

# History in Images

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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## Introduction: History in images

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. Turn the book over, and you will find 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*. Continue reading, and you will discover 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*.

In contrast to the reverse side of the anthology, this part is organized thematically, progressing from the general to the particular, from the abstract to the concrete.

In the opening contribution, Ariella Azoulay throws down the gauntlet to the historical profession at large. In what is surely one of her most drastic theoretical gestures to date, the Israeli curator, filmmaker and theorist of photography stages nothing short of a full-scale attack on prevalent conceptions of the archive as a societal institution. Far from the neutral space that it is often made out to be, Azoulay regards the archive as a fundamental component of an “imperial regime” wreaking havoc on the cultural worlds that came in the way of its “relentless pursuit of the new”. In the same way, documents are seen less as simple carriers of information than as “burning shards, active embers, lethal blades” – in short, as traces of an “unbounded archival violence” that is closely intertwined, in principle and sometimes also in practice, with the physical violence of the ever-expanding regime. In an argument that can be said to parallel – but that also goes more than one step beyond – Ginzburg’s classic essay on ‘The inquisitor as anthropologist’<sup>1</sup>, Azoulay challenges her readers to disentangle

themselves from inherited scientific practices and forms of expertise, to unlearn their most cherished lessons, to resist the siren song of the documents yet to be discovered, calling instead for nothing short of – an archive strike.<sup>2</sup>

The following three contributions direct our attention to contemporary filmmakers who, just like Azoulay, all grapple with the past and our relation to it. First, Sylvie Rollet turns the spotlight on Sergei Loznitsa, a Ukrainian documentarist whose works she relates to Ginzburg's microhistorical approach. Focussing on *Blockade* (2006) and *The Event* (2015), two compilation films that both deal with dramatic episodes in the history of Leningrad, and drawing on theorists such as Agamben, Foucault, and Deleuze, Rollet's analysis demonstrates how "cinema can contribute to writing history differently".

Then, Jaimie Baron leads us into more experimental territory in a discussion of *Halimuhfack* (2016) and *Reckless Eyeballing* (2004), two shorts by American filmmaker Christopher Harris. Although neither film will be recognized as "historical" in a straightforward sense, Baron argues that both embody "an intense form of historical experience" with the potential to destabilize our received notions of the past. By appropriating existing images and using them to "interrupt" dominating social imaginaries, Harris's work illustrates how aesthetic choices always have epistemic and ethical implications.

Third, Malin Wahlberg invites us to consider an even more ephemeral aspect of cinematic storytelling – that of sound – in *Natureza morta* (2005) and *48* (2010), two films by Portuguese filmmaker Susana de Sousa Dias. With Ricoeur's philosophy of history as her main point of departure, Wahlberg attends closely not only to voices, sounds, and sound effects, but also to "telling moments of silence". Like in the previous examples, it is precisely the aesthetic intricacy of de Sousa Dias's works that allows the viewer to approach a difficult past in a new and more thoughtful manner.

In the thematic progression of this section of the anthology, the next contribution marks a turning point insofar as it gives the word to the artist himself – in this case, to British filmmaker Peter Watkins as he presents himself in the soundtrack for *The Role of a Lifetime* (2003), an essay film by his Lithuanian colleague Deimantas Narkevičius. In his long, winding monologue, Watkins reflects on his own work and its personal resonances, on the genre of the documentary and its political implications, and on history as "a constantly revolving, linking process".

Taking the same overarching progression to its logical and, at the same time, aesthetic<sup>3</sup> conclusion, the last four contributions provide concrete examples – if only in the form of film stills – of what an (audio)visual historiography could, perhaps, come to look like. While each project addresses a different theme – the legacy of the Cold War in Deimantas Narkevičius's *The Dud Effect*, the place of religion in secular soci-

eties in Magnus Bärtås's *The Miracle of Tensta (Theoria)*, the economic underside of Western modernity in Lina Selander and Oscar Mangione's *The Offspring Resembles the Parent*, or the figure of the refugee in 20th-century European history in Andrej Slávik's *The Literal Zone: Exhibits A–J* – and approaches it with a different sensibility, together they hopefully provide a glimpse of the “community of style” to which this anthology wishes to contribute.<sup>4</sup> To gain a wider perspective on that venture, turn the book over and continue reading.

Finally, for the decisive question: how are we to understand the notion of (audio) visual historiography proposed in this volume? Most straightforwardly, as the historical counterpart to visual ethnography, an approach to anthropology that goes back at least to the 1950s and that has been firmly established in an academic setting since the mid-1980s (e.g. through the Society for Visual Anthropology, founded in 1984 as a section of the American Anthropological Association).<sup>5</sup> To be more specific, if there were such a thing as (audio)visual historiography, it would situate itself at the intersection between three extant fields of research: *visual methodologies*, a trans-disciplinary field with its centre of gravity in the social sciences, taking its inspiration from visual ethnography; *visual history*, defined as the historical study of visual sources, often with reference to visual culture studies; and finally *public history*, to the extent that it has employed (audio)visual means of communication.<sup>6</sup> It is from such a vantage point that the intertwined artistic traditions of compilation and found footage film could then be adequately assessed for their potential contribution to the historian's practice.<sup>7</sup>

And what would motivate such an audacious undertaking? In the first place, the sheer fact of its possibility. With a growing share of existing (audio)visual archives accessible in digital form, with increasingly advanced techniques for searching, classifying and retrieving such materials currently in development, and finally with both consumer- and professional-level video editing software already available at little or even no cost, it is reasonable to assume that historians, as well as scholars from neighbouring fields and other professionals working on historical issues, will sooner or later begin – and, indeed, have quietly begun – to explore the possibility of writing history with moving images in a more systematic fashion. Such explorations, however, will surely prove a lot more fruitful, in both the short and the long term, if a coherent theoretical framework is already in place to provide orientation and direction to the inquiry. It is such a framework that this anthology hopes, if not to provide, then at least to prepare the ground for.

In a wider perspective, as the preceding discussion has already made clear, the possibility of (audio)visual historiography takes shape against the nebulous background of what has been called “the digital revolution”. Although currently the subject of much speculation, there can be little doubt that the proliferation of digital technologies over the last half century has already brought – and, crucially, is yet to bring – irreversible changes to fundamental patterns of social interaction, political participation, technological innovation, economic production, and cultural expression. The same trend is equally prevalent in an academic setting, as evidenced by the recent profusion of “digital turns” across a variety of disciplines, including that of history.<sup>8</sup> As a result, throughout the past decade, historians have increasingly devoted themselves to the new possibilities offered by digital sources (e.g. big data), methods (e.g. topic modelling) and channels of publication (e.g. open access).

In effect, digitization has not only opened up new theoretical and methodological vistas; more fundamentally, it has also affected the practical preconditions – the very horizon – of academic scholarship, a fact that is duly emphasized in a recent report on the future of societal interaction in the humanities and social sciences co-commissioned by the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters.<sup>9</sup> However, while the authors do acknowledge that the exponential spread of digital technologies results in “fundamental modifications to patterns of communication and media use”, their subsequent argument conveys the impression that we are simply dealing with “changing practices of writing and reading”.<sup>10</sup> Thereby, they fail to mention what, from a wider perspective, comes across as the really significant shift: the marginalization of the written word, directly paralleled by the increasing centrality of visual media, in the wider public sphere. Digitization, from this point of view, merely extends a historical tendency that can be traced all the way back to the invention of photography in the mid-19th century – that is, to the very beginning of what Walter Benjamin famously dubbed “the age of mechanical reproduction” – and that was cemented by the commercial breakthrough of television a century later.

It is this long-term medialization of the public sphere that, in conjunction with other processes, has given rise to our current predicament: on the one hand a scholarly writing of history which, in spite of recurrent initiatives to the opposite end, finds itself increasingly restricted to a narrowly academic circulation; on the other hand a pedagogical and popular dissemination of history where visual forms of expression play a decisive role, often to the detriment of sharper analysis and deeper understanding. Against such a background, the larger aim of (audio)visual historiography would be to *“short-circuit” this divide with digital means by making visual media an integrated component of the professional historian’s own research process.* “The transformation of the wider media landscape” – so the report just cited – “has repercussions on the very

idea of what knowledge is and ought to be.”<sup>11</sup> If this is indeed the case, then the pre-eminence of the visual register in this wider landscape should also make visual media an important mode of communication for contemporary historical scholarship.

So much for the motivation; now for the obstacles, which are indeed considerable. Having spent the better part of the last century shielding themselves, on the one hand from repeated incursions from “harder” sciences, on the other from the abiding risk of historical relativism, most historians are bound to object to what they will no doubt perceive as a challenge to their hard-earned epistemic authority. Similarly but conversely, many film scholars (and quite a few filmmakers) will remain sceptical of what they can only regard as a naive faith in the veracity of images in general and the photographic image in particular – a holdover, it would seem, from a bygone, pre-theoretical age. Anthropologists, on their part, will probably find the emphasis on filmmaking a little outmoded as compared to other visual research methods – to the extent, that is to say, that they see any value at all in such methods. And so, caught between a rock and a hard place, the would-be (audio)visual historian will have no other choice but to venture into the gnoseological fault zone between art and science, a no-less treacherous terrain that, in spite of common roots and innumerable exchanges, remains largely uncharted.<sup>12</sup>

And if, like Alice in Lewis Carroll’s celebrated novel, pursuing the White Rabbit down its hole and “never once considering how in the world she was to get out again”, we can only imagine what lies ahead – well, then all the better.

Göteborg, November 2019

## NOTES

- 1 Carlo Ginzburg, ‘The inquisitor as anthropologist’, in *Clues, myths, and the historical method* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). Some of the considerable distance between Ginzburg and Azoulay is bridged in Jessie Sherwood, ‘The inquisitor as archivist, or surprise, fear, and ruthless efficiency in the archives’, *The American Archivist* 75 (Spring/Summer 2012).
- 2 The argument is further developed in Azoulay’s recent work, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).
- 3 In the etymological sense: see e.g. Steffen W. Gross, ‘The neglected programme of aesthetics’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42:4 (2002), and cf. idem, *Cognitio sensitiva: Ein Versuch über die Ästhetik als Lehre von der Erkenntnis des Menschen* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011).
- 4 Cf. Andrej Slávik, ‘Preface: Towards a community of style’, in *Microhistories*, eds. Magnus Bårtås & Andrej Slávik (Stockholm: Konstfack, 2016).

- 5 See, e.g., Marcus Banks & Jay Ruby (eds.), *Made to be seen: Perspectives on the history of visual anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Faye Ginsburg, 'Shooting back: From ethnographic film to the anthropology of media', in *A companion to film theory*, eds. Toby Miller & Robert Stam (London: Blackwell, 1999); Anna Grimshaw & Amanda Ravetz (eds.), *Visualizing anthropology* (Bristol: Intellect, 2005). Regarding previous interdisciplinary exchanges between anthropology and history, see, e.g., Brian Keith Axel, *From the margins: Historical anthropology and its futures* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002); Christopher Morton & Elizabeth Edwards (eds.), *Photography, anthropology and history: Expanding the frame* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Andrew Willford & Eric Tagliacozzo (eds.), *Clio/Anthropos: Exploring the boundaries between history and anthropology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
- 6 See, e.g., Gillian Rose, *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*, 4th ed. (London: Sage, 2016); Gerhard Paul, *Visual history: Ein Studienbuch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006); Faye Sayer, *Public history: A practical guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), ch. 6.
- 7 On compilation film, see Jay Leyda, *Films beget films: Compilation films from propaganda to drama* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964); Patrik Sjöberg, *The world in pieces: A study of compilation film* (Stockholm: Aura, 2001). On found footage film, see Jaimie Baron, *The archive effect: Found footage and the audiovisual experience of history* (London: Routledge, 2014); *Found footage: Cinema exposed*, eds. Marente Bloemheugel, Giovanna Fossati & Jaap Guldemond (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012); William C. Wees, *Recycled images: The art and politics of found footage films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993). The genre of essay film, although no less important, will not be discussed here.
- 8 See, e.g., Daniel J. Cohen & Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital history: A guide to gathering, preserving, and presenting the past on the web* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Toni Weller (ed.), *History in the digital age* (London: Routledge, 2013).
- 9 Johan Östling, Katarina Bernhardsson, Jenny Björkman & Jesper Olsson, *Kunskapens nya rörelser: Framtidens humanistiska och samhällsvetenskapliga samverkan* (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhetsakademien, 2016).
- 10 Östling *et al.*, *Kunskapens nya rörelser*, 11 (my translation).
- 11 Östling *et al.*, *Kunskapens nya rörelser*, 18.
- 12 For a recent cartographic attempt, see Catherine Russell, *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and archival film practices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). To achieve a longer historical perspective, a useful starting point is Steffen W. Gross, 'The neglected programme'.