality of our work. Using this term about, say, history has been very provocative, since we normally set up 'factual', scientific or accurate accounts against 'works of fiction' which are implied to be imaginative, creative and simply not reflecting reality. Yet, we have seen in Chapter 1, and in this chapter, that there is not a 'mirror' on reality and that our analysis strives towards making a plausible account. So I am using the term to stress that all accounts are made, that fabrication is not a synonym for 'falsehood' but a process of constructing things. The best 'scientific' accounts involve imagination, artistry and creativity and all accounts involve the hard graft of tying elements together. What differs are the criteria by which differing audiences may judge an interpretation's success or validity – as we shall see in Chapter 9.

To give this some concrete substance, let us follow Michel de Certeau's (1986) study of the travel-writing of Jules Verne and his critique of 'those languages which deny their status as fictions in order to imply (or make one believe) that they speak of the real' (de Certeau, 1986, p.28). He argues that the effect of texts is to regulate and distribute places, through a **doubled narrative** – that is, they narrate narration – or, for our purposes, the story of our research frames the evidence we use. The notion of a doubled narrative needs some unpacking. Thus in Chapter 1 we saw our questions begin to pre-empt our data, or in this chapter, as Benjamin would have it, our way of finding information is perhaps as important as what is found. In other words, the events and elements of our analysis are framed by the structure, and made into interpretable instances in the light of the process, of research itself. He suggests that our materials function as evidence only because they are bound this way into a narrative. It is a doubled narrative since it gives meaning to the things it claims are evidence of its truthfulness. Applying this to the process of research, de Certeau argues that the structure that gives shape to the analysis is one of going out and into the

doubled narrative

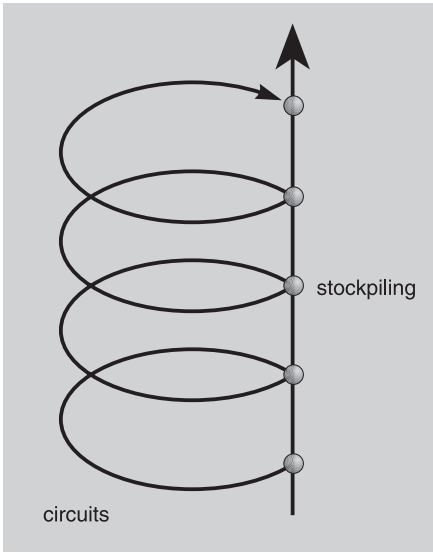

Figure 7.1
Source: de Certeau, 1986, p.146

world, then returning home with material that is transformed into data by being brought home. This is illustrated in Figure 7.1.

In Figure 7.1 de Certeau shows a series of loops coming from a home base and out into the field. He argues that interpretation is about turning our travels to and from the field into a **stockpile of knowledge**, and he would suggest capitalizing on it, in terms of deriving status, authority and academic qualifications from it. In other words, he sees analysis as, in part, being about turning experience '*out there*' into knowledge '*back here*' that brings with it some measure of power and prestige, echoing what in Chapter 5 was called the 'squirrel–acorn' sense of collecting and hoarding data. Indeed, de Certeau goes so far as to call it 'an accumulatory economy' and sees the research 'narrative as the Occidental capitalization of knowledge' (de Certeau, 1986). The accumulatory pattern of this is clear in Figure 7.1, as each journey returns to the place of writing and re-inscribes the centrality of the centre of calculation and inscription.

stockpile of knowledge

What this approach adds to the previous chapters is the suggestion that when we separate finding knowledge and building upon it, this separation is achieved by denying how analysis creates its own evidence through denying the twofold narrative of analysis. So in his study of Jules Verne's stories, he points out that they are punctuated by a structure of setting out, having an adventure and returning to base to make sense of it all. It is perhaps significant that the base is in the library of the fictional *Nautilus*. That is, the economy is one of stockpiling and building at the place where there is a cyclic return to the story's place of production. The accumulation consists of building these disparate elements into a coherent stock of knowledge. He sees this working by binding together the elements to make a linear progressive line out of a series of circles (see Figure 7.2).

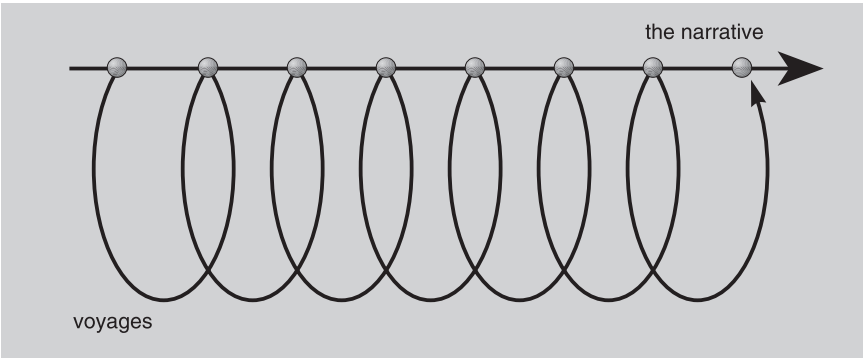

Figure 7.2
Source: de Certeau, 1986, p.146

Here the stockpiling of 'data' at home has to be transformed into an argument or explanation, linking together material derived at different points in the research process. So there is a tension between thinking and production composed of a series of episodic circuits and the need for a plot giving a forward moving account.

De Certeau argues that this structure of text and data is pervasive not just in 'fiction' but in how we accumulate and deploy evidence in general. But what he suggests we do is to look at the obverse of this, like looking at the photographic negative of this process, so that instead of seeing a solid accumulation de Certeau sees a series of gaps. Thus de Certeau asks the disarmingly simple questions: why is there more than one circuit? Why does the evidence in the first not prove the case? There is, he says, a moment at the end of each of these cycles where the account seems to come up short, to not really prove the case, where it says 'but that is not quite it' – and thus it commits to a new gathering of material. The issue he points us towards is whether any amount of data gathering can finally answer a question, or whether our research journey always stops short of such a final 'proof'. At a practical level this may well point to a simple truth that the number of circuits tends to reflect less an inherent logic of evidence and proof and more an arbitrary point where we have to stop – for a deadline set by timetables, funding, examiners, or even publishers. More philosophically, de Certeau suggests the text is not producing solid proof, piling arguments and evidence, but is what he terms a 'piling up of insufficiencies', putting together things that do not in themselves offer conclusive proof – or, we might say, stringing together a series of gaps or holes.

The structure of many academic texts is thus a repetitive going out and coming back, making the world into a story and accumulating intellectual capital all the while. To elaborate, we might note that de Certeau points out that Verne's books were based on the work of a researcher, called Marcel, hired by Verne, who worked in libraries building up material for the travel stories. He suggests this is a narrative capitalization of citation, where the process of interpretation conscripts past knowledge to the current project, meaning that:

> . . . the narrative displays a multiplication of trajectories, which unfurl an earlier writing in space, and of documents, which bury one past beneath displacements of location. But all of this occurs in the same place, in a book, or rather collection of books, each of which, due to its particular geography, is different from the preceding one, in other words stands *beside* the other, yet nevertheless repeats the same depth effect by placing itself *above* or *below* the other. (de Certeau, 1986, p.140, emphasis in original)

There is an unfurling sequence of writing and voyaging where both Marcel and Verne labour on texts only to bury them as 'foundational' strata in their own. It is this creation of foundations that de Certeau highlights and problematizes. An example is how we bring in previous stories through citations, leaning our work on someone else's. The implication is that since they said something we may take it as proven and as a simple building block, as foundations from which to argue. But he argues that none of them necessarily proves anything more than any other. Instead we might see these stories as alongside each, rather than with some relationship of verticality, or, after de Certeau, see them not as accumulating layers but as an accumulation of **fragments** or ruins from previous work – in other words, a piling up of incomplete parts – and it is the incompleteness that induces motion to the texts, as we strive to think what might add completeness. One implication of this is that a quest for a final answer inevitably fails. Our work may stop but there are always gaps and deficiencies. Not because we have failed to do things properly, but because the structure of interpretation is made up of gaps. We could always follow up one more reference in the back of a source, and in that we could find another, and another; one more field site might just add something to support an idea, but would also inevitably bring its own issues and conundrums that might be tested only by another site. In other words, our interpretation is always shifting, contestable and more or less provisional, so that the decision when it stops is more one of pragmatics than completeness. Inescapably one text leans on a previous one which in turn leans on a previous one, citation upon citation, ruins within ruins. De Certeau suggests some recognition of this fragility of interpretation. But he also cautions that interpretation has often been a 'violent' process where parts of the world are cajoled and reordered, made to speak to new purposes for our work. This reshaping is constructive, but it also tears apart previous orders. Or as de Certeau puts it:

fragments

> More exactly that speech [from the informant] only appears in the text in a fragmented, wounded state. It is present within it as a 'ruin'. In this undone speech, split apart by forgetting and interpretation, 'altered' in dialogic combat, is the precondition of the writing it in turn supports. (de Certeau, 1986, p.78)

The subjects of our work reappear as ghosts – haunting it – or as ruins and relics. They push us to write, they authorize our interpretation but the

price is that they are inevitably altered – we interpret in their name but their voice is lost. De Certeau argues that our analysis does not make the field present, but rather fundamentally it is about dividing us off from it. This philosophical perspective thus outlines a scepticism that our concepts will ever match up to reality and suggests that a deep and inevitable rift exists between them. Logically, it also leads to scepticism about claims to interpretations being complete and self-sufficient, since it sees them composed of bits taken from elsewhere – be that the field, the archive or the library. It thus suggests interpretation is incapable of achieving '**closure**' or, as it is often put in the literature, it rejects '**totalization**', where an interpretation purports fully to explain events.

closure
totalization

De Certeau thus draws our attention to what he sees as a problematic creation of what he calls a '**logic of the same**', or a **monologic** account (that is, all in 'one voice' or from one perspective). He suggests our accounts are shot through with voices from absent others, producing **heterologic** accounts. Using his work we might look more critically at the place of knowledge as making certain things legible – at the expense of silencing others. As he put it, 'it would be wrong to think that these tools are neutral, or their gaze inert: nothing gives itself up, everything has to be seized, and the same interpretive violence can either create or destroy' (de Certeau, 1986, p.135). He is critical of the way in which, what he calls 'proper' places of knowledge, try to make the world transparent by fixing things in an analytic grid. He argues that actually the material always exceeds this grid. He also looks carefully at this 'place' as being one where we can accumulate knowledge by subjecting it all to the same interpretation. Instead he sees the process as more itinerant, with us, the researchers, thinking through different material in different places, in libraries, in the field, with a sort of textual and theoretical voyaging that complements empirical travels and travails. As he argues:

logic of the same;
monologic
heterologic

> . . . when someone departs the security of being there together . . . another time begins, made of other sorts of excursions – more secret, more abstract or 'intellectual' as one might say. These are the traces of things we learn to seek through rational and 'academic' paths, but in fact they cannot be separated from chance, from fortuitous encounters, from a kind of knowing astonishment. (de Certeau, cited in Terdiman, 1992, p.2)

De Certeau thus provides a critical eye upon interpretation in several ways. First, he points to the imposition of order as quite often a violent act through which the interpreter silences others. Secondly, he does this by linking notions of stockpiling knowledge with linear narratives. Instead he turns to narrative to undo these stockpiles, to suggest they are full of holes, and the larger the pile, the more holes. He is arguing that this claim in interpretation to produce evidence is actually an artefact of our accounts. The value placed on the evidence comes from the interpretation, and is not inherent in the data. More positively, he picks up on the notions of

transformation to suggest we should think of our work not as a bringing together, not as placing knowledge in the cabinet but as displacing it, not accumulating but dispersing. It is this, he suggests, that opens our accounts to multiple logics and plurality.

Conclusion

Overall, then, the theme here has been to think about philosophical materials as part of an activity – as a doing among our research, not as reflections standing over and above it. The process of analysis I have tried to stress is thus an active and material one, one that involves making connections – and divisions – and where material is combined, recombined, decontextualized and recontextualized. The tension I have been focusing upon is how we see order emerging and being created. Both Benjamin and de Certeau caution as to the violence and constrictions of interpretative frames. Both ask us to think about analysis as a process of translation and transformation, and I have tried to illustrate this in terms of processing qualitative data and working with archival material. I have tried to show that what happens in the filing-cabinet can have impacts not just in terms of constraining and ordering but also disrupting interpretations. The sudden and surprising connections of material that Benjamin foregrounds come from seeing interpretation as flowing through the movement of information in and out of archives, collections, on to our desks, into our notes and into our texts. De Certeau, meanwhile, points to the limits of analyses, and suggests that trying to impose too much solidity on our analyses is to risk imposing an over-coherent view of the world. Instead he suggests opening our accounts to reinstate the silences and gaps as ways of engaging with the field, to see ourselves as journeying through, rather than standing over, our material.

All these accounts ask us to think about the politics and ethics of ordering our accounts, to see that this process is often, perhaps inevitably, one where we balance disciplining our material with allowing it to develop. The tension and dilemma is, then, often to work through how much the material is in our voice, or how much we are having others speak through it – be they informants, other writers or theorists. The chapter has also tried to suggest that our materials speak back to us; they may resist our analyses; they may push us in new directions. Interpretation is often a process where we are not wholly in control. On the plus side there can be serendipitous discoveries; on the negative side there are ill-fitting elements. The aim here has been to suggest that the work of analysis – and it is work – is bringing things together in new ways. I have also tried to show that this does not start when you 'return from the field', nor stop when you start writing a final report. Rather, it is a process of transformation and connection that flows through from initial questions and on to writing a final product, a process which the following chapters take up.

Further reading

An excellent account of Benjamin's work is provided in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (MIT Press, 1989). On interpreting the city, see Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Polity Press, 1996) or, for a more general discussion, Gilloch's *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Polity Press, 2002). On Michel de Certeau, two good general guides with different takes on his work are Jeremy Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and Its Other* (Polity Press, 1995) and Ian Buchanan, *Michel de Certeau: Cultural Theorist* (Sage, 2000). My own preferred outline of his approach is in the introductory essay by Wlad Godzich, 'The further possibilities of knowledge', in de Certeau's *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Manchester University Press, 1986).