

## **Interview With Walter: A Visual Auto/Biography**

A critical analysis of an eighteen minute-long video, edited from a two-hour video interview with Walter Benjamin Schild.

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### **The Interview**

The interview with Walter Benjamin Schild (1922-2011) took place in 2008 at his home in Sussex and lasted around two hours. The 85 year-old had spent his childhood in Cologne, Germany during the rise of Hitler and was transported to England through his Jewish school in 1938. He remembers his internment on the Isle of Man, suddenly a 'foreigner' when the war broke out. He subsequently joined the British Army's Intelligence Service, a place where he finally found a new sense of belonging. After the war he returned to Germany and married his first German wife. On three occasions in the interview he refuses to discuss that specific time by either not remembering or remaining silent. At some point Walter returns to England, marries his present English wife and is now retired from his business.

I met Walter through Julian Schild, his nephew. Julian's father Rolf (Walter's brother) had passed away suddenly a few years earlier, without writing down his memories, and so Julian turns to his uncle Walter as a substitute source of information for remembering his family's story.<sup>2</sup> In the interview he frequently compares Walter's memory of past events to stories his father told him, in the form of 'my father remembered this' and 'my father told me that'. Rolf in his very absence thus influences the interview and subsequent narrative. Also present at the interview is Walter's second wife, who is listening and making coffee in the background. My assistant is stationed at a discreet distance with his headphones silently behind the camera.

At the interview I combined my experience in making documentaries with life history interview techniques. I made a careful list of questions based on Robert Atkinson's (1998) suggestions on how to conduct a life story interview, including reminders to be open ended and guide Walter towards what Atkinson refers to as "the feeling level", where "most meaning in a person's life comes from" (1998, p.41). In the interview, Walter sidesteps detailed descriptions of 'feelings' except to repeatedly state, "It was very emotional." That was my first experience of the problematic of applying 'universal'

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<sup>1</sup> A three-minute extract of the 18-minute long video discussed here can be found on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LTjOw0o6dg>

<sup>2</sup> Julian was keen to continue his father's research into the family's history and I agreed to do three video interviews to capture the memories of three last survivors connected to the Schild's German past: Walter (Julian's uncle), Frau Kahn (Rolf and Walter's 98 year old school teacher) and Fritz (his father's school friend, still living in Germany).

principles to a specific cultural setting and not anticipating resistance from the participant to thematic questions (Riessman 2005; 2002). I cringe when, looking back at the footage, I hear myself interrupt Walter or push him repeatedly on a question he is clearly uncomfortable answering. An additional complexity arose when it transpired Julian was determined to also interview Walter. His aim was to complete the Schild ancestry charts, mine was to encounter a Jewish-German survivor and hear his experience first hand. This raises interesting questions I will address in below, asking whose interview this really was: whose film, whose story?

Examining the evidence of this struggle on the video-tapes, I set out to visually examine issues that Robert Coles (1997, p.59) raises around how we define our research aim. My purpose with the 18-minute video edit, it became clear, was to visually examine questions of authorship, power relations and ethics, as well as issues around memory. I decided to apply digital manipulation to the interview in order to convey layers of meaning and explore several points of view. In post-production I exposed my presumptuous classification of Walter as Jewish and his subsequent refusal to accept that identity for himself. My overall intention was to explore the digital video medium's relation to narrative life story inquiry and thus I deliberately included a lot of this 'messiness' (Coles 1997, p.61) in order to provide a more complex contextualisation for Walter's story than a 'clean' edit might. In this way, I included, in the video text, a kind of narrative deconstruction of the interview text through visual means.

### **The Video as Text**

How is the video interview different to a tape recording? I will examine some of these differences here, by first pointing out the obvious: there is the image of course. Geoffrey Hartman (1994) argues, "the link between a survivor and his story is sustained in video as it cannot be in literary narrative" (Hartman 1994, p.169). Young also suggests, "Unlike narratives that hide their lives construction, these audio-visual testimonies retain their process of construction, the activity of witness" (Young 1990, p.165). Whereas in audio testimony the witness is 'disembodied', the voice separated from the speaker (Hartman 1994), in my interview the speaker, Walter, is visually present and embodies his words on screen. The relation of image to sound is complex and is firmly imbedded in our ability to 'read' cinematic conventions. For example, lip synch (synchronised image and audio) is interpreted to mean we are seeing a 'live' event and are 'really' hearing the person speak. This has great authoritative power within the documentary film tradition and gives authenticity to the spoken word (Nichols 1994, Russell 1999, Renov 2004). As a strategy to challenge cinematic conventions, in my video of the interview I at times freeze the frame and separate sound and vision. On the other hand video documentary is also associated with pseudo-history and docudrama and the bias of emotions on screen (Young 1990), which we recognise as 'non-scientific', and thus the medium itself contradicts traditional notions of objectivity and reliability. My 18min video edit straddles the blurry boundary of art (my subjective, creative expression of Walter's drama and emotion) and 'science' (the ethical and methodological research aspects of the interview). The power of Walter's bodily presence is at times juxtaposed by my disembodied voice. The representation of his life narrative is challenged through such cinematic interventions.

There are several cinematic structures in place that determine what the viewers see on the screen and how they come to understand what they are seeing. Within a video interview there are aspects of framing, camera movements, time and space distancing, and other formalistic layers that construct the interview as much as the questions might – form and content are intertwined and hard to separate on film. Young (1990) points out

the constructed nature of *all* evidence, not just videos. My aim was to make the viewer aware of this construct, by openly editing my position into Walter's story and contextualising the presence of the camera. The process of addressing documentary representation and historical consciousness is what Bill Nichols (1994) calls 'working the blurred border zones of realism'. Hence my interventions of layering image, sound and text, are to jar us out of the fantasy of the narrative as some kind of 'neutral' or 'truthful' representation of Walter's life narrative. These ruptures of cinematic interview structures require us to fit together, as Nichols (1994) puts it, fragments of a shifting field of reference. Visual interventions into a video interview ask the viewer to remain conscious of the medium and its function of transmitting pre-recorded events.

Film itself is a medium of fragmentation: it is a narrative made up of fragments that are edited together. Young states:

By inviting a Holocaust survivor's recollections and then filming them, the makers of video and cinematic testimony simultaneously (and paradoxically) preserve broken fragments of memory even as they stitch them together into a continuously unfurling scroll. (1990, p.175)

This paradox applies to filmed/audio-visual life histories in general. Memories on videotape are organised twice over, "once in the speaker's narrative and again in the narrative movement created in the medium itself" (Young 1990, p.158). Walter's narration was at times hesitant, unsure and incomplete, and I wanted to preserve this difficult process of remembering on video, even as I edited it into one continuous video narrative. I experimented with the notion that the narrative canon of sequential ordering can be contradicted in video – video can be open, fragmented, have no closure (because footage is missing, the tape has run out, or the person is still alive making new history and there is no tidy conclusion to their life). My edit attempts to problematize the memory process by rendering it visible. For example, we see a transcript text scroll over Walter talking, illustrating that the person speaking and the words spoken can be separated in video, and that both image and text can conjure different meanings according to context. Our understanding of the narrative is not fixed but influenced by factors such as either seeing the person who speaks (the raw video interview footage) or reading the words detached from the person (the transcript of the interview). Such techniques aim to point to the many layers of Walter's narrative that cannot be neatly placed one after the other, but that overlap, contradict and jump in time.

Young (1990) asks if memory can ever have closure – where does a testimony begin and end? A film on the other hand must clearly begin and end somewhere. It is an important decision for a filmmaker to choose when and how to do so. I was looking for ways that would not 'close' Walter's life when the film ends. I felt the whole cinematic narrative probably had to be structured in a way that points to fragmentation and layering, in order to avoid a visual representation of a 'completed' life, wrapped up in the space of 18 minutes. This is in line with Greenspan's (1998) assertion that recounting is done best when we don't receive the interviewee's words as finished text but enter into the process of the person's struggle for words. The video finishes with questions rather than presents answers so that as a visual text it is not fixed but points to the '*unfinished nature*' of Walter's retelling (Greenspan 1989).

To transcribe the video interview is problematic in this respect, as well as raising transcription issues common to other methodologies (Samuel 1971,1998). How do you include all the variables taking place on the tape beside the spoken word? Do you give preference to the word over the image? What about the relation of other people's

presence to the narrative? For example Julian's previous relationship with Walter that underpins the dialog can be seen on the screen, but is not expressed in words: how can one write this into the transcript of the interview? I argue film is at an advantage here because the *site* of the interview becomes visible. We can spot when the image contradicts the text, for example through a facial expression or silent gesture, something that is easily lost in a transcript that focuses on the spoken words. We see non-verbal communication that seems as relevant as the spoken words, for example Walter's challenging glint when he uses humour to express ambiguous feelings. We can literally see the influence of the space and larger context on the interview. My video edit includes several references to the setting, for example Walter calling to his wife off camera, my voice-over describing noises we can hear off-screen, or a shift of camera focus from Walter's face to background objects. Watching the video we witness the present day setting in which the life narrative is situated, and we see the relationship between the 'now' of the interview and the 'then' of the past told.

Working in a visual medium involves aesthetic decisions, and often aesthetic choices and ethical considerations are in tension. Nichols (1994) calls this "the blurring of form and content". Coles (1997) highlights the responsibility of researchers, photographers and filmmakers towards those who give their time freely to answer questions. While creating the edited version I was very conscious of my ethical responsibility towards Walter's story and its representation. While cinematically structuring 18 minutes of film I was dealing with *ethical aesthetics* (Tamboukou 2008, orally transmitted), making artistic choices on the representation of a person I owe utter respect to. One could perhaps label this visual ethics, an essential issue to visual narrative and in need of more depth than is the scope of this paper. Briefly, what is relevant to my process of re-presenting the interview with Walter is Shoshana Felman's question:

How does the film use its visual medium to reflect upon eyewitness testimony, both as the law of evidence of its own art and as the law of evidence of history? (1994, p.92)

My ethical standpoint was to position my video outside the master discourse of popular electronic media, which Miszta (2003) proposes remains the main source of images of the past. I did not wish to report or comment with authority on a subject such as Walter's experiences, but instead to 'let speak' as a means to make sense of the world and contribute to the search of belonging. The problem of archiving someone's memories remains, as Miszta (2003, p.43-48) points out, in that sound and moving image are *artificial* memories, and our increasing reliance on these electronic means for memory-keeping and memory-construction tend to 'institutionalize' memory. However, creating a short subjective video clip of Walter's interview introduces a parallel narrative to the full transcript, and illustrates the fluidity with which one can read Walter's memory construction, as open-ended and a means of closing the gap between the self-that-was, the speaking (current) self, and the projected self (Ricoeur 1988).

### **The Slash in Auto/Biography**

I was interested in visually exploring (and exposing) the relation and power structure of interviewer/researcher and the subject. The interventions I inserted into the edited interview played a role in opening up the dialogue on the 'slash' in auto/biography within the video itself. Young (1990, p.169) points out that once we recognize the interviewer's agenda, the part they play within the video testimony, "we might better understand our own preoccupations as well." He suggests to "*credit* the interviewers for some of the

shape this testimony takes” (Young 1990, p.169, his emphasis). The authorship of the interviewer shapes the narrative because “the questions which guide our research originate from deep within ourselves” (Andrews 2007, p.27), something that Stanley (1993) calls the overlap of the biographical and autobiographical self. The edited interview ultimately reflects my own ‘preoccupations and obsessions’ (Young 1990): even though it is Walter’s story we hear, my choices of inclusion/ exclusion were mainly based on elements of Walter’s and my shared German background. I open the video with a subjective ‘confession’ of shaping his life story according to my assumptions of his Jewish experience. It is his active refusal to follow the master discourse on holocaust/kinder-transport stories that both resist the shape I try to give his testimony and that reveal and draw attention to my active shaping efforts.

This tension created between the short excerpts I chose to represent our interview is a product of compressing time from the two-hour interview, as well as visually symbolizing the ‘slash’ of auto/biography. Barbara Harrison (1993) refers to Stanley and Steier in her article asking researchers to firmly root themselves within the activities of their research. “There is an increasing emphasis on reflexive accounts as an integral and ‘public’ aspect of our research work, and not just some interesting adjunct to it” (Harrison 1993, p.105). I wanted to root my own issues around national identity into the activity of the video edit – my status as both ‘participant’ and ‘observer’ needed to be pointed out within the interview text. For example, I both participate within the interview and I observe the proceedings ‘without’, by depicting myself editing and through my voice-overs. Even though these two aspects of life-interviews are “part of a continuous experience” (Williams quoted in Harrison 1993, p. 106), within a cinematic framework one can tease them out into separate visual narratives. The video edit illustrates that life stories are the product of an interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee and thus occupy a position between autobiography and biography.

Of course Walter’s interview also provides evidence of factual history. We can learn about the internment procedure on the Isle of Man and the Special Intelligence system in relation to German-Jewish refugees after the war. However when neither memories nor histories can be seen as objective, “remembering the past and writing about it no longer seem to be the innocent activities they were once taken to be” (Burke 1989 quoted in Misztal 2003, p.103). Jane Ribbens takes this one step further when she states, “we may not wish to approach autobiography with ideas about ‘objectivity’ at all, but instead explore what it can tell us about our own ‘subjectivities’” (1993, p.87). The video clearly shows agency of Walter as an individual, his subjectivity (of historical events) and thus potentially provides a counter-narrative (Andrews 2007). For example, he states that he wanted to join the Hitler youth; that the German’s after the war became ‘friends’ and were ‘not really Nazis’. Those are complex narratives that raise challenging questions as they work against common expectations of holocaust narratives. Hartman (1994) points out that seeing the speaker makes it harder to critique the text because it feels like critiquing the person speaking. However Liz Stanley (1993) makes the helpful point that we can see the auto/biographical I as “concerned in constructing, rather than ‘discovering’, social reality and sociological knowledge.” The video is an attempt to visually represent this process of construction, of narrative and counter-narrative coexisting in a complex framework of (re)interpretation.

## **Memory and Remembering**

In Gadamer's hermeneutic perspective, memory is conceptualised...in terms of images. Bergson also suggests that memory is virtual and enters the field of consciousness as an image. (Miszta 2003, p.118)

The inquiry into the visual nature of memory is very interesting from a cinematic point of view. When a filmmaker creates images of a person narrating their life, then what is caught on celluloid (or digital video memory storage) is the process of transformation from virtual mental images into the consciousness of speaking. The act of creating images, both while remembering and while filming, produces meaning and coherence to a version of events. Walter is trying to convey meaning of his past life, to shape his memories into a cohesive story. I in turn tried to summarize his past through editing together images of his recounted experiences. I wanted the snippets that I chose out of the two hours of videotape to create some coherent version of my perception of his life. This process is on some level similar to the one of remembering itself, as we choose the version of our past according to the situation in which we re-tell it. Novick takes this one step further by explaining that we bring to the fore memories "central to our collective identity", in order to make sense of ourselves and the things we share with others (Novick 1999 quoted in Miszta 2003, p.132). The videotape of Walter's interview gives us a sense of how Walter is constructing his identity in response to questions (expectations from others) in order to legitimate his present existence. Julian expects to find in Walter's interview a confirmation of a common past history, one that Walter shares with his father. This illustrates how our social memory often "distills the past into icons of identity" (Lowenthal 1994 quoted in Miszta 2003, p. 135) and we can easily be tempted to sentimentalize in this "shift from memory to heritage" (Noakes 1997 quoted *ibid*). But Walter's response implies this shared past is more a duty or burden than a real memory for him. He does not share the same sense of belonging with Julian. Walter's refusal to share Julian's version of his past functions as critique on assumptions of his life, and ruptures any sentimental narrative threads offered to him.

Video has the ability to visualize the performance of remembering, to make visible the internal dialogue, and to give presence to the non-verbal act of thinking, digesting or shaping words. Young (1990) further explains that what one can see in cinemagraphic testimony and that is lost in literature is an "on-camera simultaneous translation of events from memory into language and from one language into another" (Young 1990, p.160). One can argue therefore that when we see Walter struggle for words, we see the video record the specific moment of "entry of memory into language" (Young 1990). We witness the making of testimony because the film "places us in the position of the witness who sees and hears" (Felman 1994, p.96). The medium itself becomes an arena for the "continuing struggle between meaning and memory" (Greenspan 1998, p.167). The video interview captures Walter remembering. The difficulty of remembering is captured in the in-ability to speak, Walter's search for words and his silences. As Young puts it,

Where writers necessarily break silence in order to represent it, in video testimony silence remains as much a presence as the words themselves; silence that cannot exist in print except in blank pages is now accompanied by the image of one who is silent, who cannot find the words... in video testimony the pauses and hesitations in the telling of a story remain intact. (1990, p.161)

To an interviewer, listening is on many levels more important than understanding (Andrews 2007) and in order to become part of the 'transmission' of the narrative (Apfelbaum 2001 quoted in Andrews 2007, p.39) we must listen to the silences carefully. Walter's silences are open to different interpretations (remembering, searching for words,

tiredness, language translation, unwillingness to answer, etc) but “we do not always know the meaning of the unspoken, nor are we the best person to evaluate” them (Andrews 2007, p.40). I did not want to privilege my ability to know the meaning of his life (Andrews 2007) or the internal process he went through during the interview. My aim was to leave his silences complete, letting them remain on screen, framed not by an interpretation of them but rather by my own discomfort and fumbling for responses. In the video edit I wanted to establish I am not ‘the expert’ and instead make myself vulnerable from the start. For example, I indicate my feelings of responsibility as a German faced by Walter’s narrative, with past history and my own national identity.

Freud called the process of thinking back on the past ‘Nachtraeglichkeit’. Walter is constructing a story from his present perspective but one that is mediated by what he *now* understands of past events (Nichols, 1994). For example, he remembers his parents being deported through the accounts in a book on deportations. The written narratives become part of his own narrative – even though he was not in Germany at the time to witness this himself he describes this history like an eyewitness. In the video edit, I am reading the book that describes the parent’s experience while I am listening to Walter’s version of the story on the screen. This exemplifies to the outside interventions on memory, and how these other texts are shaping Walter’s construction of the past. In recollection, “we do not retrieve images from the past as they were originally perceived but rather as they fit into our present conceptions, which in turn are shaped by the social forces that act on us” (Misztal 2003, p.51). Our own readings of Walter’s story are informed by both previous knowledge we have accumulated and by the social role these texts play within our collective memory. As Ricoeur (1991) puts it, “the process of composition, of configuration, is not completed in the text but in the reader” (quoted in Squire, forthcoming, p. 19). Individual viewers will read Walter’s interview differently, make their own meaning of his story and of my video interventions.

Inquiring into the nature of memory opens a debate on the lack of separation between memory and imagination and history and fiction (Misztal 2003). Memory’s non-linear temporality “poses difficulties for history as it replaces history’s quest for the truth of the past with a revision of the past promoted by later events” (Misztal 2003, p.108). This is illustrated by Julian’s desire to hear historic ‘facts’ about what his grandparents did and talked about during the rise of Hitler versus Walter’s non-linear personalised response. Misztal quotes Warnock (1987) pointing out that memory is “a special kind of knowledge about the past, which stresses the continuity, the personal and the unmediated” (Misztal 2003, p.107). In other words, Walter’s narrative does not provide a historical understanding of the past but rather can be taken as a method of inquiry that relates a causal continuity of his identity in relation to historic events. Video seems to have the potential to provide a connection between remembering and history through the very properties of its medium, such as editing together various sources (that can include various histories and representations in addition to oral histories) and layering different audio and visual clips next to and/or on top of each other. As Young states, “The kind of knowledge they [audio-visual testimonies] bring us is not purely historical, but metahistorical: the activity of telling history, organizing it, of being affected by both events and their pathos” (Young 1990, p.165). I have only touched upon possible links between visual narrative and memory here but explore such concepts further in another paper.

## **Conclusions**

Walter’s interview, or more accurately, fragments of his narrative, end up in an 18-minute long video, which I edited. Reflecting on the interview and the subsequent (re)construction

process, the edited version has itself become a new narrative. The content of the video is Walter's life story but the structure of it points to the filmmaker's own processing: the fragments included are arranged in a semi-dramatic way to suggest my changing attitude towards memory and history, seen through Walter's narrative. The edit has become a narrative something separate from Walter's interview and entered a new stage in telling, re-telling and listening. As Felman states, film "is the art par excellence which, like the courtroom, calls upon witnessing by seeing" (Felman 1994, p.92). The cinematic medium expands the capacity for witnessing in the filmmaker as well as the viewer. The complex multi-layered process of creating a film – from interview to assemblage to viewing contexts – encourages multiple readings of the text. This implies a shift from author to reader: the conditions to read the video vary depending on the individual viewer, and the time and space framing the viewing experience. Walter is providing us with traces of his past which we can examine, but, according to Ricoeur, we cannot "know" his complete life.

After the interview, Julian was disappointed by the lack of detail Walter could provide about his father's childhood years in Germany. My video edit made him aware of the process of remembering, forgetting and the information inherent in the *unspoken*. I myself was moved to witness Walter's struggle to return to his past. With the distance of time and repeated viewing I discover increasing layers of meaning in our interview. Visual narrative is a complex method of accessing life histories and my video edit addresses some of the challenges involved in undertaking such an approach. The 18-minute video is only a small inquiry into a wider discourse, but one that encourages further explorations of the interconnections between visual life history, cinematic interview recording and the potential qualities of video as a medium for auto/biographical narrative research.

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