

## Challenges and perspectives of audio-visual history

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Audio-visual history is one of the new methods in historiography.<sup>1</sup> Other scientific disciplines like anthropology or ethnography used filming as a method long before, although sometimes in a problematic, paternalistic or colonial way.<sup>2</sup> Like in Oral History there is a need for theoretical, methodological and ethical reflections on how we generate these sources and how we use them.<sup>3</sup>

Audio-visual media give historians the chance to become part of the process of remembering by observation, participation and interaction.<sup>4</sup> Like in Oral History, we have a chance to deconstruct the individual concepts of remembering by understanding how individual memories are formed by certain aspects like social interactions, artefacts, private sources, enactments, rituals or media consumption.<sup>5</sup>

Audio-visual sources are specific; they are different from other sources like audio-sources, photos or written sources. Audio-visual sources have their own “truth” or “falsehood”; the communication patterns differ. To give a simple example: facial expressions sometimes seem to give a different expression than words.

As nowadays many Oral Historians use cameras to document their interviews, although they have little knowledge of film history, technology and the power of visuality (in terms of ethics), it is necessary to start a serious discussion about what we are doing. Just as we have learned to take a critical view of typical primary sources, gaining these competences for audio-visual sources – especially when we are not only analysing these sources, but also producing them ourselves – is an exciting, because new, process.<sup>6</sup>

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1 Dan Sipe, “The Future of Oral History and Moving Images,” in: Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (ed.), *The Oral History Reader*, London/New York 2006, 406–16.

2 Ilisa Barbash/Lucien Taylor, *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos*, Berkeley /Los Angeles/London 1997.

3 Almuth Leh, *Forschungsethische Probleme in der Zeitzeugenforschung*, in: *BIOS - Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History*, 13, 2000, 64-76.

4 Norris, Sigrid, *Analyzing Multimodal Interaction: A Methodological Framework*. New York/London 2004.

5 Peter B. Kaufman, *Oral History in the Video Age*, in: *Oral History Review*, 40/1, 2013, 1-7.

## **Listen – Silence**

Just as with other primary sources, there is a need to create audio-visual sources using a repertoire of techniques. As Oral Historians, we are skilled in formulating questions properly. I posit that our strength in Audio-Visual History, as it is in Oral History, is in “saying nothing”. When observing our students, it becomes clear that this is something that must be learned, as silence is often hard to bear. However, not interrupting is an elementary aspect of audio-visual interviews. When editing interview sequences for a film, the interviewee’s exhalation is essential to be able to edit at all. There must be silence before making a cut. Apart from that, we already know from Oral History that a pause allows the interviewee to take a breath and at the same time search his or her memory. This is often the point where the process of remembering really starts to gain momentum, and a new narrative thread emerges by means of association. Inexperienced interviewers fear that waiting could be confused with insecurity or a lack of interest. In the event that an interviewee really does get this impression, the interviewer can defuse the situation by asking an attentive question. In addition, the world of media also influences our work, as it hardly allows any pauses and the interviewers in discussion panels are usually just as important as the participants, if not more so. These moderated discussions use completely different interview techniques than we do in Oral History interviews.<sup>7</sup>

## **Different Settings**

What makes the audio-visual method so exciting is trying out different settings. While the seated interview – i.e. a classic talking head interview – certainly remains the foundation of our work, it also makes sense to move around with people, walk with them, ask questions while standing or walking, observe them as they interact with others, stage scenes together with them. The word “staging” sounds like manipulation. It is certainly correct to say that working with film has made us more demanding; but, in a less strict sense, we could see it as a more playful approach. As an example: when I was working with Norbert Abeles, an almost 90-year-old Austrian now living in Malawi with his Malawian wife who is 35 years his junior, I asked them to dance together for us. They had previously danced at a party, so there was a backstory. This scene is so beautiful and also shows their love for each other.

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6 Alexander von Plato, *Medialität und Erinnerung : Darstellung und "Verwendung" von Zeitzeugen in Ton, Bild und Film*, in: BIOS - Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen 21/1, 2008, 79-92.

7 Albert Lichtblau, *Wie verändert sich mündliche Geschichte, wenn wir auch sehen, was wir hören? Überlegungen zur audiovisuellen Geschichte*, in: Bios. Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen, 20. Jg., Sonderheft 2007, S. 66-74.

At the same time, scenes like this reinforce familiar clichés: music, an easy-going lifestyle and dance in Africa. A balancing act!

Although it is possible nowadays for a single person to film everything, I prefer to work with camera operators who take care of the whole technical side and know how to achieve the best possible shots as well as ensuring good audio quality. The following section deals primarily with the practical aspect of producing audio-visual sources. There is still a lot to discover!

## **Places**

Each person has his or her own memory spaces.<sup>8</sup> These have an elementary meaning in people's biographies and therefore also shaped them. Returning to key memory spaces with people can help to better understand their memory patterns. Recollection and location are fundamentally connected to memory; they are mutually dependent. Creating this interaction can lead to special moments of recollection.

Much of my work has involved so-called BAD or DARK PLACES, especially former concentration camps that are now memorial sites.<sup>9</sup> Time and again I asked myself how these places present themselves in this day and age and what they communicate. It is important to distinguish between what places mean to the interviewer, who has no recollection of them, and what they mean to someone who had fundamental experiences there. In addition: if we visit such dark places together with people who survived them, these are nonetheless not the same places as the ones buried in their memories – they are restored, redesigned, radically altered.

Places are not just places. They smell different; they have a current “sound”, which differs from that of the past. But still it is important to notice a place's new ambient sound. Former gas chambers and shower rooms have their own ambient sound. We should take note of this acoustic ambience and take it in, so that we can become attuned to the location in its historic and current dimension.

In order to be able to understand such dark places in the present, it is sometimes helpful simply to observe how people move and what they do. Often, there is a perceptible sense of insecurity. If several people come together, there is murmuring, they “tumble” into the room. They evidently

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8 Tim Cole, (Re)Placing the Past: Spatial Strategies of Retelling Difficult Stories, in: Oral History Review, 42/1, 2015, 30-49.

9 Sharpley, Richard/ Stone, Philip R. (eds.), The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism, Bristol/Buffalo/Toronto 2009; see also chapter >Bloodlands< `41. Gewalt in Bildern – Bilder als Gewalt – Gewalt an Bildern, in: Paul, Gerhard, BilderMACHT. Studien zur Visual History des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts, Göttingen 2013, 155-197.

have associations, familiar images from films. For example, it is certain that many people visiting the shower room at the memorial site of the former Mauthausen concentration camp believe themselves to be in the former gas chamber. The movie “Schindler’s List”, for instance, uses this motif in one of its key scenes, in which a group of women and children believe that they are about to be gassed.

What we have observed is that people only stay in this room for a short time, often taking a photo and then leaving again quickly. Therefore, they immortalise it and take it home with them. What will they do with the photo? Being able to take a photo allows people to adapt the place individually in a picture, to perform an act that creates a distance between them and an unbearable past. Our work as Audio-Visual Historians, however, allows us to give empty rooms an individual history, thereby bringing them to life.

Survivors always remind us that memorial sites have changed from what they used to be and only have the location in common. Solomon J. Salat was born in Krakow in 1926 and survived several concentration camps, including Mauthausen and some satellite camps. In 2013 he attended the memorial in Mauthausen together with his daughters, Miriam and Alison. We joined him on this day with a film team. In response to a question about the most horrific part of the concentration camp, he answered:

“[If I think back], well this quarry – probably the quarry. This was a killer.”

We went to the quarry and continued the interview there. He did not speak only to us, but also to his daughters, explaining the place to them. It was important to him to point out its completely transformed appearance:

“This didn’t look the way it is now. Because you have everything overgrown with vegetation and trees. There was bare stone here, very rock. This was an active quarry. And at the bottom of the quarry there were piles of rocks, broken up into small rocks. And the entire bottom was covered with these sharp pebbles, sharp one, not this one. Sharp, you know, broken up from this splinted – from the breaking of stone.”

It was precisely at this point in the recording that something unusual happened, something that can be ascribed to the stimulating power of cameras. A music group from Russia played “for us”, performing songs like “We Shall Overcome” and concluding their performance with “Kalinka”. One of the group’s musicians came forward and asked the 77-year-old Solomon to dance; he was glad to oblige. This all happened right at the Stairs of Death in the quarry of the former concentration camp. Who would dance in a former

concentration camp?<sup>10</sup> I learned something important in the course of this work. This place cannot only be seen as a “bad” place; it is also a place of survival. A survivor has every reason to dance on the Stairs of Death – to celebrate his own existence. In spite of all the sadness and oppression of DARK PLACES, it is vital not to forget that hope and strength also emerged from them. It was necessary to learn a lesson from that horrendous experience.

Apart from this: the stories told on location are interesting in that they can be compared with other interviews carried out in the US.

To sum up: Locations (and not only the dark kind) trigger narratives about the places themselves and point to their impermanence, as they now differ from the memory. Alterations and changes are pointed out. Finding that something is no longer there compels interviewees to describe it, thereby closing the gap between the past and the present.

### **Observation & variety: The instant of the moment**

Our observations fall within the realm of spatial turns, which deals with how space and emotion respond to each other. But how do we interpret emotions, feelings?<sup>11</sup>

Participant observation, one of the fieldwork methods used in social science, is also suited to our Audio-Visual History work. It involves actively learning to understand the behaviour of people in time and space. Staying with the example mentioned above: there are numerous memorial and remembrance rituals that establish connections with the past.<sup>12</sup> The communication takes place at many levels:

Written word,  
Spoken word,  
Languages,  
Tone of voice,  
Commemorative symbols,

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10 Albert Lichtblau, “Recapitulation of Memory,” in: Johannes-Dieter Steinert and Inge Weber-Newth (eds.), *Beyond Camps and Forced Labour: Current International Research on Survivors of Nazi Persecution*. Proceedings of the International Conference, London, 11–13 January 2006, London 2008 (CD-Rom).

11 We also should take care for ourselves, see: Albert Lichtblau, *Keeping Distance*, in: Philippe Denis/James Worthington (eds.), *The Power of Oral History. Memory, Healing and Development*. XIIth International Oral History Conference, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, Pietermaritzburg 2002, 814-824.

12 Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*, New York 1967.

Music,  
Sounds,  
Improvised and  
Staged scenes  
Ritual processes,  
to trigger feelings – e.g. empathy or antipathy,  
Images,  
Signs or other symbols,  
Clothing,  
Interaction, etc.

In a nutshell: The past is communicated on so many levels, that it could not be fully grasped even with the most meticulous observation. Recording the observation of such processes with audio-visual media may become an important foundation for us.

I would like to name another example, from the Bronx in New York. Up until a few years ago, a club of migrants from Burgenland, a small Austrian province characterised mainly by agriculture, held regular meetings. These people left Europe mainly because of poverty and lack of perspectives. In New York they regularly returned to a former community venue, even though the neighbourhood had become dodgy owing to social change, social tension and crime, and was temporarily regarded as dangerous. But the location's familiarity and the memory of old times outweighed their fears. There was so much happening at these club meetings that it would have been impossible for me to record it all in writing or in photos. Take, for instance, the level of sound: At the beginning an oompah band, typical for these meetings, played the American national anthem. Everyone was encouraged to sing along, they stood with their hand over their heart, singing with great fervour. When the comparatively boring Austrian national anthem was played, hardly anyone knew the words and their posture slumped. I noticed a lot of other things: for instance, that the clubs set their hopes mainly on their young women to pass on the ethnic identity for future generations, and these opened the festivities together with their children, while the young men played no role at all. It is, however, hardly surprising that the male elders ultimately call the tune. During the festivities, there were visual signifiers of the home country on display all over the place. The tombola, for instance, included calendars depicting the old country, national alcoholic beverages, etc. The meeting was all about traditional dishes, drinking, singing, celebrating, talking, clothes. Of course, people also took advantage of the opportunity to chat. For me, the video recordings I made formed the basis of an article, and not of a video project. I only became truly aware of the diversity of the event when I reviewed the video footage.

Audio-visual interviews create a special narrative space that often remains unique. When producing video projects, I can recommend memory rituals or events that deal with the past and present. The presence of other people who share a similar story stimulates the interviewee's own memory and levels the emotions out at a level that would otherwise be impossible to achieve. That is something I especially noticed when working together with young people at a weekend event where they talked about racism and anti-Semitism and dealt with the topic using a playful approach. The last third of each interview with these youngsters was unique because they were completely engrossed in the topic by this time and made very impressive statements. I suspect that I wouldn't have gotten such depth during their day-to-day activities.

This is why it definitely makes sense to consciously choose an event that injects a special meaning into the memory, thereby making the past the focus of attention within a small, temporary collective.

What never ceases to amaze me about Audio-Visual History is how much more information this medium allows me to subsequently garner. This method frees me from the pressure of having to pick up on – and remember – all of the visual aspects at that very moment. It gives me the freedom to really immerse myself in a situation, to just be there, take part, allow unexpected things to happen or even encourage them, and allow myself to get carried away by the moment. Research can be truly exciting.

### **OBSERVING THE PROCESS OF REMEMBERING**

When working with the “eye” and the “ear” of the camera, the interaction is much more direct than in Oral History. A “tension” should arise between everyone involved, which should be based on mutual interest in dealing with the topic and be maintained throughout. One can simply tell when people get distracted and bored. This is why direct eye contact is so important; it keeps the interviewee's eyes from wandering. As someone who does not always look into other people's eyes, I find this more strenuous than Oral History, in which it is of no importance where an interviewee looks. At the same time, it is fascinating to observe oneself keeping the interviewed person's attention, since we, the interviewers, represent the future audience, which wants the interviewee to face them. In other words: the visual aspect does in fact have its own communication repertoire.

I had not been aware how much historians interfere and how much we construct the past until I started working in the editing room, even though we constantly edit people's words when writing papers by paraphrasing them or by selecting longer or shorter quotes. We construct the stories about individual pasts through our texts and often use what we need to support our arguments. When editing film footage, one is more aware of the act of “trimming” information, as one is directly facing the person. And he or she is

more than “mere” text. Apart from this, editing is not about words alone, but about physical communication.

In interviews with displaced persons and survivors who experienced physical violence, one can observe how the experience, which is hard to describe, is inscribed in the body. It is often clear how rattled the interviewees are, even before they respond verbally; be it that the interviewee’s facial expression darkens or that one can see how they are struggling for adequate words to describe the horrors they experienced to a stranger. In a film on people displaced by the NS regime and now living in the USA, I asked how the refugees liked the new place that offered them asylum, usually New York. The word “like” was definitely provocative. The repertoire of questions that can be asked in Audio-Visual History differs from that of Oral History, as the main aim is to understand feelings. Film is a medium that strongly focuses on emotions and the history of feelings. But it is exactly this point that will have to be discussed to define the limits for questions that trigger emotions. At what point are boundaries overstepped? Personally, I believe that the answers show us the boundaries. When dealing with matters that are important to us, we will negotiate on whether those boundaries are firm.

In the case of the interview mentioned above, this question led to important answers. A female interviewee pointed out that arriving at the place that offered asylum was not about “liking” it, but about surviving and worrying about the people who hadn’t fled.

When filming places, one should think about how space and time are presented. In the latter project, for example, we always filmed looking out of apartments in order to establish a connection between the interior (which was also documented) and the exterior.

### **Photography as a memory trigger**

Working with photographs as a memory trigger has already been reflected on several times.<sup>13</sup> It becomes interesting when photographs have a specific meaning to the persons concerned. To give an example: Sometimes interviewees have put up photographs in rooms or on walls. Depending on how these interrelate with the interviewee, they can be a key to a person’s memory constellation. Survivors of genocide often arrange their family pictures in the form of a memorial shrine. Usually, one of the people on it is particularly important to them. In many cases there are neither gravesites for the persons on the pictures, nor memorial places. Often it is the messages and instructions of the persons killed that accompany someone throughout their life. Herta Eisenstädter, for example, who now lives in New York, had such a strong bond to Europe and Austria that she did not want to leave the

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13 Alexander Freund/ Alistair Thomson (eds.), *Oral History and Photography*, New York 2011.



continent despite the NS rule. During her flight she visited her uncle in France, who more or less pressured her to leave Europe and travel to the US. She survived, while her uncle stayed in France, which had not yet been occupied at that time, and was killed. His picture, one among many others on a windowsill in her Manhattan flat, is especially important to her, as he was the one who saved her life.

“Somebody needs to remember them,”

she says when explaining why the photos mean so much to her. Sometimes, as historians, we assume responsibility for this by making recordings. We document faces, names and what the deceased mean to the survivors. Personally, this is certainly one of the key aspects of my work.

### **OBJECTS/THINGS TAKE YOU BACK**

In Audio-Visual History we animate memories much more intensively than in Oral History. In addition to places or people, we sometimes need to use “things”. Things are the object of the currently much-discussed material turn. Perhaps we should rather talk about a material return, because historical research has been working with “things” for a long time.

People are haptic beings. Touching an object from the past can help to “grasp” it, to connect with the past through this medium and go back to the array of emotions that seemed gone. Usually, there is a good reason why things from the past are still there. In audio-visual work it is our task to learn about them.

When working together with Helga Embacher, we went to Kingston, NY to visit the daughter of Salzburg’s Rabbi. During the pogrom of November 1938, her father was interned in the Dachau concentration camp and grossly ill-treated. He was never to recover from this. His daughter, Gabriele Margules, an artist, wrote a compelling memoir and a poem entitled “Hitler Never Came to Tea”, in which she portrays the dramatic story of her childhood from the perspective of her teddy bear, August. During filming we asked her whether teddy August still existed. It did. She fetched it and didn’t let go of it during the whole time she was reading or after that. It is hard to describe what you see: When cuddling her teddy bear, it seemed as if this 70-plus woman metamorphosed into the child she had once been.<sup>14</sup> At least, that was my impression. It was interesting for me that some observers found it difficult to handle this transformation and therefore blocked it off. (Sadly,) this is part of the medium of film: visible emotions (be it a voice, physical expression or disposition) polarise. It never fails to astonish me that reactions are not necessarily predictable, but sometimes surprising.

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<sup>14</sup> Helga Embacher/ Albert Lichtblau, *Hitler Never Came to Tea*, documentary film 2002; 9 min. ([www.unityv.org](http://www.unityv.org)).

The range of artefacts serving this purpose is wide. I also include personal documents such as letters or diaries, self-written texts intended for private use or for publication. Holding these old documents and reading them out loud can invoke times past. The confrontations with the past thus recorded can also be confusing when the memory of it is different. Facing one's own past begins with these things, which may lead to a new interpretation because of their unsettling nature. At this very point it becomes clear how much responsibility this work entails. It is important that the interviewees not be harmed through our work.

Some things refer to a time lost, a life that no longer exists in that form. But objects may also include clothes, books, pictures ... And to give another concrete example: Dorli Neale, an Austrian who lives near London today, is a survivor of the NS regime. Our visit to her was all about the relics she still has in her possession from the time before her expulsion. One of them was her school satchel, in which she keeps old documents. Our work resulted in an invitation to the town where she was born. She took her satchel along and visited her old school, where she talked with the students. This seemed to close a circle. This is an effect often experienced in audio-visual work: since films are used for projects and exhibitions, this leads to social activities that go beyond the actual video work.

### **Private footage**

There are plenty of audio-visual sources that we should, at last, use for historical research.<sup>15</sup> For more than half a century people have recorded their family histories on film, albeit in diverse formats. Sometimes these are unusual sources. TV stations have exhaustively used the recordings dealing with the NS period. We too should look out for them and use them. I would like to explain how valuable such sources can be by using the example of the film "Wer ist Michael Gielen?" (Who is Michael Gielen?) by Alois Pluschkowitz and Chiel van der Kruit. The composer and conductor Michael Gielen was born into a prominent family.<sup>16</sup> His father was, among other things, the director of the Vienna Burgtheater; his mother, an actress, was a member of the Steuermann family, a family of note in terms of cultural history. During our work we discovered that Michael Gielen's wife, Helga, filmed a lot and found footage that was relevant in terms of film history. With her camera, she had observed Jean-Marie Straub and his partner, Danièle Huillet, filming Arnold Schönberg's opera "Moses and Aaron". Michael Gielen conducted the opera. It was fascinating to watch old films

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15 James M. Moran, *There's No Place Like Home Video*, Minneapolis 2002.

16 Albert Lichtblau and Alois Pluschkowitz, *Wer ist Michael Gielen/ Who is Michael Gielen?* documentary film, 2001, 45 min. ([www.unitv.org](http://www.unitv.org)).

together with the couple that they themselves had not seen for a long time because they did not possess the necessary technology. Just like when looking at photographs, it is interesting to see what older people looked like when they were young, and film shows even more of their physicality and the dynamic of their movements. In this case, the films were silent, which means that the couple were able to explain in great detail what we were seeing. We staged a kind of cinema performance in which the two of them provided a commentary.

Just like in Oral History, self-produced material can be used in audio-visual work, and extracts that need clarification – for example, because something was said that was confusing or seemed implausible – can be viewed together with the interviewees. The interviewees get the opportunity to explain their own position. Whether we like it or not is of no significance in this potential phase of conflict. But it is important that we explain our own position to point to inconsistencies (again). Apart from inconsistencies, this may also be used to draw attention to contradictions in memories and to ask for clarification.

To sum up: By using audio-visual media we can now make video recordings of interviews and observe, perceive and use spaces and consciously select events for our work and go to places and look for things and sources in order to perceive the process of remembering in its various forms. Learning how to see is an exciting undertaking. And in all this, we have the privilege of working with people. It is our responsibility to take them seriously. This includes allowing contradictions. “We” should accept and appreciate that the collective meta-narratives have been replaced by fragmented ones. However, they make us unsure and are no replacement for the search for a deeper meaning, which is indeed part of our historical research. After all, what is the point of pursuing this subject? We are looking for explanations for a confusing past and present. *History Matters* – this phrase is true – otherwise historical research would be a mere end in itself. When you work with people as intensively as Oral Historians and now Audio-Visual Historians do, you need to be fully aware of the responsibility you have for the footage recorded. When working with people, we may reach boundaries that are sometimes a challenge and other times too much. Audio-Visual History gets much closer to those boundaries than Oral History. We still need to give this a lot of thought. And that is a challenge. But it is necessary, since there is no way around audio-visual media in practice-oriented work, be it when producing work for exhibitions, working on film projects or presenting our interviews on the internet. And what’s more: it’s fun.<sup>17</sup>

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17 See also Albert Lichtblau, Opening Up Memory Space. The Challenges of Audiovisual History, in: Donald A. Ritchie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook to Oral History*, Oxford-New York 2011, 277-284.