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The Visual Potential of History. Images of the Past in Film, Television and Computer Games

Abstract

In a famous quote Marx said: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.”

Today one would like to add, that film, television and computer games alter the historic event through modern visualizations of the past. Not only the historic facts and personages appear more than once, but also the representation of history multiplies itself in visual reconstructions, re-enactments and simulations in the media. What happens to history and its epistemology when it becomes an audiovisual experience? What are the different visual modes of knowledge production in historiography? Which uses of history become part of popular media culture? These questions are the starting point for an analysis of current examples of 'histotainment' and theoretical considerations about popular historiography.

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Keywords

Visualisation, histotainment, visual historic reconstruction, re-enactment, simulation, media, history, modes of knowledge production, popular media culture, popular historiography

Tony Soprano, the leading character in the television series “The Sopranos”, finds distraction in front of the television from his strenuous work as a mafia boss. One of his favourite programs is the History Channel. In the televisual representation of the past he occasionally finds inspirations for his little everyday problems. Tony Soprano was at one point watching a biography of the German field marshal Erwin Rommel (Season 5, Episode 65: “All Due Respect”) and perceives the historical figure as a man with similar problems in life (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1

In this minor anecdote about the role of history television in the narration of a television series one could catch a glimpse of the variety of issues in general representations of history in the media. A remarkable aspect is that these representations do not generally follow scholarly ideas about history.

Tony Soprano's access to history is a popular approach to a complex field of events, their narration and their images. Our view into the past is mixed with our media experiences and identities, which range from reading a history book to playing a computer game in a historical setting. By taking up a proposition from Mimi White and James Schwoch it is probably accurate to propose that film, television and computer games are "contributing to a significant transformation and dispersion of how we think about history, rather than to the loss of historical consciousness" (White, Schwoch). Even the term 'visual history' enters the discourse of academic historiography (Paul 2006).

To push the argument a little bit further: history itself is a media event. If we look back at the Second World War as a conglomeration of related historical events, it would be hard to tell how a historiography without the moving image would look like. The media are part of the on-going process, which turns events into history. The assassination of John F. Kennedy, the peaceful revolution in East Germany 1989, 9/11 and the various conflicts in the Middle East are soaked with media representations. Especially television uses obsessively the term "historic" for records in sport, for political processes, for cultural products, for media events etc. Television "acts as an agent of history and memory, recording and preserving representations to be referenced in the future" (White, Schwoch).

An element of this process is the popular historiography in the media itself. My hypothesis is that this popular historiography with the constant production and repetition of historical representations changes the way we think about history. Three concepts show exemplarily the basic media operations of history representations: document, drama and animation/simulation. The focus will then be set on the audiovisual production of knowledge in these three representational modes of history. The potential of history presentation in audiovisual media will be addressed with examples from the last years. Since it is impossible to include the whole diversity of media products about history, the primary object of the forthcoming considerations will be television, which has indeed taken over the role of a 'popular historian' (Chanan 2004, 75). But some additional remarks about film and computer games will still be made.

1. Document

"Documentary is what we might call a 'fuzzy concept'" (Nichols 2001, 21). This fuzziness applies also to the concept of 'document' in historical representations in the media. Documents are produced in a specific historical process. They are sometimes an index or have an indexical relationship to the events, which occurred in a specific timeline. Media products like a letter, a recorded speech, and a newsreel could be addressed as documents. Some documents are stored in archives and some are circulated in popular culture (Chanan 2004, 67). But the document is always a media product and is presented in the context of other media types.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

A typical combination of different audiovisual material including documents can be observed in the introductory scene of the BBC documentary “The Nazis and the final solution” from 2005. On the visual side there are the following elements: eyewitness accounts (Fig. 2), dramatic reconstructions (scenes with actors in costumes and historical settings; Fig. 3), digital animations

or simulations (Fig. 4) and film material from different archives (Fig. 5). On the sound side we can identify five major elements: the testimonies from the eyewitnesses, diegetic sound in the dramatic reconstructions, music (soundtrack and songs), citations from historical documents and the voice-over.

All these elements are edited in different ways. In the first twenty minutes of this documentary the visual documents play a minor role. Only around 10% of the time we are confronted with archive material. On the other hand the dramatic reconstructions of historical events and places occupy nearly half the time. And around 20% of the visual presentation consists of computer-generated images. Beside the visual archive material there are often the accounts of eyewitnesses as a special form of document.



Fig. 6

In television documentaries eyewitnesses are always presented in the same way. The eyewitness is filmed in a typical head and shoulder shot. They seldom address directly the viewer. They are sitting angular to the camera and the interviewer is invisible. These interviews with eyewitnesses are a regular part in the BBC documentary “The Nazis and the final solution” and of many other documentaries, which cover the recent past (Fig. 6).

Eyewitness accounts serve as authentications of the whole arrangement of visual elements, which are not directly connected to a clarification of historical facts. But the testimonies from eyewitnesses are in fact one of the most important parts in current documentaries. In a take-over and amplification of the authentication function from the archive material, the eyewitness is an anchor for all the drama and simulation scenes in a historical documentary.



Fig. 7

But this counts only for media productions which cover the recent history. For all other historical themes in a past beyond a lifetime the part of the eyewitness is replaced by the expert. It is often played by a historian, who is interviewed in exactly the same way as an eyewitness (Fig. 7). The 'expert', however, is a well-established figure on television. He is introduced in aesthetically similar interview sequences as the witness. The expert produces documents when he states proven facts and knowledge from his field of study. Clearly, the credentials function of the eyewitness remains with the expert. Only the legitimacy strategy will change from the historical experience of a single subject to current academic knowledge achieved through scholars. This knowledge is documented also in the "controlling discourse of voice-over in documentary" from a "position of mastery" (Cowie 1999, 29). The voice-over is the primal force to create a narrative. It functions as an adhesive to the different audiovisual material.

The audiovisual material from different archives reflects the history of visual media like photography, film and television in the last 150 years. The archive material was central in former documentaries and especially those dealing with the Nazi Regime. For example in Erwin Leisers "Mein Kampf" ("Den Blodiga tiden", Sweden) from 1960 the film material proved to be authentic. All this changed with the wave of oral history and the discrimination of the archive material as hegemonic and as Nazi propaganda. After that, it was possible to produce a documentary without a single scene using archive material like "Shoah" (France 1985) from Claude Lanzmann.

My thesis is: Computer simulations and dramatic reconstructions are getting more relevant in documentaries when there is no visual archive material or when the archive material does not reach the aesthetic level of a developing audiovisual culture. The authentic is the constructive in dramatic reconstructions and computer simulations. On the grounds of concrete and diffuse bits of knowledge the barracks of Auschwitz are rebuilt in the BBC documentary as computer images and the events of the past are filmed as dramatic reconstructions.

For the present, the 'extinction' of eyewitnesses of the Nazi period means a further crisis of authentication and documentation. The computer animation wins a precarious credential function through its use in scientific context. Precarious means that at the same time computer images are also perceived as a sort of special effect.

The dominance of the history of the 20th century in television documentaries is a result of the existence of visual material from the film and television archives. The use of archive material as a primary source of visual history representation draws a time line between recent events and events in a distant past (Lagny 2003, 122).

2. Drama



Fig. 8

The acting scenes or dramatic reconstructions are key elements in my major example “Auschwitz: The Nazis & the ‘final solution’” and in almost all current productions of history television. Although dramatic reconstructions as a method of knowledge production in the television documentary formats are still relatively new, it was quite common in early cinema to stage historic events (Whissel 2002). One example is “Attack on a China Mission” (GB 1900) from James Williamson. It is based on the Boxer Rebellion of the early months of 1900 and shows the rescue of a missionary family by British soldiers (Fig. 8). With these visual reconstructions of historic events there is always a moment of re-enactment.

The imaginary source of this method can also be placed on various historical and philosophical ideas of the 20th century: the practice and theory of the re-enactment. In the first half of the 20th Century Robin George Collingwood founded the process of re-enactment as the basis for historical research (“The Idea of History”, 1936). With re-enactment he meant to re-enact the thought of a historical agent (D’Oro 2000). For Collingwood re-enactment is a purely intellectual task of the historian (Cook 2005, 491). There is a second form of re-enactment as a historical practice. Events of the past are reconstructed in all possible details and at the original places such as battles. This second form of re-enactment is currently experiencing a boom especially as a recreational activity or as part of a theme park. “Yet it is combat re-enactment that is the most popular re-enactment activity” (Groot 2006, 392). This development can be traced back to Hollywood movies like “Platoon” (USA 1986, Oliver Stone), “Saving Private Ryan” (USA 1998, Steven Spielberg) or “Letters from Iwo Jima” (USA 2006, Clint Eastwood). These movies explore the capacity of the audiovisual image as “a representation of the real and a source of fantasy and identification” (Sturken 1997, 74).

This observation can also be verified in another medium: the computer game. Very popular first-person shooter series like “Call of Duty” (2003-) or “Medal of Honour” (1999-) prove this trend in re-enactment. They put the player in the place of a combat soldier and let him fight virtually through historic battlegrounds (Rejack 2007). In other games like the “Tomb Raider” series (1996-) or “Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune” (2007) the historical setting triggers only the events of the story.

In television re-enactment became an issue in the ‘shift’ to reality television during the 1990s. Since then television produces reality formats of ‘living history’ and first-person history like “The 1900 House” (1999, Channel 4), “The 1940s House” (2001, Channel 4), “Surviving the Iron Age” (2001, BBC), “The Edwardian Country House” (2002, Channel 4), “The Ship” (2002, BBC), “The Trench” (2002, BBC), “Frontier House” (2004, Channel 4), “Outback House” (2004, ABC), “Abenteuer 1900: Leben im Gutshaus” (2004, ARD), “Windstärke 8: Das Auswandererschiff” (2005, ARD), “Texas Ranch House” (2006, PBS), “Die Bräuteschule” (2007, ARD) etc. All these productions demonstrate the notion of television as historian (Edgerton 2000). Through the eyes of the participants in these television formats the viewer experiences the “otherness of history” (Groot 2006, 403).



Fig. 9

the past” (Agnew 2007, 300). The drama of history or historical narrative in the media takes its course in this balance of acting and understanding. The television documentary series “Metropolis – The Power of Cities” (Germany, Canada 2003) shows how dramatic reconstructions and computer simulations conjoin to a historic experience and a specific knowledge space. Real actors in historic costumes are performing in a realistic simulation of ancient cities (Fig. 9).

The detailed screening of historical situations in combination with computer simulations makes the transition from documentary film to docu-drama and feature film very fluid. Finally, the characteristics of fictional television formats cannot be avoided in the re-enactment scenes. In our examples “Auschwitz” and “Metropolis” the re-enactments with their diegetic sound are ‘cross talked’ with the voice-over of the commentary. The omniscient commentary embanks the fictional effect of the re-enactments. It also marks with its neutral tone the re-enactments as documentary elements. This might be a formal difference to fictional modes in film and television.

Nevertheless, there are strategies of representation, which stress the motivations or causalities of historical events. Because of these strategies of representation the dramatic elements in documentaries differ hardly from staging the psychological motivations of characters in docu-dramas and feature films. History is then defined as “the substance of transformative experience and staging” (Agnew 2007, 303).

3. Animation/Simulation



Fig. 10

“Auschwitz: The Nazis & the ‘Final Solution’” begins with a computer animation. From a bird's eye view the immense expansion of the concentration camp is shown to the viewer (Fig. 10). This animation is accompanied by the musical theme of the documentary, and the voice-over. Here the soundtrack and the voice-over are important to glue the aesthetically very different image material together, so that in the end a coherent story emerges. The austere music defines the emotional atmosphere of the documentary; the allegedly neutral

All these different media experiences are connected to various modes of drama. Within the concept of re-enactment a real experience could be a ‘first person’ involvement in a historic battle or an emotional involvement with the problems of ‘normal’ people in the 1940s; it could also be an immersion into the narration of historic events or the performance in historic settings. “What these forms share is a concern with personal experience, social relations and everyday life, and with conjectural and provisional interpretations of

A new element in history film and television is the computer animation or simulation. It is part of a general development of digital techniques in visual media. This is not only a technological change, but we can observe also a change in aesthetics and in the mixture of different audiovisual material. The computer animation or simulation is certainly both a kind of witness and a form of re-enactment. But its specific qualities in the production of knowledge in history television will be the subject of further consideration.

commentary creates the units of narration and arranges the images, in this case the computer animation.

Following this first visual, emotional and narrative setting is an abrupt cut and a dramatic reconstruction begins. On the soundtrack the music glides over this visual breach.

The computer animation is running without any indication that we see a digital animation. This indicates the successful popularization of digital animations in documentary television and film. This visual element has not to be explained. At the same time the virtual overview over the concentration camp functions as an establishing shot for the entire documentary: "This is the story of Auschwitz and those who turned it into a death factory", the voice-over declares at this point.

A further development of the establishing shot is a virtual flight or ride around to a location. This visual form of introduction of a place of action is equally represented in documentary and fictional formats in film, television and computer games. Another function of these flights or rides besides the introduction of place is the bridging from outer to inner space.

The genre of ridefilm has its roots in early cinema. In the early productions of the film the realisation of camera rides with the aid of locomotives or cars were quite common. In the age of computer animation and simulation a large number of trips and flights were used, among other things, to test the performance of software and hardware. Today, this form of computer animation or simulation as ride or flight is absolutely conventionalised and established. They can be found as a function in Google Earth, cut scenes of computer games and virtual rides in amusement parks. With the rides a cultural form is established, which has a history across the different media. The aesthetic character of virtual rides and flights are similar in all media formats.



Fig. 11

The virtual fly-throughs in the Auschwitz documentary are inspired from architectural models. One flight is typical for the evocation of subjective effects on the viewer. The artificiality of the fly-through is quite visible (Fig. 11). A good example for the artificiality lies in the purity of the images in which human beings are not included. Another element is the movement of the camera without reference to human motions. Nevertheless, a subjectivity effect arises with the attraction of the images and

the spectacular visual impressions as an excess of production and as an experience of the viewer.

In a way, these digital fly-throughs are "(not) normal rides," which – according to Jürgen Link – are providing "application templates for denormalisation" in the constitution of the subject (Link 1997, 57f.). Their tracks are more or less contingent and experimental, and they offer the thrill of changing subjectivities. In comparison with the interviews with eyewitnesses and to the re-enactments the virtual flights and rides don't put the viewer in a position opposite to the witnesses or in the position of observers of the dramatic reconstructions. The viewer in virtual flights and rides is drawn into the action space through the non-narrative element of computer animation or simulation and their visual attraction. Furthermore the digital animation or simulation closes visual gaps (Anderson 2000, 18/19). In doing so, the animation is used when no archive material is available, and when possible, alternative scenarios should be presented.



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

The latter shows in another scene from the BBC documentary, in which the Nazi expansion plans for the city of Auschwitz are converted into digital 'reality'. Starting from a dramatic reconstruction (Fig. 12) the scene turns into a two-dimensional map of the city (Fig. 13) and is then projected into a three-dimensional model, which is discovered by a virtual fly-through (Fig. 14). This model remains on the table of the architect and therefore in the diegetic space of the dramatic reconstruction. Then additional virtual camera pans and flights explore it.

The details of the expansion plans are visually demonstrated through the transition from black and white to colour images. In the end the three-dimensional representation transforms back into a two-dimensional architecture drawing on a worktable.



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17

In the ZDF series "Göring – A Career" from 2006, the scenario of a digital simulation of the projected Hermann Göring museum is realized to get an insight into Göring's psyche. The direction of the digital ride from the outside of the virtual museum inwards serves as a metaphor for the exploration of Göring's soul life (Fig. 15-17). The digital ride is introduced from the voice-over with the words "This is Göring's real world".

The animation or simulation of historic events became a large part of docu-

mentaries about an epoch that has produced little or nothing visual at all. "Television encourages viewers to participate in the past, and the medium's animations may also help to confirm or deny hypotheses about the past" (Hanna 2007, 542). Then the computer animation or simulation fills visual gaps. In the introduction to the ZDF-documentary "Giant of the seas" (2006), we experience a mixture of computer animation and dramatic reconstruction, which completely fill in the visual gaps, which events lying as far back leave to present audiovisual media (Fig. 18-20). In combination with computer animation and dramatic reconstructions, the visual gaps in the story are continuously refilled.



Fig. 18



Fig 19



Fig. 20

An epistemological reason for the use of computer animation or simulation is their connection to the discourse of scientific control (Wolf 1999). Events of the past should be made manageable like natural phenomena. A similar strategy of control is pursued in scientific simulations of weather, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes etc. The aim of these operations is calculability, prediction and control of events. Epistemologically, the digital simulation and animation of Auschwitz or Göring's museum

or Chinese maritime expeditions of the 15th century fall into a pattern of dominance and control. The peculiarity of the historical event is the control in the post-review. Auschwitz is no longer the unknown horrors of our imagination. It will be manageable in the digital model and, at least in the post-viewing in the truest sense of the word, predictable. This visual version of Auschwitz presents itself in the computer animation without victims, without violence and without the disastrous living conditions.

The calculation of history provides the control potentials for the possible (as in the animation for the projected expansion of a concentration camp) and the factual (the explanation for the Holocaust). "Computer simulation has allowed the conceptual world to enter the perceptual one, by concretizing the imaginary or speculative through visualizations" (Wolf 1999, 290). Only the forecast of future history seems difficult.

The lack of prognostic potential of history television marks a difference to other documentary formats such as in "The Future is Wild", a BBC documentary of 2003, which presented in computer simulations the fauna and flora of the Earth in 5, 100 and 200 million years into the future. The abundance of increasingly complex visualization procedures derived from a teleological discourse, which was intended to capture the 'predictable truth' and which made the world organized and controllable.

The 'otherness' in the modes of history representation in the media is demonstrated in comparison to science documentaries. Document, drama and animation/simulation are interwoven in a very special mixture. The combined use of different media forms produces the enormous diversity of historical constructions in the media. In popular historiography, documents are only one of many elements of the historical representation. With the elements of drama, especially with dramatic reconstructions and re-enactments, we can observe an 'affective turn' in the presentation of history. The simulation or animation elements widen the visual potential of history. History becomes a bodily experience, a scientific enterprise and a visual sensation.

These new trends in popular historiography interact with 'classical' concepts of historical understanding. One way to explore this interaction between different systems of knowledge production could be a media history of historiography. Modes and forms of visualization,

reconstruction, variation and repetition are only a few keywords, which could open interesting fields of research. The representations of the past have already altered. The reflection about the impact of media helps to understand this epistemological change.

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