Images in History

Towards an (audio)visual historiography

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ABSTRACT

The outcome of an international symposium taking place on 27–28 April 2017 at the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities in Stockholm, this anthology can be read from either end. At one end, a number of essays addressing the question of how pictorial, especially photographic, representations can and have been understood either as historical artefacts or as sources of knowledge about the past. In a nutshell, images in history. Turn the book over again and continue reading. At the other end, an equal number of contributions – texts as well as images – that approach the same question from the reverse angle: how pictorial, especially photographic, representations can themselves be used to convey a new and different understanding of the past. In another nutshell, history in images. Taken together, the two parts of the volume are intended, each from its own perspective, to prepare the ground for a new historical (sub)discipline, viz. (audio)visual historiography.

Keywords: (Audio)visual, film, history, images, methodology, photography

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Imaginary history

A mathematical parable

In a recent autobiographical sketch, Carlo Ginzburg declared: "Labels do not interest me, but the impulse that generated microhistory does."[1]

Although this anthology already turns the spotlight on two such labels, the Italian historian's own microhistory and the "potential history" developed by the Israeli curator, filmmaker and theorist of photography Ariella Azoulay, I trust that you will forgive me for introducing another label – in fact, even two or three of them – which, in what follows, I will proceed to introduce in their due order. Along the way, I will also offer some comments on what I regard as the common impulse behind both Ginzburg's and Azoulay's work.

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The first label that I would like to propose is that of *irrational* history – and I could just as well reveal straightaway that I regard microhistory as an example, perhaps even the most striking one, of irrational history. Of course, if Ginzburg himself was to be confronted with such a description, chances are that he would protest vigorously: after all, in his famous essay on 'Clues' (1978–1979) – often read as a sort of manifesto for the approach that subsequently became known as microhistory – he took care to distance himself from what he denounced as "the fruitless opposition between 'rationalism' and 'irrationalism'".[2]

When I say "irrational", however, I have something altogether rational in mind – but I cannot explain what without deviating, at first sight rather drastically, from my subject.

When children count on their fingers, they tacitly rely on what mathematicians call *natural* numbers. By adding one to the other – one, two, three ... – they are able, at least in theory, to generate an infinite series: the *set* of natural numbers. Now, if such numbers can be added to (or even multiplied by) one another, they can also be subtracted from one another – minus one, two, three ... – generating another infinite series: the set of *negative* numbers, a sort of mirror image of the natural numbers. Indeed, to mark the point of passage across this imagined line of symmetry, we habitually add another number, this time of an altogether singular sort – the number zero, neither positive nor negative – thus bringing the natural and negative numbers together in the set of *integers*.

It goes without saying that we can already do an awful lot of counting with integers: since there is an infinity of both natural and negative numbers, apparently, there is also an infinity of integers. And yet, there is also an awful lot of counting that we *cannot* do with integers – because, although there are indeed infinitely many of them, there are just as many gaps between them. Fortunately, the solution to this problem is already at hand. If we can add, then we can also subtract: hence, as we have already seen, the negative numbers. And if, in addition to adding, we can also multiply, then, in addition to subtracting, we can also divide, thereby filling out the gaps between the integers with the help of ratios.[3] For instance, the ratio of one and two (½) marks a point midway between one and two (that is, a half), and so on. The set of all such ratios – in other words, the set of all possible pairs of integers – is called *rational*.

At this point in my discussion, even the most patient of readers will no doubt ask themselves the decisive question: what on earth does all of this have to do with historiography, let alone with (audio)visual historiography? Well, as far-fetched as it must seem, I would contend that elementary number theory provides a quite fruitful conceptual model for the dialectical development of history-writing in a wide sense. To mark the passage of time, we single out significant occurrences: natural history. To interrogate or question such occurrences, we ask what came before: negative history. To regain a sense of orientation, we establish turning points, whether absolute (e.g. the birth of Jesus Christ in traditional religious historiography) or relative (e.g. *Stunde Null* in contemporary German historiography): integral history. To account for gaps in the historical record, we compare events with one another: rational history.

End of story? Not at all – because, on closer inspection, rational history is also full of gaps: infinitely small this time, but still infinitely many. The rational numbers, that is to say, do not constitute a real continuum, since we can prove that there are numbers which cannot possibly be expressed as a ratio of integers: no matter what number we divide by – or, indeed, how many times we carry out the division – a remainder will always result. The classical example is provided by the square root of two ($\sqrt{2}$) or,

a little more tangibly, the diagonal of a square with a side of unit length. Quite reasonably, the set of all such numbers is called *irrational*.

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Now, if we agree to define the term "irrational" in this specific sense, I would argue that we find it articulated with almost astounding precision in the preface to Ginzburg's most renowned work, *The cheese and the worms* (1976), where the Italian historian describes his protagonist, the 16th-century miller Menocchio, in the following words:

> Menocchio falls within a fine, tortuous, but clearly distinguishable, line of development that can be followed directly to the present. In a sense he is one of our forerunners. But Menocchio is also a dispersed fragment, reaching us by chance, of an obscure shadowy world that can be reconnected to our own history only by an arbitrary act. That culture has been destroyed. To respect its residue of unintelligibility that resists any attempt at analysis does not mean succumbing to a foolish fascination for the exotic and incomprehensible. It is simply taking note of a historical mutilation of which, in a certain sense, we ourselves are the victims.[4]

Some occurrences, that is to say, no matter what other occurrences we compare them to, would seem to leave a kind of irrational remainder: in Ginzburg's words, a "residue of unintelligibility that resists any attempt at analysis". Pinpointing such singular events – and once we start looking for them, they tend to surface almost everywhere – requires not only the very sharpest of conceptual tools but also, I would argue, a sort of literary sensibility that is subtly present throughout Ginzburg's scholarship, including his contribution to the present volume.[5]

Hence, we can think of microhistory as an approach that, in both senses of the word, *tends* to the irrational – but that nevertheless (and, one might add, almost by implication) remains committed to a broadly rationalist perspective: to recall the passage just quoted, respecting the unintelligibility of the past is not the same thing as "succumbing to a foolish fascination for the exotic and incomprehensible". With time, in fact, Ginzburg has increasingly distanced himself from what he considers overly "irrational" interpretations of his work and has thereby come to emphasize – possibly even over-emphasize – its "rational" aspects.

This turn of events, however, should not be regarded as a step back but rather as another step forward.[6] Just like the positive and negative numbers can be brought together in the set of integers, with the number zero as a sort of capstone, the ra-

tional and irrational numbers are reunited in the set of *real* numbers. By analogy, if *The cheese and the worms* can be considered a defining moment in the development of irrational history, then Ginzburg's mature position should rather be qualified as an instance of what might be called real history. This would at least explain why, in more recent writings, he continually underscores the complementarity of exceptions and rules, cases and generalizations, questions and answers, microhistory and global history.[7] Far from collapsing the distinction, he rather exploits the tension between such apparent opposites, thereby combining them to even greater epistemic effect.

End of story? Not quite – but the next step does seem to take us in quite an unexpected direction.

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In the course of the preceding argument, we have already encountered the square root of two as an example of an irrational number. We now come across another, even stranger one: the square root of minus one ($\sqrt{-1}$), also known as the *imaginary* number.

This time around, I will not bother you with the mathematical details: suffice it to say that the imaginary number cannot possibly be a real number, since no real number, whether positive or negative, can possibly yield a negative square. Utter nonsense, in other words – yet quite useful for working out certain equations that would otherwise remain unsolvable. In effect, by applying the ordinary arithmetic operations (addition, multiplication, and so on) to the square root of minus one, we are able to leave the linear expanse of real numbers behind and venture into an entirely new dimension. Although it took a while even for mathematicians to get used to the idea, nowadays imaginary numbers can be found in every high school curriculum.[8]

And what about imaginary history? As you will already have suspected, this is the second label that I would like to introduce – in the first place as a more captivating and, indeed, imaginative shorthand for the rather dull and cumbersome expression (audio)visual historiography. If irrational history attends to the remainder or "residue", to what is either left out of or left over from conventional accounts of the past, then imaginary history opens up what is arguably an entirely new dimension for historical scholarship. What if we could write history not only *from* images (that is, drawing on visual evidence) but also *with* images – and then not only as illustrations for some preconceived idea about past events, but instead as an integral part of the process of inquiry? In the words of British cultural historian Ivan Gaskell, what if "the visual material of the past" – or, I would add, any such material – "can only be adequately interpreted by the creation of new visual material [...] which is rigorously

conceptually disciplined"? As Gaskell proceeds to note: "Under this premise the cultural theorist and the artist become one and the same."[9]

But why, exactly, would this qualify as an entirely new dimension rather than just an extension along previously established lines? Although this is a matter of discussion, I would say that writing history with images – especially photographic images – is essentially different because, compared to written sources, their "residue of unintelligibility" can hardly be considered residual at all. Due to its distinctive mode of production, photography invariably gives rise to a surplus of sense – so much, in fact, that the result often verges on the nonsensical. As the American film theorist Mary Ann Doane has put it:

> Beyond the inevitable selectivity of framing and angle, the camera always seems to evade issues of subjectivity, agency, and intentionality in the process of an unthought and mechanical recording. In reception, this lack can readily be transformed into the questions What does it mean? and What is it for?[10]

Clearly, if we still wish to "respect the residue" of such sources, we cannot just disregard the questions that they raise – but neither will it do simply to explain them away, so to speak, whether by declaring them insignificant or, indeed, by answering them in an overly literal manner. Rather, we would have to elicit somehow the "unthought" of the image, combining it either with other images or else with words in a way that brought its incomprehensibility to the fore – still without "succumbing" to it but, *pace* Ginzburg, perhaps just barely. Hence, if irrational history ultimately proves to be compatible with a certain kind of rationalism, imaginary history would have to occupy an even more ambivalent, because liminal, position.

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Does the approach that Ariella Azoulay calls potential history occupy such a liminal position? On that score, readers are invited to make up their own mind by skipping straight to Azoulay's contribution to this volume and, if necessary, comparing it with that of Ginzburg.[11] In any case, by virtue of its similarity to as well as its difference from microhistory, potential history provides the perfect point of orientation for my own discussion.

To begin with the most apparent difference, the one that first meets the eye: although Ginzburg's microhistorical inquiries draw on a range of visual materials – from carvings and sculptures to illuminations and prints[12] – Azoulay's perspective distinguishes itself by the significance it ascribes to photographic images, both as his-

torical sources and as historiographical means of expression. On more than one occasion, in fact, she even reproaches the historical profession for its relative neglect of the medium:

> Historians are usually indifferent to photographs and to the unique type of information they contain, due to their ontological nature as documents that do not express the position of their "author," but rather contain an excess of heterogeneous information.[13]

A reproach, one might add, that Ginzburg can only partly escape.[14] If there is nevertheless a certain similarity – a family resemblance, perhaps – between microhistory and potential history, it is because both seem to approach their chosen materials from the same underlying point of view. "The ontological nature of the photograph," Azoulay explains,

> enables one to enact a civil reading, a viewing that one can call "nongovernmental viewing," a viewing that will turn the traces of constituent violence that became the law [...] into traces of disaster and that will show the expanded field of the disaster. It will point out that the disaster has also affected those that the regime has maimed by virtue of the loss of ability to see disaster and recognize it as such.[15]

Although Azoulay is primarily concerned, here as elsewhere, with the situation in present-day Israel/Palestine, her reasoning has an almost uncanny resonance – at least to my ears – with the passage from *The cheese and the worms* that I quoted above. Indeed, what is Ginzburg's "dispersed fragment, reaching us by chance" if not a "trace of constituent violence that became the law"? And could Azoulay's "disaster", with its "expanded field", not be described precisely as "a historical mutilation of which, in a certain sense, we ourselves are the victims"? All differences aside, is microhistory not another instance of "nongovernmental viewing", enacted with the help of Inquisition protocols rather than photographs? Clearly, although photography remains unparalleled in this regard, it is not unique in containing an "excess of information".

In a different context, I hope to pursue this line of argument further, in the first place with reference to the essay where Azoulay introduces her notion of potential history.[16] Here, I will settle for two additional points. Firstly, when Ginzburg wrote of "a historical mutilation of which, in a certain sense, we ourselves are the victims", what he actually had in mind was not just the persecution of an obscure 16th-century miller but also – if only unconsciously – the Holocaust, that event beyond events which, directly or indirectly, continues to haunt the imagination of Jews and Palestinians alike, whether in Israel or the diaspora.[17]

Secondly, in addition to this tacit background, there is a more specific connection: both Ginzburg and Azoulay draw inspiration from the works of Walter Benjamin, in particular from his notion of redemption – although, in Ginzburg's case, this early influence would subsequently be offset, at least to some extent, by his belated encounter with the rather more sober perspective of Siegfried Kracauer.[18] In *The cheese and the worms*, however, it still seems to have retained more than a little of its messianic force.[19] To crown his discussion of the "fragment" Menocchio, Ginzburg quotes from Benjamin's *Theses on the philosophy of history* – "only to redeemed humanity does the past belong in its entirety" – and then appends a thesis of his own: "Redeemed and thus liberated."[20]

Liberated – or restored, in Azoulay's words, to "full unimpaired citizenship".[21]

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As my discussion draws to a close, allow me to briefly retrace my main lines of reasoning. First, with allusion to the terminology of mathematical number theory, I introduced the notion of *irrational* history and suggested that microhistory – at least in the style of Carlo Ginzburg – constitutes an example or subset of irrational history. Next, I proposed *imaginary* history as a more distinct term for what we have also been calling (audio)visual historiography, developed some of its implications and raised the possibility that Ariella Azoulay's potential history might belong in this category, operating in an even more ambivalent epistemic register. Still, it seems to me (but I could be wrong) that both microhistory and potential history remain, so to speak, on the same side of the line – "fine, tortuous, but clearly distinguishable" – between the rational and the irrational, comprehension and the incomprehensible, restraint and excess.

To conclude, I will also sound a note of restraint. Whatever becomes – if, indeed, anything at all becomes – of the prospect of an (audio)visual historiography, as evoked to varying extent by the contributions to this anthology, it needs to be conceived not as a self-sufficient approach but rather within a wider spectrum of historiographical practices. To resort one last time to my slightly fanciful parallel with mathematics: just like the rationals and the irrationals together form the set of real numbers, the real and imaginary dimensions come together in the *complex plane*. Hence, if imaginary history is to prove meaningful in the long run, it can only be as a contribution to what might be called complex history: a kind of history-writing that combines the full scope of available techniques and modes of communication (from the visual to the discursive) with a living awareness of how past, present and future are mutually constituted – without, however, giving in to the temptation of either

eschatology or absolute relativism. In short, a kind of history that would, as it were, approach philosophical reflection asymptotically without actually intersecting with it, that is, without ever taking the leap of faith into speculative philosophy; or, in the words of Siegfried Kracauer, history as a discipline dealing, not with ultimate matters, but nevertheless with "the last things before the last".[22]

In the end, then, should we regard imaginary history simply as one possible vector among innumerable others within the wider field of complex history – just like, in practice, the imaginary part of a complex equation is always eliminated at the end of a calculation? To recall my initial hesitation, how many labels – two or three – have I actually introduced in the course of the preceding argument? Well, perhaps we can take the term imaginary history in either a loose or a strict sense, where the former would simply be a shorthand for (audio)visual historiography in general – whereas the latter would refer to a more specific, perhaps even irreducible line of inquiry, one where the "real part" of the historical argument tends towards zero.

In the latter case, the concept can be summed up as follows. First, on the plane of content, imaginary history would primarily, if not exclusively, draw on visual sources. Second, on the plane of expression, it would primarily, if not exclusively, make use of visual – or, indeed, audiovisual – media.[23] Third, and perhaps most crucially, with regard to the process of inquiry in its own right, imaginary history, while relying to an equal extent on both empirical receptivity and theoretical spontaneity, would give pride of place to the faculty of the imagination, constituting a rigorous (but, *pace* Ivan Gaskell, not primarily conceptual) investigation into the social imaginaries of the remote as well as the more recent past.

Another experiment, that is to say, in practical epistemology,[24] now aiming to answer an altogether particular question: how far can (audio)visual historiography be taken without ceasing to be historiography in any meaningful sense? A question that I would very much like to explore further – with the proviso that, in all probability, it cannot be answered in principle, only in practice – that is, by force of example.

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Notes

1 Carlo Ginzburg, 'Some queries addressed to myself', in *Carlo Ginzburg: 2010 Balzan Prize for European History* (Milan: Fondazione Internazionale Balzan, 2011), 13.

2 Carlo Ginzburg, 'Clues: Roots of an evidential paradigm', in *Clues, myths, and the historical method* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 96. While the distinction between (ir)rational as an objective property and (ir)rational*ism* as a subjective persuasion is obviously of some significance here, I have chosen to disregard it in the context of my argument. For a reading that questions the prevalent perception of Ginzburg's essay as a manifesto, see Andrej Slávik, 'Microhistory goes public: From Ginzburg's *paradigma indiziario* to Weizman's forensic turn', in *Microhistories*, eds. Magnus Bärtås & Andrej Slávik (Stockholm: Konstfack, 2016), esp. 249, 253.

3 Although, technically, it would be more correct to speak of fractions or quotients, I opt for the term "ratio" to retain the etymological liaison with "rational".

4 Carlo Ginzburg, *The cheese and the worms: The cosmos of a sixteenth-century miller* (London: Routledge, 1980), first published 1976 as *Il formaggio e i vermi* (Torino: Einaudi1976), xxvi.

5 Ginzburg in this volume

6 For contrast, see Florike Egmond & Peter Mason, *The mammoth and the mouse: Microhistory and morphology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 201 (but cf. 203, where Ginzburg's alleged turn to élite culture is described as merely a "provisional closure"). For the Italian historian's own point of view, see Carlo Ginzburg, *No island is an island: Four glances at English literature in a world perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), xiv.

7 See e.g. Carlo Ginzburg, 'Our words, and theirs: A reflection on the historian's craft, today', *Cromohs* 18 (2013): 109; idem, 'Microhistory and world history', in *The Cambridge world history*, vol. 6, *The construction of a global world, 1400-1800 CE*, part 2, *Patterns of change*, eds. Jerry H. Bentley, Sanjay Subrahmanyam & Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); idem (with Magnus Bärtås, Andrej Slávik & Michelle Teran), '"[...] Dynamism in a single image." Twelve snapshots from a conversation with Carlo Ginzburg', in *Microhistories*, eds. Magnus Bärtås & Andrej Slávik (Stockholm: Konstfack, 2016), 80–81.

8 At this stage in my argument, I do not distinguish between (pure) imaginary and complex numbers, in effect retaining the historical terminology of Descartes.

9 Ivan Gaskell, 'Visual history', in *New perspectives on historical writing*, ed. Peter Burke, 2nd ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 206.

10 Mary Ann Doane, *The emergence of cinematic time: Modernity, contingency, the archive* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 63.

11 Azoulay in this volume.

12 For a more comprehensive inventory, see Andrej Slávik, 'Microhistory and cinematic experience: Two or three things I know about Carlo Ginzburg', in *Microhistories*, eds. Magnus Bärtås & Andrej Slávik (Stockholm: Konstfack, 2016), 50.

13 Ariella Azoulay, 'Regime-made disaster: On the possibility of non-governmental viewing', in *Sensible politics: The visual culture of nongovernmental activism*, eds. Meg McLagan & Yates McKee (New York: Zone, 2012), 39. Cf. idem, 'Potential history: Thinking through violence', *Critical Inquiry* 39:3 (2013): 555–556.

14 Slávik, 'Microhistory and cinematic experience', 50–51.

15 Azoulay, 'Regime-made disaster', 40.

16 Azoulay, 'Potential history'.

17 See e.g. Ginzburg, 'Some queries addressed to myself', 10; idem, 'Our words, and theirs', 104. Cf. Bashir Bashir & Amos Goldberg, 'Deliberating the Holocaust and the Nakba: Disruptive empathy and binationalism in Israel/Palestine', *Journal of Genocide Research* 16:1 (2014), 77–99.

18 For Ginzburg, see Tony Molho, 'Carlo Ginzburg: Reflections on the intellectual cosmos of a 20th-century historian', *History of European Ideas* 30 (2004), 144–148. For Azoulay, see e.g. Ariella Azoulay, 'The darkroom of history', *Angelaki* 10:3 (2006). As regards the corresponding notion in Kracauer's works, see e.g. Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The last things before the last*, ed. Paul Oskar Kristeller (Princeton: M. Wiener, 1995), 310 ("a common life of mankind on earth").

19 Regarding the intellectual background to Benjamin's vision, see e.g. Nickolas Lambrianou, 'Neo-Kantianism and Messianism: Origin and interruption in Hermann Cohen and Walter Benjamin', in *Walter Benjamin. Critical evaluations in cultural theory*, vol. 1, *Philosophy*, ed. Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 2005).

20 Ginzburg, *The cheese and the worms*, xxvi.

21 Azoulay, 'Potential history', 574.

22 The subtitle of Kracauer's *History*.

23 I use the terms "content" and "expression" in the sense of Louis Hjelmslev: see e.g. 'La stratification du langage', in *Essais linguistiques* (Copenhagen: Nordisk sprog- og kulturforlag, 1959).

24 Cf. Andrej Slávik, 'Preface: Towards a community of style', in *Microhistories*, eds. Magnus Bärtås & Andrej Slávik (Stockholm: Konstfack, 2016), 11.