

Conversazioni con
Alberto Mario Cirese

di
Riccardo Putti
Eugenio Testa



Università degli Studi di Siena -Centro Televisivo di Ateneo



Università la Sapienza di Roma - Dipartimento di Studi Glotto
Antropologici e Discipline Musicali

giugno 2001

Alberto Mario Cirese

"If I think about the beginnings of my cultural itinerary, I would mention my father, the *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris, and the socialist peasants of the Rieti plain."

Alberto Mario Cirese was born in Avezzano in 1921. He studied at Campobasso, Rieti and Rome, taking his degree in the History of Popular Traditions with Paolo Toschi. In this discipline he first obtained an adjunct position (1956), and then a regular teaching assignment (1957-1961), and finally the chairmanship (1961-1971) at the University of Cagliari.

Cirese continued his academic career by moving on to teach Cultural anthropology at the University of Siena (1971-1973), and then at Rome (1973-1992), where he was also the first coordinator of the doctorate of research program in Ethno-anthropological Sciences (1988-1993). In 1997 he retired. He is now Professor Emeritus of the University of Rome 'La Sapienza'.

He has recognized for himself no less than five homes -- places of affection and work -- that compete to make up his identity: that of his birth in the Marsica region of the Abruzzi, that of the Molise of his father, that of the Sabina in Latium, that of Sardinia, and finally that of Mexico where he spent intense study and teaching sojourns in Mexico City, Colima, and Toluca.

To the years before his university career date his encounter with Raffaele Pettazzoni at the school of Ethnological Sciences at the University of Rome, a sojourn for study at the Museum of Man in Paris, and folklore and folk music fieldwork activities. This research, some of which in collaboration with Diego Carpitella, was carried out in the Molise and Sabina areas, partially under the auspices of the National Center for the Study of Popular Music (Centro Nazionale Studi di Musica Popolare), and in part for the journal "La Lapa," which Cirese edited along with his father Eugenio, who was the editor of collections of Sabine and Molisano folk poetry and the author of volumes of dialect verse.

An examination of the distinctive writings of Alberto Cirese can help discern some of the research themes to which he dedicated himself.

Certainly we have in Cirese a historian of scholarship. Taking up and innovating upon the tradition begun after the war by Giuseppe Cocchiara, Cirese contributed review articles, reconstructions of local histories (Molise, Sardinia), studies on specific themes (his studies of folk poetry), not to mention numerous contributions on individual scholars, collectors, and authors, to Italian folklore studies.

It is no accident that in his writings one finds themes leading toward a history of Italian intellectuals during the last two centuries. Another of his interests, pursued especially with regard to the circulation of texts, concerns the diffusion of cultural information, and the relationships between educated people and non-educated people, that is, between hegemonous

and subaltern culture. In this case, the closest theoretical comparisons can be made with the positions of Giuseppe Vidossi, Vittorio Santoli and Antonio Gramsci.

Cirese did not study questions of "popular literature" (folkloric texts, written or not, produced for, or by, a popular audience and therefore understood and used by them) only in historical, philological, or class terms. They were also prime territory for the study of forms and structures and the creation of models. For this kind of work, Propp and his *Morphology of the Folktale*, and Lévi-Strauss and his *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, were among the seminal figures Cirese discussed and elaborated upon in a dialog with semiotics and logic. He made experiments in formal analysis and modeling that took as their subjects kinship relations and proverbs, or ideological constructions and traditional metrical forms, but always working carefully on circumscribed objects of study and with clearly defined documentary corpuses.

Underlying his interest in these methodologies was the idea that both comparison among cultural facts, and modeling carried out based upon them using abstract metalanguages, could return an idea of a world of people united at a deep level by common membership in a single species -unity and membership not only of a biological nature. Cirese did not want to give up upon the theme of unity of mind and human experience, already present in Tylor, in Frazer and in Lévi-Strauss, hoping to recapture for anthropology the possibility of the study of universals alongside that of differences, and of the consideration of the Other, not as separate Self, but of an Other Self.

Cirese accompanied his predilection for logical reckoning of the form of possible worlds with the systematic use of the computer. Dating between the end of the 60s and the beginning of the 70s were his computer based experiment in the analysis of a group of texts from the Barbi collection, the beginning of his collaboration with the National University Center for Electronic Calculation at Pisa (Centro Nazionale Universitario di Calcolo Elettronico di Pisa) in a project to create a computerized folklore catalog, and his analysis with the computer of popular poetic texts published by Niccolò Tommaseo. The first versions of programs Cirese himself wrote for the analysis of kinship relationships date from the 80s.

There remains to be mentioned at least one other of the areas of Cirese's work, one in which the computer saw ample use: the census, cataloging, classification and conservation of the folkloric heritage. Cirese concerned himself with this both in theoretical terms - writing, for example, about peasant and folklore museology - and in practical terms - to mention only the Sardinian Folklore Inventory and Atlas, begun during the period of teaching in Cagliari, and work conducted between 1968 and 1975 with the National Recording Library (Discoteca di Stato), which led a large group of researchers to the systematic discovery and cataloging of an ample body of non-sung oral tradition from all Italian regions.

Eugenio Testa

(Translated by Tony Galt)

(This document is on the Internet at the URL <http://h-net.msu.edu/~sae/bibs/cirese/ciresebio.html>)

An almost identical version has been published in *Europaea*, 2. (1996), n. 1: 149-150)

Bibliografia scelta / Selected writings

Saggi sulla cultura meridionale I. Gli studi di tradizioni popolari nel Molise. Profilo storico e saggio di bibliografia. Roma, De Luca, 1955

Volume secondo dei canti popolari del Molise. Rieti, Nobili, 1957.

La poesia popolare. Palermo, Palumbo, 1958.

Poesia sarda e poesia popolare nella storia degli studi. Sassari, Gallizzi, 1961.

Cultura egemonica e culture subalterne. Rassegna degli studi sul mondo popolare tradizionale. Seconda edizione accresciuta. Palermo, Palumbo, 1973.

Tradizioni orali non cantate. A cura di A.M. Cirese e L. Serafini. Con la collaborazione iniziale di A. Milillo. Roma, Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, Discoteca di Stato, 1975.

Intellettuali, folklore, istinto di classe. Note su Verga, Deledda, Scotellaro, Gramsci. Torino, Einaudi, 1976.

Oggetti, segni, musei. Sulle tradizioni contadine. Torino, Einaudi, 1977.

Intellettuali e mondo popolare nel Molise. Isernia, Marinelli, 1983.

Segnicità fabrilità procreazione. Appunti etnoantropologici. Roma, C.I.S.U., 1984.

Ragioni metriche. Versificazioni e tradizioni orali. Palermo, Sellerio, 1988.

La Lapa. Argomenti di storia e letteratura popolare (1953-1955). Di Eugenio e Alberto Mario Cirese. Ristampa anastatica a cura dell'Istituto 'Eugenio Cirese' di Rieti, con il patrocinio dell'Università degli Studi del Molise. Nota introduttiva di Pietro Clemente. Indici, cura grafica e redazionale di Roberto Marinelli, con la consulenza di Alberto Mario Cirese. Isernia, Marinelli, 1991.

Dislivelli di cultura e altri discorsi inattuali. Postfazione di Pietro Clemente e Eugenio Testa. Roma, Meltemi, 1997.

Il dire e il fare nelle opere dell'uomo. Con promemoria bibliografico degli scritti dell'Autore. Gaeta, Bibliotheca, 1998.

Conversations with Alberto Mario Cirese

by Riccardo Putti, Eugenio Testa
2001

Translated by Cristina Grasseni

This is a historical document you see.

Look what I wrote in my notebook, on the 26th March 1930

- obviously then the eighth year of the Fascist Era -

it says: "*Today Guglielmo Marconi accomplished a marvellous experiment.*

He lit up a house in the city of Sidney, Australia, from his ship anchored in the port of Genoa.

What a grand invention!

I am proud of it, because Marconi is Italian.

Guglielmo Marconi also invented: the radio, the telegraph, the cordless phone.

When I hear of inventions by Italians I feel glad.

Dad says that in fifty years wars will be fought with electric lightnings - he was almost right!

Marconi's experiment succeeded fully. The electric waves crossed the Americas... the Pacific Ocean, the South Pole till Sidney.

From his ship, Marconi talked with Sidney's Mayor through the radio, which he himself invented.

Dad told me that Marconi gathered electric waves that were dispersed all over the world and cast them all in one direction.

Guglielmo Marconi, to invent the cordless telegraph, made his first trials on the roofs of buildings.

He was in one attic and his mate in another attic, but his mate's receiver did not work.

Marconi studied the problem for a month and a day and then the machine worked."

I took my A levels in Campobasso in July 1938. I was 17 years old on 19th June 1938.

I was in the second form, and skipped the third.

You could skip the third form if you were admitted to it with very high marks.

My father moved from Rieti to Campobasso and back again to Rieti in 1940. I started University in Rome in 1938, still living in Campobasso, but attended it from Rieti.

My intellectual and cultural activity began in Rieti.

The first time I went to Paris in 1949, it was Lelio Basso who gave me some contacts.

It was 1949, so in Paris I met all the socialist refugees. It was a beautiful experience.

I kept in touch with D'Anna and with Marcella, when I went back a second time with a scholarship.

I got the scholarship in 1953, so on 8th January 1953...

- so now we have been married for how long? forty-seven years?

We got married at eight in the morning, in the Town Hall.

We wanted a civil ceremony, but we did not want to make a show of it.

We left for our honeymoon to Paris, in third class.

But I stayed while Liliana went back to Italy. Then it all began with the Musée de l'Homme. I went twice, with a scholarship,

but they were rather brief spells,..

though long enough to establish a frequentation with the Musée de l'Homme.

In fact *La Lapa* is full of reviews of Paris publications.

I remember that I brought back Lévi-Strauss' *The elementary structures of kinship*...

...Popper's *La misère de l'historicisme*...

...the *Cahiers de sociologie* with the «Notion d'archaïsme», which I then translated for *La Lapa* in 1954...

... and other books that I still keep.

There it is: collection number 16, Lazio,

Alberto Mario Cirese, 18th February 1951, at Preta di Amatrice, province of Rieti.

It was my first recording.

We did not have portable recorders in 1951, at least *we* did not know them.

We only had RAI recorders, i.e. in a van, with technicians, and a driver of course.

So this was my first recording, on account of Nataletti... for the Accademia Nazionale of Santa Cecilia.

These collections were all gathered at Preta di Amatrice, then Preta, Amatrice, again Preta, Preta, Preta...

...in 1951, on February the 18th.

I was then a member of Rieti's Town Council. Preta, Preta, then Posta...

then Contigliano, and here we recorded the... 'Moresca'.

It was on account of Nataletti and De Martino that I met Diego Carpitella.

Diego was... I don't know his bureaucratic-administrative position, if indeed he had one. He was something like assistant to Giorgio Nataletti, the director of the National Research Centre of Popular Music in RAI - Accademia Santa Cecilia.

So Diego worked with him, but he was also in touch with De Martino, as I was.

I made his acquaintance... I can't remember if I went to Florence to meet him, at a conference Italy-USSR ...where De Martino gave a lecture on USSR ethnography and I think I have the conference proceedings at hand, but if they are of no interest let's leave it, ...or was it here in Rome? I remember De Martino in a café...

In 1968 I began to gather tales from all the Italian regions, dividing up the work between me and Parlangei.

My proposal was accepted by the board of the National Phonoteque, whose president was Antonino Pagliaro.

There were also Vittorio Santoli, Paolo Toschi, Carpitella... and myself as secretary.

Parlangei covered eight regions and I did twelve.

As for my work with Bosio... let's read the Foreword to the inauguration of the Istituto De Martino

- which I have mostly written myself - with Bosio I did nothing less than these...

I componimenti minori... But let's read the Presentation of the «Archivi di Lavoro»... I know that someone complained... Here.

"The Folklore Archive's Working Tools mean to provide precisely the basic means for this enterprise:

to grant access to sources otherwise scarcely available or completely ignored, furnishing repertoires, indexes and groundwork investigations..."

Can you imagine? We were in 1968. In 1968 I wrote this, and Bosio published this.

"... against two forms of amateurism and of improvisation...

the pseudo-journalist's - more or less brilliant - and the pseudo-academic - more or less pompous, and against the presumption and lack of scientific seriousness that are a common root to both, here deliberately we provide neither "studies" nor "interpretations", at least not in their often approximate sense. It is hoped instead to produce - literally - "tools", freely available to anyone wishing to and able to use them, in order to study and to interpret."

Nineteen sixty-eight.

Meaning: do you want the Revolution? Be a philologist!

The last pre-fascist and first post-fascist Mayor of Rieti, Angelo Sacchetti Sasseti, taught me, sitting in his Mayor's chair, banging on his Petrocchi dictionary: "Dear Cirese, first philology, then socialism".

I remember the *Enciclopedia dell'arte*...

I told you about the *Enciclopedia dell'arte*, didn't I?

Signorini worked with Ernesta 'Titti' Cerulli, who was Director of Ethnology after ... after the King got together with the Third State to exile the Aristocracy - the Revolution at the *Enciclopedia dell'arte* - because they could not come up with the first issue.

And so Massimo Pallottino, general manager, made an alliance with the "assistants" versus the "directors of section", like Grottanelli, Argan, etc.

and made the revolution by promoting them all, so as to remove all the directors of sections ...who all became I don't know what, and all the assistants became responsible for their own sections.

I was only photography assistant in the ethnology section, under Grottanelli as Head of division, with Titti Cerulli as director.

I became Head Editor of the *Enciclopedia*, while Sandro Marabotti, who was photography assistant in the modern art section, became general director of photography.

It was thanks to this that I could move to Cagliari and leave secondary school teaching.

But in the *Enciclopedia* there were also people linked to the university:

Ugo Spirito was an editorial consultant for the publisher Sansoni.

Sansoni and UNEDI published the *Enciclopedia universale dell'arte*, together with McGraw Hill for the U.S.

In Rome I joined De Mauro, whom I knew from the *Enciclopedia dell'arte*,

then Fernanda De Mattei, whom I also knew from the *Enciclopedia dell'arte*,

...and likewise Signorini. I did not know Cardona, at least not in the same way. I knew Signorini from having been in the selection committee for his professorship.

I was one of the committee members who granted him the professorship.

I appreciated his systematic ethnography of the Panu.

One of my personal efforts has been that of rescuing as much material as possible from the realm of what is merely debatable knowing well that - quite apart from personal capacities - this is not an enterprise for a single scholar and knowing well that it is perhaps impossible to apply it totally to the objects, for which there always remain, in my opinion - as well as for the positivists, who are considered as the crudest, meanest materialists - for them there was - today's laymen will hate this -

there were bounds of mystery surrounding the spot of light that science had built.

They strove to expand that spot of light, with an *ignoramus* and an *ignorabimus?* - question mark.

It was a faith, a hope that the light would expand indefinitely, if infinite is mankind's time and the universe.

Therefore, even in the more restricted field of one's personal work, one knows that one will not succeed to "rationalise", meaning, to rescue everything from being merely debatable because underneath, beside and sometimes even inside, something still moves - an incitement to continue working - something that escapes your operation.

At the end of the day, the effective condition of mankind, and of the scholar, is schizophrenic that is that of having diametrically divergent and absolutely irreconcilable viewpoints ...each *per se* valid, since it sees what the other viewpoint cannot.

I should say that this has always been my thought, how should I put it?

...my spontaneous, immediate, instinctive rejection of Hegel's dialectics.

I mean thesis, synthesis and antithesis, where there's a third point that is the synthesis of the other two.

No, thesis and antithesis remain such. This is Benedetto Croce's dialectic of distincts, and, I have argued, Leroi-Gourhan's great strength.

Leroi-Gourhan's functional aesthetic says that an object is beautiful in as much as it serves its task.

Otherwise, you'd have the useful on the one side, the beautiful on the other, and then a third uniting them both - what would that be for?

Here it is! Here is my fundamental...

I was trained on such a book.

He said that... here...

If one can follow this, one can understand and master...

Here is the reason why Greimas' 'carré sémiotique' is nonsense...

This is the Aristotelian square: do you see where it says 'opposites' and here 'sub-opposites'?

These cannot both be 'true' and these cannot both be 'false'.

Greimas' semiotic square considers these too as opposites.

But when you have 'opposite' here and 'opposite' here, you lose the contradiction between opposites, it simply dissolves.

Greimas misunderstands the square of Klein's group theory, for which the parallel sides have the same value, with the Aristotelian square, in which he wants to insert the opposites.

When these become 'opposite' and these also 'opposite', then you can put anything on the other sides.

Hence, what should be a scientific tool... - as I told Greimas many times in Urbino...

But he answered: "Tant pis pour la logique".

My involvement with information technology began in Tuscany, yes, in Pisa, when we formed the Committee for the Barbi collection with Santoli and Toschi

- or rather, a Committee already existed - that great collection of folk poems that Michele Barbi put together, which is held at the library of the Scuola Normale di Pisa.

So we started a photocopying campaign in order to have five copies of the Barbi Collection to entrust to the five curators of the different sections.

It was a hell of a job.

Paola Tabet, who was then the active and intelligent woman she always has been, got in touch with Zampolli in Pisa.

He is now professor of - I think they call it Computational Linguistics or something like that -

And we had this idea: why don't we use electronic tools?

Back then there were no keyboards, as input terminal for the computer...

...but perforated cards. There were machines like typewriters...

...to make holes in the cards as if typing letters on paper.

Then there was a second typewriter to correct any mistakes. You would type it all over again and it would signal if there were any discrepancies.

And so began the work to prepare the texts, on the one hand the Barbi collection, i.e. the manuscripts gathered by Barbi on the other hand the Systematic Corpus of the Italian Folk Traditions.

The texts were prepared and photocopied by a group of researchers one of which was Pina Di Iorio. Then they were transferred onto perforated cards,

then there was what we called "operation mark": to retrieve the rhymes you need to highlight the tonic accent.

So while typing the texts on perforated cards, we marked the tonic syllable, i.e. we stressed with a special mark the tonic syllable of the rhyming word, so that the perforators would highlight it for the computer.

This is how we began working with the computer.

All the anthropology that you read is written in the same language that you use on the tram, or to order a meal, to argue or rejoice with your friends. This is everyday, ordinary language.

Is this language capable of representing certain phenomena? For instance, kinship phenomena?

My first programme, ACAREP allowed one to enter an ethnic group - say Nambikwara, and then their kinship terminology.

Hence, the terminology was provided by the ethnologist or ethnographer, who writes "this and that kinship position correspond to the term *baba*".

One could enter that name - i.e. the kinship term, e.g. *baba* -

and then 1G0, that is 'male parent of a son or of a daughter' and then even 1S1G0, i.e. 'father's brother', and so forth.

What was the programme for? It highlighted the elements in common between the lists of kinship positions associated to each kinship term.

Kinship terms are 'cultural', kinship positions are 'natural'.

So you can find a series of fifteen, twenty kinship positions grouped in one single...

- for instance in Italian, for 'nipote' you can have 'son's son', 'daughter's son', 'son's daughter', 'daughter's daughter', 'brother's son', and so on.

So you have eight positions grouped under the same term.

What do they have in common? Componential analysis is exactly this, i.e. finding which are the elements in common, so that when I take *baba*, it does not mean 'father' but simply 'male of the previous generation'.

This is its denotation, not 'father', nor 'uncle'.

In the case of 'nipote' there is no such identity, it only means "someone's child",

in one case child's child and in the other case sibling's child, that is either *tecnon's tecnon*, or *sibling's tecnon*.

So, the kinship root, if one can say so, in this case is *tecnon*.

There's nothing else in common, nor generational identity, because the *sibling's tecnon*, i.e. my nephew is one generation below me, whilst my grandchild is two generations below mine.

Which makes of this term an important and significant exception.

So what was the programme for? It should gather several ethnic groups on disk.

Remember there was no hard disk then, so whatever was not saved on floppy would be lost.

But a floppy contains only 360 K.

So I had to devise a mechanism to reckon if the disk had enough space for the new ethnic group I was entering.

Such programmes as GEPR, however powerful, are no more adequate and must be superseded.

My personal attempt consists in a language called 'roots', in which I also represent the lineages that one belongs to.

Such languages have their own necessary syntax.

Because if I say that A, male, is B's father...

...I have made a mistake, since in our patrilineal systems A's children are A.

Do languages which can represent complex situations...

- such as that of "step-brother" or "step-sister" -

- and then step-brothers on account of the mother or of the father, etc...

Do such situations belong to kinship? Are they anthropological objects?

Yes! So how do you represent them?

You must have tools that can adequately capture them in their complexity.

This is why a science is as powerful as its symbols.

Studying must be, more than a profession, a passion ...with all the power, generosity and dedication that passions have

- when they are serious.

Thank you.