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FRANCESCA VIGO

STORIES THAT MATTER

*A socio-semiotic approach
to contemporary narratives
of migration*



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INTRODUCTION

This work stems both from a personal interest and from a professional commitment. Living in a place where migrants are not something you hear about in the news, but rather a part of your own daily life, and, being aware of the general confusion people who live elsewhere may experience about migration issues, I decided to describe such a cogent phenomenon from a ‘scientific’ point of view, that is a pure linguistic and semiotic perspective.

My professional commitments have also given me the chance to learn more about the issue, although in the restricted context of the Court. I worked as an interpreter and translator in some trials, where migrant smugglers were involved. I spent some time with them, waiting for the judge to come back or for the lawyers to discuss their proof of evidence, etc. During our *private* conversations, I learned a lot and, most of all, I understood how varied the situations were, how different was one story from the other. Thus, I realised that I (we) knew nothing about such an unknown wealth of narratives, and nothing about them in relation to the migrants’ origins, their lives, etc.

In that specific context, my insights were supported by one of the lawyers who maintained that the system did not offer adequate tools of analysis to judge those kinds of situations. They, as professionals, had to rely and ground their work on a legal system that was not entirely ready to deal with those situations. The lawyer’s argument was much more informed and complex, her basic claims were: we know too little to understand this situation fully and for this reason it is very difficult to judge since we run the risk of following some criteria that have not been devised for such a phenomenon.

There is a real lack of knowledge, and this is dangerous.

I started to reflect upon this lack of knowledge and upon the variety of the phenomenon from a more scientific point of view. For this reason, I worked side-by-side with cultural mediators in order to investigate some issues related to their interactions with the migrants. I also met various people from some associations working with migrants to verify how they approach the issue and what activities prove more useful as far as migrants’ integration is concerned, and I met migrants variously working in the city in order to listen to their stories and to collect their insights and comments.

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Ultimately, I focused on various aspects and among others, I realised that the media play a key role, or may play a crucial role, in reducing the lack of knowledge. They can reach a significant number of people and can increase their knowledge.

The investigation I am going to present in this book stems from the need to understand what is told about migrants and migration, or rather what people are told about them.

The topic is very wide and of an interdisciplinary nature. In this book, I will focus on what stories about migration are told on the Internet and in newspaper articles, because I firmly believe that some of the most common unfair behaviours towards migrants and migration stem from a lack of knowledge and a consequent very limited and partial understanding.

In the volume, two contrastive investigations will be presented. In the first introductory chapter, I will present my project and some preliminary methodological references to the works by Bednarek and Caple (2012), Lester (2013) and also Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED talk (2009).

The second chapter hosts the first part of my research which focuses on what stories images tell on the Internet. For the specific purpose of this part of my research, I collected images from *.it* and *.uk* domains only, and I compared them according to some analytical frameworks. After an initial quantitative comparison, I analysed some *prototypical* images following Bednarek and Caple's analytical taxonomy (2012) which I combined with Lester's preliminary steps (2013). From the third chapter onwards, my attention shifts to investigating what is recounted in newspaper articles, considering the prestigious role that the press plays in society (Rao 2010, Harper and Yantek 2003). For the analytical purpose of my research, I collected two corpora of newspaper articles from two Italian and two British newspapers, namely the Italian *Il Corriere della Sera* and *la Repubblica*, and the British *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*. Aiming at verifying whether news discourse is turning into a narrative, I decided to apply Propp's framework, which was originally devised to analyse folk tales, to newspaper articles. Drawing from the Russian anthropologist, I looked for initial situations, *dramatis personae* and functions adapting his analytical tools. To corroborate my claims, the results of an in-field research about what people think about migration are also included in the third chapter. In Chapter eight, at the end of the analysis informed by Propp's morphology, I introduce a small-scale Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to some of the articles in order to validate Propp's results. Chapter nine goes back to the images in order to highlight how they are being used in

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newspaper articles, especially as far as their possible recycling is concerned. Before the concluding remarks, Chapter ten focuses on the current status of the news and on news construction, underlining how the renown and alleged change of hard news into the more entertaining soft news cannot be read considering it as a mere process of dumbing down. To better understand how news is changing, infotainment is presented and compared to *professional* journalism, bearing in mind that most of changes occur for economic and political reasons and not for communicative needs.

