

# Media and memory: the presentation and 'use' of witnesses in sound and image

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## RESUMO

O artigo estuda o registro de testemunhos em som e imagem, bem como os efeitos desse registro e das mídias, em geral, sobre as pessoas entrevistadas. O autor expõe sua experiência com depoimentos de sobreviventes da Segunda Guerra Mundial na Alemanha e analisa diversos aspectos, como a ética no uso dessas entrevistas em filmes, e as relações entre ciência, pedagogia e jornalismo. O autor comenta a reinterpretação de depoimentos pelas gerações posteriores e recorre a quatro exemplos de sua própria família para expor como são variáveis e complexos os julgamentos de personagens antigas no decorrer da história.

Palavras-chave: Memória; entrevistas; registro em som e imagem; Alemanha, século XX.

## ABSTRACT

This article looks at the recording of witnesses in sound and image, as well as the effects of this recording and of the media in general on the people interviewed. The author discusses his experience with statements from survivors of the Second World War in Germany and analyzes various questions, such as ethics in the use of these interviews in films, and relations between science, pedagogy and journalism. The author comments on the reinterpretation of statements by later generations and draws on four examples from his own family to show how the judgment of old characters during history is complex and variable.

Keywords: Memory; interviews; registration in sound and image; Germany, twentieth century.

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## QUESTIONS

The themes of media and memory or witnesses in sound and image covers various questions:

- The use of video recording or annotations made during conversations, although this aspect can be attributed in a general manner to the relationship of writing to orality and visuality.
- The ‘use’ of interviews in science and in educational work, in exhibitions and memorials, in fiction films or in documentaries and *docudramas*; this also involves the relationship between science, pedagogy and journalism.
- Biographical interviews in video, audio tapes and transcription suffer from various processes of aging, and some of them even suffer from ‘obsolescence.’ In relation to the inter-war period, national socialism, the Second World War and the period of the occupation of Germany,<sup>1</sup> we are going through a transition: we still have live witnesses, but soon we will be without them. What will be done – possibly in a manner different from now – in the new generations with the audio recordings and the visual documentation of these experiences?
- The issue also involves ethics when we deal with statements in films, especially in relation to the question of the public and private.
- It can also be looked at from the ‘other side’ completely (and this is the usual question): the effect of the media on the memories of interviewees needs to be understood, since this can interfere in the credibility of other witnesses.

It is with the last question that I intend to start, afterwards touching on the others – briefly, taking into account the brevity of this work – with the objective of sensitizing ourselves to the use of medias and to the recording of witnesses in audio and video.

## THE EFFECT OF MEDIA ON MEMORY

When several years ago I interviewed Mrs. S. – a woman with a social democratic inclination who had been expelled from Silesia and who now lives in the Ruhr region – and asked about her experiences in the post-war period, she talked a lot about the difficulties in the integration of the refugees, but also about the almost always good reception in the workplace and about the great significance of the monetary reform and of the balancing of the responsibilities in her own life. But she got completely lost when I asked her about her memories of the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany (1949). Nothing occurred to her – as actually happened with many of our interviewees from the east. In our second meeting Mrs. S. made an extremely vivacious description of the emergence of the Federal Constitution and the founding of the Republic. She knew about the Conference of Herrenchiemsee and emphasized the role of Carlo Schmid and Annemarie Renger, i.e., important and charismatic social democrats. Naturally I tried to discover what had caused the change in her memory. Mrs. S. avoided the question, or maybe she felt she had been caught out. Nevertheless, she explained – in a manner somewhat more agitated than before – that she had always been a reader of newspapers and that her children had learned about the question in school. With this her memories had been reawakened. But shortly afterwards there emerged the fact that two nights previously a film about Annemarie Renger had been shown on television discussing everything that she was now transmitting as if they were her own memories.

We can thus say that people do not remember their own experiences at a determined time, but rather the representations of that time, which have been transmitted by various media. Generally speaking, this initial impression of the lack of credibility of interviewees, or even their falsity, has been rapidly propagated among various representatives of the academic community linked to history as an argument against research that involves witnesses.

However, the problem of credibility of people in relation to media and memory is naturally more complex. I could have started this text with another story. Mrs M., interviewed by me as part of a project about memories of the bombing of Dresden in February 1945, was strongly critical of a television film, a *docudrama* about the air attacks on the city, in which the plot centered on a love story between a German woman and a British pilot whose plane was shot down. She brought to a much deeper level arguments which defined the story

narrated in the film as impossible. According to her the film contained a series of 'false reports' which she classified with some precision and tried to refute.

Both examples – and many others I could present – show that *media* reports about an epoch, an event, or even about the impact of certain events, can have various effects on witnesses' memories and on their narratives. The task and the art of the interview and interpretation consist precisely of discovering if a description made as if it were something related to the person results from what the media has exposed and/or their experiences, if *it fits into the other experiences of the person* being questioned, or if it appears as false and implausible.

In other words: what has to be discussed is where certain memories, opinions and orientations came from, so that we can coordinate them and interpret this in the context of biographic exposure. However, we have to protect ourselves from the assumption that presentations in the media are assumed in an equal form by different persons. On the contrary, the work of interpretation in itself begins with the recognition that some of these presentations come from newspapers, are heard, or are seen. However, this work is sometimes precociously considered unnecessary, as if everything was nothing other than a narrative borrowed from this film or that film. On the contrary, it is necessary to investigate why some elements in a presentation in the media are adopted by some interviewees, while other interviewees are affected by other elements. Even the contrary can be argued: the adoption of *certain* reports present in the media can be the key to interpreting some statements. Perhaps Mrs. S., incriminated, found the appropriate term for some of these reflections in the explanation that her memories had been 'refreshed' by the film about Annemarie Renger.

It is worth bringing another scientific argument in here: experiences are never identical to what is directly lived. Experience is the working of life experiences and history.<sup>2</sup> Life experiences are recognizably perceived, worked through and narrated in very distinct manners; for example in function of origin, social environment, sex, education, religious and political orientation; they also depend on the 'offers' for this preparation which comes from other people who with have lived something similar, from literature, from media and monuments, or also from official educational policy. It would be naïve to believe that some people do not 'incorporate' reports coming from the media or narratives of others in their own memories or reports of life, consciously or not. If we are sincere, we will admit that we do the same or something similar. We insert the experiences of others, the reports of third parties in our narrative

about the important phases of life, whether as a proven allusion, or in our own supposed experiences and life experiences.

The analysis of the reports of experiences show the difficulty in discovering memories free of the influence of sources coming from the media or other persons, especially of the family. However, when the research with witnesses examines above all the 'worked through' history and its effects, instead of 'facts and personalities,' then this objection is not as relevant as it seems at first view: in this case the 'adaptation' of these sources to our experiences is more important than what the possible sources can possess in themselves or may not have been used by interviewers, since what is being dealt with is content and ways of working with history – and here the adaptation of the reports of third parties always plays a role.

However, something different from this can be found in reports of *eyewitnesses* about certain events. If these people are really credible, then the investigation of their accounts has to be able to withstand investigation better than those of their contemporaries, which signifies that the origin of their knowledge should be carefully examined, that their reports should be compared with those of other witnesses, or that the contradictions in their memories should be exposed and compared with other sources.

There is a totally diverse aspect: acting in an opposite sense to the examples presented until now, we collected a large number of personal narratives that play a primary role in leading science or journalism to determined clues. For examples, the first research about concentration camps and the Holocaust, the examination of prisoner of war camps and special Soviet camps in Germany. This research emerged at a time when there were very little or no coverage in the media about these issues. In this case it was the personal memories which encouraged the development of research, articles, and films, or simply made them possible.

An example of this: recently during a biographical interview about forced labor, Mr. F., a *sinti* gypsy from East Prussia, told me that the Third Reich authorities separated the gypsies from their families, isolating them and dividing them among different villages and rural zones. Since they were shortly afterwards forbidden to move between communities, they lost track of each other and only looked for each other again after the war – most often in vain because many had been killed. This form of repression had not until then been dealt with research into the national socialist gypsy policy. However, in the meantime we know something about various other cases.

## THE 'USE' OF WITNESSES IN SCIENCE AND IN EDUCATION

Interviews and their interpretation in the ambit of science, pedagogy and journalism tend to be the same, a widely diffused error.

For example, when guests are invited to give a class, the discussion of this tends to revolve around the effects of this on the students, the didactic utility of the visit, the commiseration, or – with a little irony – the identification of the students with a subjective destiny within a broader history. This destiny is presented with an grandiosity resulting from age, whether the guest is a victim, a martyr, an objector, a hero, a man, or a woman. Ultimately, what is involved in most cases is an impressionistic illustration of a historic event or historic unrolling, whose true meaning can be learned from other sources. Furthermore, in my opinion it is not rare to develop in schools a terrible practice in which emotional identification, the 'politically correct,' almost always results in a schematized spectacle of the relationship between the subject and history and of history with 'professional' witnesses. Seen by themselves these apparitions do not appear bad, since they have to satisfy the stipulated objectives and nothing else. However, anyone who has witnessed the behavior of students – how they can be intimidated and silent, sometimes even embarrassed when concentration camp survivors or prisoners from Soviet camps make presentations – can have a notion of differences between science and (bad) pedagogy in the use of witnesses. How can an adolescent 'critically' examine witnesses who bring with them such terrible life experiences? How can the existence of other sources be called attention to? Sometimes I ask myself whether in various cases it would not be better to present and discuss in school excerpts from interviews on video, instead of bringing these people to the school. The 'authenticity' and the 'grandiosity' of age would be missing, but in compensation the students would have freedom to discuss. In summary, educators have to (learn to) decide what is the most adequate means to reach their objective.

In science, at least in historic science, biographic interviews are carried out in great detail; in it interviewees initially narrate their whole lives and interviewers can, with plenty of time and an objective in mind, question them, or even discuss a particular point. After this the narratives can be compared with those of other persons and then interpreted. If necessary, other meetings can be organized for further interviews.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, it seems sensible that students carry out their own brief research in which as well as drawing on written or visual sources, they can

carry out interviews. Thus, it is unquestionable and essentially more simple to compare the narratives of those being interviewed with other sources and to keep distance from their affirmations. Our experience indicates that this does not weaken the emotional identification, for example, with concentration camp survivors, but place the statements at a higher and less objectionable level due to their greater diversification. At the same time this resources allows students to learn scientific methodologies.

I believe that similar problems to those of school can emerge in the use of witnesses in museums and memorials. Nevertheless, these institutions have at the very least the dual task of interviewing witnesses as scientific sources and using them in educational work.

## THE 'USE' OF WITNESSES IN FILMS AND TELEVISION

### **Advantages and disadvantages of sound and video recordings**

In the first stage of this attempt to give an opinion on the use of witnesses in sound, image, television productions, documentaries and fiction films, we should at the very least highlight the merits of recordings made on homemade video or on film, compared with the sound recordings. Both equally enjoy the advantage of the 'veracity' of reproduction in contrast with the simple transcription of oral sources, which is generally done preceding the evaluation and interpretation. The danger usually present in this task is to 'mold' the sources to what most widely corresponds to preconceived ideas. Errors can be minimized through the written correction by the interviewee, but in this case the danger lies, for example, in the partial selection of tracts, in the replacement of words, in the directing of an argument to create impact – something that was not previously decided but which is afterwards accepted by the interviewee.

The advantages of video recordings in relation to sound are obvious: alongside voice also highlighted are facial expression and its changes, sweat, blushing, gestures, the background scenario, the furniture, the style of decoration, glances at prepared texts, occasional reading from texts or speaking spontaneously, amongst other aspects. This leads to the expansion and enrichment of comments about a text, sometimes even to another and completely different possibility of interpretation. For example, a citizen of RDA (German Democratic Republic, or East Germany), in a statement made in 1987, raised his index finger to the ceiling, in other words he was calling attention to a possible tapping showing in this way that the security of the

state, eavesdropping, had been frustrated. While the fact of avoiding a question or smiling in a malicious manner can give a totally different meaning to the same gesture.

Recording on homemade video or film has, nevertheless, the disadvantage – depending on the technical apparatus and the requirements about quality – of the presence of various people: those responsible for the camera, for the lighting, for the sound and for the actual interview. Simple communication between these people or their mere presence can bother the interviewee. Furthermore, for the recording to be good light has to be used which will heat up the local environment, for this reason the tape has to be replaced every 30 minutes. Added to this is the fact that a camera and a film team impress on the interviewee a more clear conscience about a future public presentation of their state, and can thus contribute to nervousness which will remain during the recording. However, when the quality of the recording needs less care than the documenting in itself, a video camera can be operated by the actual interviewer. The sound recording, to the contrary, does not require special technical apparatus, the presence of the interviewer is enough. With the digital recordings of today it is no longer necessary to change tapes. Therefore, there are almost no barriers of a technical nature in sound recordings which give interviewees the perception that their words are being recorded. In my opinion, this is why the nervousness caused by the ‘recording situation’ rapidly disappears. The microphone is soon ‘forgotten.’<sup>4</sup>

When it is known that the statement will be presented to the public, irrespective of the nature of this presentation, other requirements arise in relation to the interviewees. The choice of this witness has to take into account that the interviewee must be capable of clearly narrating and of being able to ‘stand’ the length of an interview, without seeming too nervous. Sometimes, it also has to be considered whether the appearance of the interviewee is suitable to the objective of the program. I myself can cite the importance of appearance in a television production: an interview with an old black market trader was refused after editing, because at the beginning of 1945 half of his face had been torn off by a shell and despite various surgeries it had not been totally remade. For the same reason his speech was incomprehensible, although other paths could have been found to make it intelligible. It was argued that his appearance could shock viewers. This selection due to exterior criteria is uncommon in science.

## Strengths and danger in the presentation of witnesses on film

A film does not immediately become a film: witnesses play a direct or indirect role in various types of productions – biographic documentation about determined people or obituaries about them in documentaries, TV programs, *docudramas*<sup>5</sup> and fiction films. Furthermore, their statements are used in exhibitions, presentation videos and installations in museums and memorials, as well as in educational films for young people and adults. All these numerous films meet objectives and conditions that are totally different from their execution. I will look here, only by way of example, at some problems, dangers and strengths in the use of interviews in films.

Generally speaking, the quality of the 'insertion' of witnesses in films in all these genres will be judged later – if it is possible to understand and transmit the strong points of the research with these witnesses, or if the film will perpetuate problems related to their 'insertion.'

Statements are included in an unconditional manner when dealing with the individual experience and activity of people, or of echoes – in a later stage of the history – of old experiences and criteria. In this case they are the principal source, and there are many positive examples in the most recent filmography: Heinrich Breloer in *Eine geschlossene Gesellschaft* (1987) about post-war youth in East German during the 1950s, or his docudrama *Todesspiel*,<sup>6</sup> about the kidnapping and murder of Hans-Martin Schleyer, or also his series about the family of Thomas Mann, *Die Manns* (2001). Heinrich Breloer is seen as one of the fathers of the *docudrama*,<sup>7</sup> a genre in whose concept it is specially appropriate to present personal experiences in historic contexts. Gathering personal photographs of deponents, documents and interviews on one side, and scenarios on the other, it is not only clear what comes and does not come from witnesses, but makes it easy to distance oneself from the witnesses and their considerations that may be 'biased.' False or controversial statements by deponents can also be more easily corrected.<sup>8</sup> I consider as well made *docudramas* *Deutschlandspiel* (2000), made in two parts by Hans Christoph Blumenberg and the producer Ulrich Lenze about German reunification, as well as the film by both about the end of the Second World War, called *Die letzte Schlacht* (2006).

Among the historic documentaries made for television the film *Ein Tag*, about daily life in a camp before the war, made by Egon Monk and the former concentration camp prisoner Günther R. Lys, established new parameters relatively early in 1965. Also deserving of mention are the documentaries of

Hans-Dieter Grabe, *Mendel Schainfelds zweite Rückkehr nach Deutschland* (1972), about a former concentration camp internee and his difficulties in the Federal Republic of Germany. Grabe also filmed *Er nannte sich Hohenstein* (1994) which reconstituted, based on a diary, the steps of a member of the Nazi party nominated mayor in occupied Poland. In both films the perspective of 'objectivity' was swapped for the particular vision of an individual, which gave them an enormous intensity and sympathy, at the same that there emerged the effect, under a new perspective, of a determined event on a person – in the first case, the way through which reparations were made.

Malte Ludin's film *...zwei oder drei Dinge, die ich von ihm weiß*, about the sending of his father in 1946 to Bratislava (Pressburg) – he had been Hitler's emissary in Slovakia –, is for me the best example of a 'witness-film' about personal and family life experiences under national socialism: Ludin manages to rigorously present the three generations of a family related to this husband, father and grandfather, which in itself is very rare in the cinematographic treatment of Nazism. It becomes extremely clear how national socialism was processed differently by successive generations and how strong the need is among some members to defend a close relative from external attacks, or also how painful it was for other members to separate themselves from a criminal who was part of the family. In summary, the fissures caused in German families by the dismantling of national socialism are vast.

Arising out of other circumstances, cinematographically speaking, is Loretta Walz's film, *Die Frauen von Ravensbrück* (2005), which in 2006 won her the Grimme prize. Her film consists almost exclusively of dramaturgically edited reports of personal experiences. This is something rare, because documentaries with individual statements tend towards monotony and excessive 'intellectuality' – as happens in many films of this type. However, Loretta Walz manages, by inserting into the film contrasting excerpts of statements, skillfully constructing tensions between different environments of life experiences and different points of view among deponents, tensions which also give these people the 'right' to their perspective. In my opinion this film seems to be part of the 'play with didactic purposes' genre, which rarely works.

In recent years there also emerged there emerged in the market aimed at educational work a series of productions that used witnesses parallel to a compilation of documents. Very impressive for me is the DVD about the Auschwitz Case in Frankfurt (1963-1965), produced by Fritz-Bauer Institute. The DVD presents in numerous manners the murders, their machinery of death and its administration, but also allows in its way a history of experiences

of the 1950s and afterwards. The problems inherent in a state of law thus become evident in the attempt to reach a verdict, since the lawyers of the defendants, who were former members of the SS, took advantage of all the breaches in justice in the state of law on behalf of their clients. On the other hand are the witnesses – in other words the former victims –, who naturally did not manage to remember what is habitually demands from witnesses in court, i.e., sequences of events and dates, as well as the faces of those who used to be wearing uniforms. What calls attention is the fact that these successful attempts about the history of the RDA are very recent. NDR channel is working at this moment on a four part biographical documentary with the name *Mein DDR*, which uses this perspective based on one hundred interviews.<sup>9</sup>

What I have cited here is nothing more than a small selection of films which, like many other, manage to 'redeem the subject in history', making tangible the history of individual destinies and in this manner leave clear both the biographic context and the respective socio-political context. In these films and documentation people are not inserted as simple illustrations of previous historical development, separated from previous ones, from which they originated. In addition, experience is presented as an independent dimension which is shown by decisions, by freedom of action, by problems and needs, by the hopes and joys of people of flesh and bone in historic processes. Experience also emerges in the reflexes of institutional, official, police, or political measures on people, something very different from administrative documents.

Obviously, there are numerous fiction films which are based on diaries or on (auto)biographic memories, which are not listed precisely because of their quantity. Fiction films are not documents and for this reason the historic criteria of experience do not apply to them, nor to their characters, nor for their dramaturgy. Where there are many, their historical statements can be classified as 'scientific knowledge.' However, I want to cite an example that is radically worth it because of its personal vision and for this reason, amongst other factors, it is still discussed and shed light on the problems of the representation of subjectivity placed almost integrally. These include Alain Resnais' first fiction film, *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959), with a script by Marguerite Duras. I cite this film because it reveals in an exemplary form how a subjective vision of history can have an impact for this very reason. The individual destinies presented in Hiroshima and in France collide with the higher politics and with the opinion of the majority, and still nowadays – in Germany more than when the film was made – does not correspond precisely to the 'correct' vision of the history of the Second World War, which leads to

heated debates when the film is presented: both protagonists are victims, though of different types. The French woman falls in love with a German soldier during the occupation and for this reason is execrated, her head is shaven and she is kept by her family in a cellar. The Japanese man and his family are victims of the atomic explosion in Hiroshima.

Films such as these are exemplary, since they aim to make visible the independent role of the dimension of experience. History though was not born from the history of experience. For this reason we should also mention the dangers that threaten cinematographic work with witnesses.

A fundamental danger in the use of statements is the creation of the appearance that *contemporary eyewitnesses are the real experts in history*, and that cinema and television journalists are their best mediators. Why should an eyewitness of the bombing of Dresden in February 1945 – to use this example once again – know the totality of the victims of this air attack? A supposition such as this demands the inclusion of other sources. However, it was not only this doubtful practice that intruded in television films; they also show statements of contemporaries as the ‘final valid truth,’ when in fact interviewees only present suppositions.

Another danger relation to the introduction of statements is the *lack of contextualization*. This signifies, first, that the affirmation of a person about a certain event is reproduced without information being given about the context in which this affirmation was made. Second, the biographic context of this person is not identified, which can be essential to its evaluation. Sometimes the impression is that the biographic backdrop is deliberately obscured. This is clear in the numerous television documentaries in which everyone is filmed against a black backdrop, illuminated by a beam of clear light, and all that is changed is the subtitles with the names. This resource allows these interviews to be easily used in different films and contexts.

Guido Knopp, the editor-in-chief responsible for the Department of History in ZDF is treated by many historians as the Beelzebub of filming of historic themes. I do not share this view, since Knopp has supported a large number of documentarists who in my opinion have made good films.<sup>10</sup> However, in some television stations there are various examples for the lack of contextualization: various films about Hitler and his ‘voluntary helpers’ present people about whom it is unclear whether they were fighters from the opposition, soldiers, former Nazi leaders or from the SA. In some cases it is not mentioned if these people had worked temporarily as criminals, in

concentration camps or in the high levels of the administration, or even as doctors. Something similar happened in the film *Downfall* (*Der Untergang*).

The temptation to use other material that can be recognized by the contemporary witness is great, even if it comes from other epochs and places.<sup>11</sup> It is particularly irritating when material of this type is not mentioned or identified, or when a clip from a film is reused, or is also inadequate. I consider it equally problematic when scenes from fiction films are based on some affirmations to create associations which do not correspond to the content of witnesses, or when memories of films are evoked which point in a direction not desired by those who have experienced those events.

Furthermore, there is the danger – both in science and in films – of us being fooled later by 'corrections' that the actual witness makes in his or her original experiences.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, it can be stated that present affirmations in witnesses require scientific control and contextualization. The majority of editors in chief and film writers are making efforts for this to occur.

## ON THE AGING OF WITNESSES AND THEIR EXPERIENCES

Due to the fact that we are currently undergoing a transition from a phase in which the witnesses of the first half of the twentieth century are still alive to another one in which they will disappear, it is very important to document and safeguard the experiences of these people. Only in this way will it be possible for future historians to include the subjective experience of this epoch in future historiography. This is one of the reasons which makes interviews, the compilation of biographical material, and statements relevant. In these areas an extraordinary increase in audio-visual sources can be found about which historians from previous generations could only have dreamed – the overwhelming majority in reports about the Holocaust, but also about expulsions and migrations, or about daily life in those times and circumstances, for example.

While it is important to document for the next generation the reports of eyewitnesses, their experiences, life stories and subjective memories, as well as their traditions, it is clear that we should disconsider this point of view. Our interpretations probably will be considered as sources for our epoch and about our relationship with previous generations, if they are taken into account.

Who will decide – in 50 years time, let us say – which reports from the time of national socialism were typical or isolated, who can appease the

previous irreconcilable memories, who will make the diversity of that time ordinary? In addition, who will identify the temporarily dominant simplisms (such as ‘criminal people,’ amongst others)? Will the great variety of experiences that we present with our works and archives, with our transcriptions of interviews, recordings in audio and films be returned to and used? Or will this material be, in turn, worked journalistically in an extremely simplified manner?<sup>13</sup>

I have the feeling that this resumption will happen in a totally different manner outside our categories and objectives. My suspicion is that we are manufacturing and supplying the ingredients for future *homunculi*. We provide perspectives and fragments for the future generations of scientists and journalists who will produce with this test-tube people, which will probably be considered authentic or consistent by our future colleagues. This might even result from the good reason of making comprehensible in this future the material of the past, what we thought at that time and what the understanding of the new times no longer ‘reaches.’

Although what will occur with our traditions, it is extremely necessary to add to reports of experiences the greatest possible amount of information and comments, because in a short while – especially in photos and in films – it will no longer be known what a particular haircut, beard, clothes, certain buttons, etc., meant. Contemporary witnesses age like other people, but differently from those who do not leave statements, and many of them fall into obsolescence to the extent that new generations rewrite history, due to the means of transmission and the context in which their statements are transmitted: this occurs in political parties, in companies and in families, for example. Contemporary witnesses suffer above all when they feel they are the trustees of history and lose while still alive the ‘power of definition’ over their history.

As of the present I know of almost no systematic works on how old reports about experiences were interpreted and reinterpreted by later generations, with the exception of some approaches to different interpretations in post-war Germany. In relation to previous epochs and ancestors these are very rare. However, I myself was confronted early on with ‘transmission problems’ of the history of my own family. I would like to register here four examples to show in different ways how the judgments of characters are variable and complex during history, and how the interpretation of their images can be difficult.



In the first case my great-great-grandfather Bodo is the protagonist: his portrait and that of his wife Annette were hung side by side in a thick gross frame in our living room. This frame and the red, black and white clothes had made the frame a relic of very old times. My grandmother, however, prevented us from forgetting Bodo. She described him as a man of opinions based on the Royal Guelphic Order of Hannover. He and his wife had maintained our farm during the difficult times in the wars of liberation, since alongside the rude peasants they offered their products to neighboring cities. These ancestors, who with their efforts and humility had saved the property of the family, gained our highest consideration.

Two generations after my grandmother, one of his great-nephews – belonging to another branch of the family – and one of his grandchildren told another version that had always existed, but had been minimized by my grandparents: our great-great-grandfather was recriminated by these family members due to his professional activities, since between 1798 and 1813 he acted not only as an administrator of the council of Hannover but was also a mayor under the French, more precisely in the Kingdom of Westphalia under King Jerome, the brother of Napoleon. As if this were not enough, he had also temporarily served the Prussians.

The question which arose was: was our ancestor a collaborationist, or a true knight of the Royal Guelphic Order? Or was he a Jacobin in disguise? This debate was not concluded, but fell silent in the post-1968 era. The documents left and his last will informed us that he considered the French administrative system positive in opposition to that of Hannover, and that he was only to be

buried when the smell of decomposition started to spread. We tried to find in the clothes he posed in for some indication of his political position – if he after all represented the French point of view or the conservative Hanoverian one –, but in vain. Even the buttons had a dual meaning: they showed an erect lion, which appeared both on the crest of Hanover and of the kingdom of Westphalia. Thus, our question remained, which at time had – perhaps – no real importance: collaborationist or nationalist of the Royal Guelphic Order?

The second case refers to a great-granduncle on my maternal side, whom – as I had heard since I was a child – had emigrated to Mexico to ‘try his luck.’ Later he participated in the American Civil War as a soldier and thanks to this bought a piece of land that caused problems for later generations, related to the ownership document. He did not have children and his tracks were lost with time. This was the current version of his history, which served well for the creation of fantastic adventures about this ancestor. Later I heard from an uncle another version in secret: this great-granduncle had been a “175” – as homosexuals were called at that time – and had been obliged to emigrate when he was discovered. This was the end for us adolescents of all the positive adventures about him. Now it does not seem that there would be any problem telling a story like this, or maybe time has just passed over my great-granduncle and his problems; nevertheless, none of the youngest members of the family know anything about him. Maybe certain postures which condemn homosexuality have been inserted again in the history, or maybe someone still does not like to see a person like this as a member of the family, even one hundred years later.

The third case is short: it refers to a picture of a relative in the 1920s – a man who looked like a fighter, evil looking and with a twisted beard, as in the period of the empire. According to my grandmother he was in some form a monarchist and after the First World War had become an anarchist, whatever she meant by that. Even today I ask myself if the same beard which twenty years before the picture was taken could have been worn by a monarchist could someday have become the symbol of an opposition supporter. If the answer is positive, what values could this beard have involved in each epoch? It is also possible that he grew it only to cover a scar or a double chin. Perhaps the same happened with the beard that I let grow in 1967, about which my children recently commented: ‘that is a typical teacher’s beard.’ How will future historians deal with this beard, if it is the problem that interests them? Will they be aware of how upset I was when I appeared for the first time with the sign of time on my face?

The fourth case is more complicated, because among other factors I am one of the actors: since the middle of the 1960s I had persecuted my parents with the suspicion that they had been Nazis. I always believed that I had found proof, but I was always 'unsuccessful' in my search. When I was more than 50 I received a letter from someone I did not know in Canada. He told me that in 1944 my parents had sheltered a half-Jew, hiring her as a *Pflichtjahrmädchen*;<sup>14</sup> the parents of this girl were later deported from Berlin to Auschwitz and murdered there. In 1944 my mother had written a very positive letter of recommendation about this girl and she had left Germany. This man had met her in London in 1946, they had fallen in love and emigrated to Canada. She wanted to thank my parents in her name; she had died, he was feeling old and wanted to put his life in order. The period in which she had lived in my parents' house had been the most beautiful in the youth of that girl, he wrote. A while later he sent us the letters that his mother-in-law had written from Berlin and Theresienstadt to his future wife, when she still lived there with my parents. I was quite moved, since my parents had never told me this. I only knew the version that my mother's sister had asked in 1943 for the daughter of a writer friend to be taken in since she had to 'get out of circulation for some time.' At that time when I questioned my mother – now deceased – about this, she explained that this girl actually was half-Jewish and had been taken in by her and my father, but that her being 'half-Jewish' had not played any role at all. It was an act of kindness for her sister. She did not want to agree – neither in the 1960s, nor at that time – with classifying what had happened as a pro-Jewish or even anti-Nazi act. Perhaps this self-evaluation was correct, though both myself and a large part of the colleagues questioned by me about this simply could not imagine that with such vigilance and control by the Nazis, someone would protect a half-Jew except for political motives. Future historians, free of these conflicts, might be able to deal with this more freely than the generation that came immediately after the events.

All these examples show how quickly the subjective testimonies of memories and reports of experiences are reinterpreted and how rapidly these reinterpretations can disappear due to new interpretations, and what little material is available to help us put in order the interpretation and lead us to the original content of the experience. Sound, image and films can help us provide more observations, generate more comments, but, as we have seen, they also generate new problems. In dealing with the effects on the lay public who do not see this material as a source, but as part of interesting documentation or a fiction film, images and documentaries seem to me to

‘age’ more quickly than simple texts or sound documents, in which each generation can fantasize their own images. Films show with all clarity the fragility of fashions, styles and signs – whether they are of those in power, in opposition, or innovation.

## NOTES

> Translation into portuguese: Gabriela França; text edition (portuguese): Armando Olivetti.

<sup>1</sup> To Germans, Contemporary History (*Zeitgeschichte*) covers the events of recent decades, especially from the Second World War onwards. (T.N.)

<sup>2</sup> In German there are two meanings of „experience“: First, the direct former adventure and – second – the adventure which is recollected and worked through by a person.

<sup>3</sup> In another work I present in greater detail the basic rules for carrying out qualitative interviews, in the context of a project investigating forced labor: PLATO, Alexander von. “Interviewrichtlinien”. In: PLATO, Alexander Von; LEH, Almut; THONFELD, Christoph (Org.). *Hitlers Sklaven: Lebensgeschichtliche Analysen zur Zwangsarbeit im internationalen Vergleich*. Vienna, 2008. p.443 ss.

<sup>4</sup> Documentarists who work with contemporary witnesses, such as Hans-Dieter Grabe or Loretta Walz, nevertheless state that in filmed is soon forgotten in film recordings as well.

<sup>5</sup> A *docudrama* is film based on recordings which uses statements and in part reenactments based both on the statements of these people and other sources.

<sup>6</sup> *Todesspiel*, made by Heinrich Breloer and by the producer Ulrich Lenze (1997).

<sup>7</sup> Heinrich Breloer made a series of other notable films and docudramas about Engholm, Wehner, Speer and others.

<sup>8</sup> It is always problematic to improve, in the historic sense, the false statements of witnesses. With this aim, the documentarist Malte Ludin provides short notes about the statements, like subtitles, in order to correct them.

<sup>9</sup> I made a similar attempt with Holger Riedel: *Erlebte RDA*, in two parts, shown in 1992 by the 3sat channel.

<sup>10</sup> Some of the positive examples in the cinematographic area have emerged under the administration of this ZDF editor, such as Heinrich Breloer’s docudrama *Todesspiel*, the two part docudrama about German reunification by Hans-Christoph Blumenberg and the producer Ulrich Lenze, or also the film made by the three of them, *Die letzte Schlacht*; alongside these there also stand out, amongst others, the documentary *The miracle of Berna* (*Das Wunder von Bern*) by Ulrich Lenze (1994), and some series.<sup>11</sup> For example I was accused of having introduced in the film *Szurowa*, about the murder of *Roma* in Poland, one

of the few – perhaps the only – SS film about his murder, which was filmed in Lublin and not in Szurowa, although I cited the source in the trailer.

<sup>12</sup> Hans-Dieter Grabe used a diary in the film *Er nannte sich Hohenstein*, which I see as a positive example of a documentary corrected after the war by its author – in other words by a contemporary.

<sup>13</sup> In relation to this paragraph and the following one, see the complete argument in my essay, "Witnesses and the historic community": PLATO, Alexander von. "Zeitzeugen und die historische Zunft. Erinnerung, kommunikative Tradierung und kollektives Gedächtnis in der qualitativen Geschichtswissenschaft – ein Problemaufriss". *Bios*, v.13, p.5-29, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Designation given to young German women who were obliged by a 1938 decree to undertake domestic service in homes and rural properties of young people for the period of a year. (T.N.)