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MOVING FROM ORAL TO AUDIOVISUAL HISTORY. NOTES ON PRAXIS

Oral Historians' Motivations

This essay discusses some main aspects of audiovisual history, as a continuation of oral history. Oral history moved to interviewing people, audiovisual historians videotape those interviews – rather than “merely” audiotaping or taking notes when interviewing. There are many other aspects that would be worth discussing, such as disambiguation, duration, ethics, transcripts, archiving, interviewer training, privacy and libel laws, research, audiences (real and imagined), content, authenticity, interpretation, taking care of all parties involved – interviewers, interviewees and camera crew, methodological limits, theoretical implications, and even unprofessional errors. But these cannot all be covered in one article. Oral history is a key part of a historical refocusing on ordinary people’s experience, and it has led to a paradigm shift in historiography. The traditional work of historians did not previously include generating the sources for their own research themselves. But going out like ethnographers or anthropologists to observe, listen and talk to people has led to fundamental discussions about methodology. We can ask both why oral historians go out into the field to create their sources and, conversely, why many contemporary historians still don’t. So, what are oral and audiovisual historians looking for when they interview?

“Giving Voice” or “Dig Where You Stand” were slogans of early oral historians in Austria and Germany connecting the methodology to a more inclusive approach, including women’s, working class or minorities’ history. Oral history methods made it possible to focus on those groups who were persecuted under National Socialism. These methods made it also possible to research the Holocaust by interviewing survivors, rather than being dependent (exclusively) on documents that had been produced by perpetrators.

I was always fascinated by how individuals shape their life stories on various layers and try to make sense of their experiences through particular narratives. The memory of emotions is often strong. “Going deeper” fragments life stories into puzzle-like segments. Therefore it needs experienced interviewers guiding interviewees along life stories to make sure that both sides understand the process of individual memory re/building. Working together with teachers and pupils, I experienced how this process can function as a “mirror”, in that discussing other people’s experiences helps to reflect one’s own attitudes. It was eye opening to learn by listening to people describing their own past, because their experience and their own interpretation are often different from the conclusions of historians’ analytic approaches. Above all, it has been exciting to visit interviewees all over the world. It opened many doors and was personally extraordinarily enriching. One of the many motivations to do oral history and to videotape the accounts/interviews was to save voices for future generations and research.

The Afterlife of Interviews

Of course, oral historians set out with a purpose, although they might not always be fully aware of or transparent about it. Sometimes it is a project and the search for witnesses to a particular event or time who may be able to answer certain research questions. Aside from listening to someone’s life story, oral historians may get access to private archives and otherwise unknown sources such as photographs, letters, diaries, objects, films etc. Whenever I interview someone, I take my computer, mobile scanner and camera with me. I find I approach things differently depending whether I am interviewing for an archive or a project with a specific framework, or a book or an article. I may interview someone simply because she/he interests me. I did not use most of my interviews with Jewish survivors for research purposes, as it was more important to me to save their life story and hand it over to an archive to be preserved. It became essential to find an institution willing to archive and catalogue oral history interviews. In Austria, the *Österreichische Mediathek* |¹ archives testimonies; in New York, I was able to

cooperate with the *Leo Baeck Institute* and the *Österreichischer Gedenkdienst* in a project entitled the *Austrian Heritage Collection Project*.¹² In my professional life, I have filmed interviews needed for school projects or exhibitions.¹³ There were a few people with whom I decided to work extensively for a book based on interviews. My first published book began unintentionally when I interviewed a woman whose recollections seemed to be endless. After several visits, I decided to interview her more systematically for publication (Lichtblau/Jahn 1995). For book projects, two interviewers generally record about 40 hours of interviews, which generates approximately 1,000 pages of transcribed text, which has to be edited, corrected and approved by the interviewee.¹⁴ I filmed only one of these extensive interviews.

Methods for Audiovisual History

Since the digital revolution in audiovisual media, oral history has opened up to film. This is a new era, as until the turn of the millennium it was almost impossible to film interviews cheaply but to an appropriate quality. To give an example: Steven Spielberg's *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation* project always hired a cinematographer, who filmed the interviews with a costly camera primarily on analogue Betacam-format.¹⁵ There was a lot to learn from the impressive Spielberg-project: interviewer training, a certain pattern to the structure of the interviews, feedback, supervision, strict guidelines for videographers, release forms etc. It set a benchmark for other projects, such as the *Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project*.¹⁶ Many oral historians film their interviews for good reason. Contemporary historians often use filmed interviews for exhibitions or other projects e.g. for web-based presentations. Therefore it is crucial that audiovisual historians reflect this new methodology, as there are many differences compared with the basic oral history approach. Oral historians have to develop a sensitivity for listening and an awareness of hidden messages or offers that generate new questions, helping both sides be open to various layers of memory. This gives interviewers the opportunity to stimulate associative or reflective memory and statements. Compared with the audiovisual methodology, audiotaped

oral history interviews offer a more intimate setting, as interviewees often seem to forget that they are being recorded and become more conversational. As an aside, this is not what is intended, as the interviewees should always be aware that they are being recorded. What oral historians were doing was generating spoken life stories based on storytelling using various approaches to structure the interviews (see Lynn 2010; Obertreis 2012; Perks/Thomson 2016; Ritchie 2011; 2015).¹⁷ Many oral historians open their interviews by saying: “Please tell me your life story.” One of the main differences with journalistic interviews is that oral historians do not use the ping-pong, question-answer-question format. Working with audiovisual media has forced oral historians to learn about film language and its methodological implications. It has also changed the role of interviewers, as they now represent the imagined audience and it is essential that interviewer and interviewee continuously interact. An interviewer should, for example, maintain eye contact with the interviewee and be seen to be paying attention, as it would look strange if the interviewee were looking round all the time as if bored or looking for someone to talk to. Working with audiovisual media also means having to overcome the traditional one-to-one talking-head interview and open up for other approaches.

For example:

1. Observation

We now have the chance not only to interview but also to include more cinematographic practices. The camera eye helps us to observe certain situations or moments, such as commemoration rituals. In the case of events involving genocide survivors, it was and is irritating that politicians and celebrities push themselves to the fore. The camera means we do not have to interfere, just observe. It shows how important moments, such as commemoration days, and important spaces, such as the sites of former mass violence, can be documented. An observing camera may also trigger activities that would not happen if the camera were not present.

2. Interaction

As previously in oral history, audiovisual history can bring people together

to discuss their experiences or observe when witnesses get into controversial conversations with other people about what they experienced.

3. Enactment

If witnesses agree, it is useful to enact certain situations that may surprise them into moving beyond their usual narrative or help them retell their recollections in different ways. A different setting may reshape the interaction. Telling your life story to a trained oral historian-academic may be different from recounting your recollections to a group of pupils with a different set of questions. There are many other forms of enactment: we can use music, films, paintings, role play etc.

4. The power of objects

Some objects are symbols for profound stories and experiences. In oral history we used photo albums to trigger memories. Using photo albums for audiovisual history provides a richness, and previously unseen private film footage is a new source we should use. Artefacts such as toys may help witnesses to reconnect with their past.

5. Audiovisual history can adopt from oral history the way to raise questions, for example how to approach each new topic with open questions that allow the respondents to focus on particular aspects their own way.

Interviews for exhibitions and other projects are often set up so that you don't see or hear the interviewer. You have to explain to interviewees that they may be interrupted if they start to answer before the interviewer has finished asking the question, because we do not want the interviewer's voice on the film. It is essential to find strategies to include all the information in the responses. I often suggest to interviewees that they start their reply with a variation of my question. So if I say: "Could you please tell me about your school experiences?" they start with: "My school experiences ...". Filming in such a way that the interviewers are not seen or heard means they have to use silent body language for interaction. A facial expression can signal that clarification is needed. Furrowed brows can indicate scepticism. Smiling, nodding, shaking your head, looking down, crossing your arms, or a search-

ing look are some of many ways to send out signals without using a single word or sound. It is immediately apparent when interviewees get bored. There are many ways to retain their attention. A provocative question would be one way, but there perhaps we tread the thin line between respect and disrespect, which we should avoid. Sometimes we may raise sensitive questions. For example: I interviewed a camp survivor who had been accused of faking a story in previous testimony she had given and “exaggerating” how long she had been imprisoned in Auschwitz. When the truth emerged, she was no longer invited regularly to schools and memorial celebrations as a highly regarded survivor. Like others, I interviewed her about her camp experiences, but I also asked about her experience of losing her reputation as a reliable witness. It is easy to judge other people. I think it is important to allow people space to give clarification in their own words. In this case, it was obvious that the length of time was irrelevant compared with the horror and trauma she had experienced. Many camp survivors say minutes seemed to be like hours, days like weeks. ¹⁸ As with oral history, we sometimes trigger emotional responses by simple questions such as: “How did you feel?” There is no rule about when a question like this is appropriate. For filming, such questions are important because we want to share experiences and understand how they affected or influenced someone. As everybody is different, each interviewer should find his or her own way to address former emotions without becoming voyeuristic.

Learn to See

Learning to see was enriching for oral historians, too, as the world is full of references to the past. Using audiovisual media may open up our approach to memory spaces. What we can see representing the past can be related to what it means to individuals. There are many exciting ways to rediscover our varied past. For example, I took Leo Glueckselig (1914–2003), a Holocaust survivor who had escaped from Nazi-Austria to the US, back to his former neighbourhood in Vienna and asked him to tell me whatever came into his mind. Walking round, he unfolded his memories of buildings and places

in expressive, vivid storytelling. He was able to shape his recollections in a way that made me as a listener feel I'd gone back into past times and spaces. The architectural relics of the past sometimes fuelled his recollections. He showed me the back yard where his first love had rented an apartment. The walls had not been renovated since the war and they were still full of bullet holes. Another example: rooms are full of signs of time, sometimes expressed by the designs of everyday items. Book shelves may give insights into reading habits, attitudes or political and religious orientations. Learning to see also means allowing time for this process of observing, and creating an awareness of how important the interior of rooms may be. With their camera team, oral historians as experts should take charge of what is shown, and how. Interviews often take place in people's homes and living rooms. As soon as we include visual information, we should make considered decisions about how to position that person within their room. The visual information should be related to the person we see in a way that does not jar. This sounds easy but may not be, as some rooms are overloaded and therefore it is difficult to focus on the interviewee. We should also take care that interviewees are comfortable in seating that does not make noises whenever they move. Interviewees may embody their time by using fashions, hairstyles or words and phrases no longer used. In 1992, I worked with a colleague, Helga Embacher, on a documentary film released in 1993 about writers living in exile in New York. One of them was the poet Mimi Grossberg (1905–1997) who lived in Washington Heights. Her German was the educated German of the 1930s and even her dresses seemed old fashioned. Everything referred back to the era in Vienna before the Nazis took over. As a milliner, she had dozens of beautiful old hats in her apartment. Embacher used the hats as an opportunity to talk to Mimi Grossberg about her training in Vienna, which had helped her find work after she escaped to New York. New York in the 1990s was a city in transition. Modern districts like Midtown Manhattan contrasted with those such as Washington Heights, which looked like film sets for 1930s movies. We tried to refer to this by asking Mimi Grossberg about the meaning of the word "Heimat" – surrounded by Midtown's skyscraper scenery. The

complex interaction between spoken words, and signifiers of time and space is something we can use.

“Casting”

But there is also the question: how does one actually find interviewees for audiovisual history? The answer is simple: by “casting” them. As oral historians, we “cast” all the time, whenever we decide who we do or do not want to interview. But interviewing on film for use in audiovisual projects further narrows the range of choices. For film, it is even more important that both interviewer and interviewee are fully interested. The more famous a person is the more difficult this can be. As an aside, it is astounding that audiovisual media somehow has an independent dimension in which some people’s facial expressions, gestures and voice appear more attractive on film than they are in everyday life. It also can be the other way round. Which is why it makes sense to carry out screen tests before one decides to work with a person extensively. There are also various ethical aspects to this casting, as we have to inform the interviewees in detail about our plans and should brief them about the way we work, for example that we need plenty of time to prepare the camera, light and sound, and that sometimes we have to remove objects from the setting that would confuse the visual information. The interviewee must always agree to any planned staging or other intervention. Release forms have always made clear that witnesses are responsible for whatever they tell us and how they behave in front of camera. Of course, it seems easier to interview someone you like. Few interviewers want an unappealing interviewee. But we should be aware of our power to exclude or include sources and stories. Sometimes it is important to confront yourself with your own prejudices. Although this is challenging and sometimes stressful, I like to work with people who have more than just a sympathetic charisma and to give them the opportunity to express opinions or positions different from mine. As with oral history, audiovisual recording offers the chance to clarify different positions in conflict phases. Nevertheless, there are limits, and I wouldn’t work with people who are arrogant, racist or sexist. Like in film, we

cast because we want to inspire a future audience with identification, confrontation, irritation, information or amazement and a desire to know more. All this affects the decisions about who we want to work with.

Language – Text – Context – Voice – Body.

One Interview, Different Approaches

Take one interview as a source and consider how different it is whether you listen to it, read it, or watch and listen to it. It is the case that we as listeners will often visualise someone if we can only hear their voice, but not see them. We assign them a gender role and age, and often form an image of them as tall or small, skinny or stout, friendly or blunt. This effect diminishes if all we have is a transcript of the interview, as we are not swayed by the voice, vocal range, sounds or rhythm. As historians we generally use clips of interviews for analytical texts and embed personal quotations to other sources for context. Reading passages from interviews seems to create the most distance. This is why oral historians encourage those who quote from transcripts to listen to the voice, too, to get an alternative and wider understanding of what that person wanted to express. Seeing a person influences viewers through the whole range of non-vocal expressions related to body language, clothes or setting. Compared with transcripts or audio formats, there is a stronger tension between the content of testimonies and the classification of the interviewees based on emotional ranking by viewers. Within moments someone is liked or disliked, seems interesting or not. If someone dislikes or likes a person it is difficult to listen carefully and non-judgmentally. For academic purposes therefore, it is advised first to read a transcript, then to listen to the interview and finally to watch it.

Problems & Benefits: The Need for Theoretical and Methodological Debate

The theoretical and methodological debate about audiovisual history is still underdeveloped and there is little training for it in lectures at university level. Using audiovisual media requires opening interdisciplinary approaches

and cooperating with communication studies and other academic disciplines. 19 Nevertheless, there is a backlog in demand for skills training at all levels, from conducting the interviews for audiovisual media, and handling cameras and sound, to editing, analysis and presentation. The complexity necessitates a time-consuming process of training, ongoing experience and feedback. In Europe there is little understanding about this, so we often face rather dilettante “learning by doing”. First, there is the challenge of dealing with trauma and taboos. There is simply no excuse when interviewers make a traumatic experience worse because they lack proper training. Interviewing survivors of concentration or extermination camps I expected to hear traumatic experiences. But often traumatic experiences pop up unexpectedly in interviews. We may not know if someone has experienced something traumatic. As a rule, if it does we tell the interviewee that it is not necessary to go into detail. Sometimes we cannot stop the narration of the traumatic experience. In those moments, we are responsible that the interviewees get the chance to finish what they want to say. Taking responsibility also means distancing ourselves, in the sense that interviewers should not follow emotionally into the traumatic situation. Nevertheless, we are emotionally affected. Sometimes the interviewees want to stop the interview, and we have to accept that. However, it is important to lead the interviewee back into the present time and his or her everyday life before we leave. Therefore, as a rule, we never have another appointment we must rush off to after an interview – to allow as much time as needed. It is also important to reassure the interviewee that it was appropriate to share the traumatic experience. As interviewers we also have to be careful of ourselves, as there is the danger of secondary traumatisation (see Rickard 1998).

Secondly, historians don’t need to know all the technical details of filming, but it is good to know basics. I therefore try to work with a professional camera crew for technically high standards. It also allows the interviewer to focus on the dialogue and interaction. After the interview, it may be beneficial for the team to share the experiences. Working with audiovisual media has advantages, and can be enlightening and enriching, thrilling and challenging.

It is a lifelong learning about history, the meaning of memory, experiences, emotions, resilience and so on. Above all, it offers exciting insights into many lives.

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- 8 See also: van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score. Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Penguin
- 9 Salzburg University has a history department and a department of communication science.