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Visual thinking of the past Historical research in the process of filmmaking

"History decays into images, not into stories"
(Walter Benjamin)

"The cinema is becoming, no longer an undertaking of recognition, but of knowledge"
(Gilles Deleuze)

"You cannot see it, but what you cannot see, you have to show in images"
(Claude Lanzmann)

To consider film as *historical research* means to think of film not just as a *source* or a way of popularized *presentation* of history, but as a tool of production of original historical insights. This implies considering history as a constructive act that is swayed by the medium it is realized in. Further it is important to my argument to understand history as a form of appropriation of the present, not of the past. History is not based on the recollection of past facts, for the simple reason that the past has past away and is not accessible to our present anymore. The only thing we can rely on in doing history are present things that are shaped by their past. Historical research though consists in bringing these elements of the present into a constellation that reveals and test possible relations to the past. In my eyes this construction of historical knowledge is a very visual way of thinking that cry out for doing it in film.

Thus historical research in film implies the whole process of filmmaking from the production of sound and images to the moment of projection. It is an audio-visual design process on various levels. On the level of *shooting* the filmmaking researchers produce or modulate situations and insert themselves into it with their recording equipment. On the level of *editing*, the filmmaker sort and contrast, repeat and combine the material and try out different constellations. On the level of *reception* the reading of the images and sounds of the film generates each time new images in the heads of the spectators.

In my paper I would like to address the field of visual historical research by analyzing strategies of designing relations into the past in films about the Shoah. Ruth Beckermann conceptualizes her search for history in "Die papierene Brücke (The paper bridge)" as a personal voyage into the territory of her childhood and her parents' origins. Claude Lanzmann designs in "Shoah" situations for his interviews with survivors, bystanders and perpetrators that make them embody their own past and brings them into contrast to the apparently vacant nowadays images of the places where once the annihilation of European Jews took place. Harun Farocki experiments in "Aufschub (Respite)" with found footage from a German concentration camp that was used as transit-camp to the death-camps. Farocki enlarges details and rearranges various times the same images in the process of editing to get new meanings out of it. I want to explore these films as models of a visual thinking of the past.

Olaf Berg is a historian and documentary filmmaker. Currently he writes his Ph.D. on "Film Considered as Historical Research" with a scholarship from the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation. He holds a Master of Arts in Social- and Economic History, Media Culture, Computer Sciences and Latin-American Studies and studied in Hamburg (UHH), Mexico City (UNAM) and Puebla (BUAP).