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Visual Culture and Hybrid Practices in Digital Public History: Contextualizing the "Frames of Reconstruction" online exhibition[1]

ABSTRACT

The article draws upon the practical experience of the authors with researching, developing, and curating the digital historical content for the online exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction*. In its first part, it reflects upon three main theoretical issues related to the realm of contemporary public history. Firstly, it investigates the open borders between the disciplines of academic and public history to position them in a dialogical relationship. Secondly, it pays attention to the importance and roles of visuals and the possibilities which the study of visual sources brings into public history projects. The iconosphere is discussed not only from a theoretical point of view, but also serves as the methodological grounding of the article. Lastly, the theoretical section opens up some basal theoretical and methodological questions brought to the area of public history by the extensive process of digitization. In relation to the online exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction* it mostly responds to the conceptualization of digital public history as offered by Serge Noiret (2018) and Andreas Fickers (2022) through his concept of digital hermeneutics. The analytical part then revolves around the critical examination of the authors' own practical experience in the field of digital public history. Particularly, the collapse of the roles of researcher and curator is discussed along with the request for sustainability, transnationality, and democratic educational potential which can be seen as specific in the case of the medium of online exhibition.

Keywords: Digital public history; Online exhibition; Visual history; Connective turn; Digital hermeneutics; Nonfiction film; Sustainability; Transnationality; Hybrid practices

Introduction

Visual culture is a very traditional part of bringing history to the public, and its position in this context is often taken for granted. Thus, its role is frequently reduced to a neutral illustration, without perceiving the theoretical context and possibilities for mutual enrichment of visual and public history. In this text, we touch upon this topic through the specific example of a project on the borderline between academic history, digital public history, and visual history. Our intention is to outline the possibilities of linking these approaches, taking into account the specific research and curatorial experience with the online exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction*,[2] which was created as an output of an international research project on the role of visual media in the post-WWII reconstruction of Europe. The project, entitled "Visual Culture of Trauma, Obliteration, and Reconstruction in Post WWII Europe" (Victor-E) brought together scholars from the contexts of film and visual studies, history, and oral history from Germany, France, Italy, and the Czech Republic to consider how visual culture mediated the post-war transformation decade and its efforts to reconstruct war-torn Europe. One of its key tasks was to create a public online exhibition with a specific e-learning section, available in all languages of the participating countries and in English, in order to convey this topic to a wide audience. In addition to the essential collaboration with partner film archives and technology suppliers, this project required a strategy of audience outreach and digital education. In this way, it differs from the already existing projects both on the Czech national level, which usually work as online databases providing a catalogue of oral interviews and static documents (e.g., most recently *Testimonies of Roma and Sinti. The Second World War through the Eyes of Roma and Sinti from the Czech Lands and Slovakia*,[3] thematic websites related to historical anniversaries published by the Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences, or the Malach Centre for Visual History[4]) as well as on the in-

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2   www.frames-reconstruction.eu
3   www.romatestimonies.com
4   www.ufa.mff.cuni.cz/malach/

ternational level, where generic templates such as Google Arts & Culture are often used by institutions or static websites with content driven by photography and text only.[5] From the admitted position of researchers involved in Victor-E, we want to methodologically evaluate this practical experience in the broader context of thinking not only in and about the field of digital public history, but also through visual history, online archiving and museology, online teaching, media literacy, and oral history, and reveal both the theoretical and practical possibilities and limits of similarly conceived projects.

We depart from the notion of public historians as mediators and negotiators who, as Glassberg argues, "operate between competing political forces, as well as between local and larger-scale interpretive frameworks as they place a local story in larger context".[6] Their task is a certain reframing of academic knowledge towards a public that "neither passively receive nor actively challenge the historical image encountered in popular television docudramas, music, film, novels, and attractions, but rather 'negotiate' between mass culture and their own particular subculture".[7] Thus, although academic and public history are often thought of as two institutionally and otherwise separate fields, and have developed as such since the mid-1970s, one cannot ignore the fact that public history remains intertwined with academic history in various ways. Public historians usually receive their training in academic institutions from academic historians, and academic historians often function in various capacities towards making history accessible to the public (as consultants or co-curators of exhibitions, expert advisors for films, commentators and guests on television and radio discussion programmes, authors of their own podcasts, and so on). In some contexts, such as the Czech one, then, memory institutions are also research institutions and are thus encouraged to present both public and academ-

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5   To learn more about examples of good practice, please, see the international conference Turning History Online, including video recordings of individual presentations at www.fresh-eye.cz/program/turninghistoryonline/

6   David GLASSBERG, Public History and the Study of Memory, *The Public Historian* 18, 2/1996, pp. 7–23, here p. 13.

7   Ibidem, p. 15.

ic results. In such conditions, it makes sense to think about how these two spheres can work together in shaping public historical awareness. Digital public history and digital historical education projects are specific examples of such a link.

Public History and its Complex Iconosphere

Based on our specific experience as visual researchers and curators, who interact with both academic and public history, we would like to argue that public history in its traditional material formats, as well as in the form of various digital platforms, is always embedded in the wider visual culture. Not only we can examine a diverse palette of visual sources, be it photographs, illustrations, posters or advertisements, we can also approach the concept of visuality as a central methodological point of view through which historical narratives are scrutinized. As Salmi points out, the "visuality is both a method of representing the history and a method of understanding it".[8] The conceptualization of public history which employs the framework of visual culture moves public history closer to the field of visual history; the sub-discipline that has found more support among historians and museum practitioners in the past years. This should not come as a surprise; when looking around carefully, one has to reflect on the omnipresence of visual representations that nowadays can be more democratically produced, reproduced, and modified. That is why Daniela Bleichmar and Vanessa R. Schwartz state this simple fact in introducing their special issue of the journal *Representations* on visual history: "There is little doubt that the contemporary digital-image revolution makes us now, more than ever, both able to see the long life of visual history and curious about its workings."[9]

However, to place the visuality at the centre of a research work can be seen as a difficult task for many professional historians who argue

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8   Hannu SALMI, *What is Digital History?*, Cambridge 2020.
9   Daniela BLEICHMAR – Vanessa R. SCHWARTZ, Visual History. The Past in Pictures*, Representations 145, Winter 2019*, p. 5.

that they lack the art- and/or film history education. In case of the public history realm, such an argument is seen as a weaker one due to the lived community experience of history *with* and *through images*. When Kelley provided one of the first definitions of public history, he envisioned public historians as active agents of public life. Specifically, he wrote: "Public history refers to the employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia. [...] Public historians are at work whenever, in their professional capacity, they are part of the public process."[10] To step outside academia in order to engage with the complex spectrum of narratives of the past, which circulate within the public, also means to enter the field of contested visual representations and symbols which co-create the public iconosphere. It is impossible to think of public processes without visuals, from rhetorical figures popular in period political discourses to photographs and films documenting particular social events. As Stuart Hall's conceptualization of the notion of representation reminds us, visual representations are the necessary equipment for communication because they function as mental codes and larger symbolic maps through which individuals can reach a basic ideological orientation within the society.[11]

The second thing that Kelley's definition provides us with is the emphasis placed on the realm of *outside academia*. It directs our interest outside the official visual sources provided by historical institutions in order to reach sources expressing the experience of communities and individuals. Official, non-official, and community iconospheres should therefore meet in our investigation of the past. Sayer speaks about the "outside academia" freedom explicitly: "Its [public history] freedom from academic conceptualization and recognition has given public historians the opportunity to explore new relations that history has with the wider world and to embrace its broader public influence. This has enabled the discipline's practice to be influenced by the community."[12]

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10 Robert KELLEY, Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects, *The Public Historian* 1, 1/1978, p. 16.
11 Stuart HALL, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London 1997.
12 Faye SAYER, *Public History: A Practical Guide*, London 2015, p. 256.

When applied to contemporary visual public history, official, vernacular, and popular visual culture are then seen as relevant sources for research and curatorial practice with the goal of opening up the professional historical narratives to wider and more diverse public experience.

To methodologically ground such a diversity of visual representations, we propose following the concept of the *plurimedial memory network* as suggested by Astrid Erll.[13] By using the term *plurimedial constellation*, Erll points out the hybridity of visual representations by detecting connections existing among visual representations circulating in the public iconosphere.[14] From this perspective, the non-fiction films from the examined exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction* cannot be seen as solo representations of the reconstruction era, but should be placed into a conversation with photographs taken by both professionals and amateurs, or with posters and advertisements, which were physically incorporated into the public sphere, as well as with the memories of individuals. Plurimedia constellations enable us to approach historical narratives in their various dynamics as they centralise the process of remediation of mnemonic content. According to Erll, conceiving the past through the dynamics of remediation is crucial as "processes linked to the remediation makes the past understandable, and at the same time, they can imbue media representations with the aura of authenticity, and finally, they play the central role in stabilizing certain mnemonic content into the powerful sites of memory."[15]

Film in Public History

Public history theorists thus generally see film and visual culture as one of the channels of communication that co-create public awareness of history, but do not use their potential fully. For example, actively work-

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13 Astrid ERLL, *Memory in Culture*, London – New York 2011.
14 Ibidem, War, Film and Collective Memory: Plurimedial Constellations, *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 2, 3/2012, p. 231.
15 Ibidem, *Memory in Culture*, p. 20.

ing with film as a part of public history is essential not only because, as Rosenstone states, "visual media are the chief conveyor of public history in our culture" (as discussed above),[16] but also because the public should be able to better read and critically analyse these films. Like Rosenstone, most historians and public historians are primarily concerned with historical films, a specific genre of fictional film that transports the viewer into a specific historical context through dramatic narrative. These films greatly shape general historical awareness, but rather than examining deviations and inaccuracies (from the accepted historical narrative of the time), Rosenstone argues, we should be interested in how they specifically create a historical world and what interpretations of it they invite the viewer to observe.[17]

In the case of nonfiction films, the relationship to public history is even more straightforward, as they are usually understood as sources documenting certain historical phenomena – illustrating certain historical periods, showing historical events and personalities. Kaes even treats them as ageless and indelible historical monuments: "All these images, which have been replayed again and again, do not age nor can they be erased or forgotten; they are part of public history, they have assumed a function which historical monuments erected in public places had in previous centuries. Unlike heroic monuments, however, these filmic images are everywhere, impossible to topple and destroy."[18] While the notion of the wide availability of nonfiction film images (Kaes refers primarily to Holocaust images) may be a bit of an exaggeration, it is partly reminiscent of one of the key challenges of circulating nonfiction films in public digital space, namely the challenge of contextualization. Nonfiction film images are much more susceptible

16   Robert ROSENSTONE, *History on Film, Film on History*, New York 2006, p. 14.
17   Ibidem, p. 14.
18   Anton KAES, History and Film: Public Memory in the Age of Electronic Dissemination, *History and Memory* 2, 1/1990, pp. 111–129, here 118. Films were, of course, especially in authoritarian regimes, censored, banned, hidden in vaults, and destroyed. However, the author points out the difference between the uniqueness of a monument and the reproducibility of film, especially in the digital era. If even a single copy of a film has been saved, the possibilities of its dissemination are now almost unlimited.

in digital space to various re-uses, re-appropriations, and re-contextu-alisations, both ethical and unethical, appropriate and inappropriate.[19] As Ebbrecht-Hartmann, Stiassny and Henig state: "As images migrate through popular culture, they leave a trace and create new connections with each iteration. These connections establish a complex network of image relations that, on the one hand, demonstrates the impact of the visual heritage of migrating images on the memory of the Holocaust and, on the other hand, provides new access points for engaging with its visual heritage in critical and reflexive ways."[20] One of these access points can be digital historiography or digital public history projects, which enable the development of complex digital curation methods.

A Digital Ecosystem for the New Research and Curatorial Practices

The first conception of the de-materialised museum can be found in the writing of André Malraux, who drafted the vision of *museums without walls* (*museé imaginaire*) in 1947.[21] He described it as a democratic platform spreading culture, art, and related knowledge. Specifically, his conception drew upon the emergence of photocopies of artworks, historical, and anthropological objects that allowed everyday audiences to "own" and to exhibit favourite objects in their private spaces as well as to freely curate the relationships between them. The democratic character of the *museum without walls* deserves a historical contextualization. Malraux published his essay just two years after the end of WWII, when the idea of accessible public education was seen as one of the fundamental elements upon which the peaceful postwar society should

19   Jaimie BARON, *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse. The Ethics of Appropriation in the Digital Era*, New Jersey 2020.
20   Tobias EBBRECHT-HARTMANN − Noga STIASSNY − Lital HENIG, Digital visual history: historiographic curation using digital technologies, Rethinking History, *The Journal of Theory and Practice* 2023, p. 5.
21   André MALRAUX, *Museum without Walls*, London 1967. Originally published in 1947.

be built. Until today, Malraux's conception can be found highly inspirative in the way it empowers the knowledge production of community and accommodates its creative and participative inputs.

Nevertheless, it took two more decades to experience another significant technological transformation that was brought by the foundation and further development in the field of the ICT sector. As Salmi reminds us, the early historical analysis processed through computational methods was taking place as early as in the 1960s and the early digital humanities projects can be traced back to the 1970s.[22] Until the 1990s, however, digital historical projects were mostly designed as browsing platforms and databases that were missing participative features through which users could interact with the content. This has changed with the extensive process of digitization that can be observed since the beginning of the new millennium and especially in the last decade, when historical institutions and documents have been turned into digital data stored in online repositories.[23] In this regard, Andrew Hoskins suggests talking about the *connective turn* that the whole realm of history-related practices is undergoing.[24] On the one hand, a profound change is seen in how various digital materials can be connected and may interact together in the digital environment: private documents interact with official historical sources which previously remained captured in public institutions, and marginalized representations circulate next to hegemonic ones. On the other hand, the connective turn has also changed the power dynamics within the field of history and memory production. It took the production of official narratives from the hands of professional historians and curators to enable nonprofessionals to narrate their stories. In this sense, the connective turn seems to have created a new foundation for the democratization of culture, art, and history as envisioned by Malraux as well as a new dynamic platform upon which public history projects can be developed. As

22 H. SALMI, *What is Digital History?*.
23 Nanna BONDE THYLSTRUP, *The Politics of Mass Digitization*, Cambridge 2019.
24 Andrew HOSKINS, *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition*, London – New York 2017.

Leon puts it, "the digital environment [is] the new ecosystem of historical practice."[25]

The opportunities, challenges, and limits that this new digital environment has placed in front of professional history practitioners has led to the emergence of *digital public history*. According to Paju, Oiva and Fridlund, "digital history encompasses diverse historical practices, such as digitization efforts at archives, libraries and museums, computer-assisted research, web-based teaching and professional and public dissemination of historical knowledge, as well as research on the history of 'the digital', computers and technologies".[26] It is therefore a relatively wide range of activities. Yet, they can be interrelated or interdependent, especially in the case of the digitisation of archival documents and their publication and evaluation in the digital environment. Serge Noiret, who promotes the concept of digital public history, emphasizes the possibility of building new connections among diverse materials, narratives, academic disciplines, and groups of audiences.[27] By mentioning the audiences, he also considers the new dynamics of dissemination that are part of digital public history, wherein the digital content becomes contested by various interpretations delivered by different mnemonic groups. However, reaching the "general public" cannot be taken as an automatic given for any project placed online. As Sheila Brennan points out, "projects and research may be available online, but that status does not inherently make the work digital public humanities or public digital humanities".[28] That is why Brennan calls for strategic collaboration with specifically defined communities whose needs would be embedded in the overall design of the project's online outputs. With this in mind, digital public history should be perceived as

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25 Sharon LEON, Complexity and Collaboration: Doing Public History in Digital Environments, in: James B. Gardner – Paula Hamilton (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, New York 2017, p. 45.
26 Mats FRILUND – Mila OIVA – Petri PAJU, *Digital Histories: Emergent Approaches within the New Digital History*, Helsinki 2020, p. 3.
27 Serge NOIRET, Digital Public History, in: David Dean (ed.), *A Companion to Public History*, Hoboken 2018, pp. 111–124.
28 Sheila A. BRENNAN, A Case for Digital Collections, *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archival Professionals* 12, 4/2016, p. 384.

a specific boundary discipline, influenced by various circumstances of the development of (public) institutions (e.g., the state of digitization of collections, legal regulation of digital access, etc.) and by the convergence and interpenetration of different methods and approaches.

Andreas Fickers makes a specific call for the critical reflection on the specific position and the place that digital public history occupies as operating between the digital and the analogue.[29] Fickers calls this position "in-betweenness" to demonstrate the mutual penetration of analogue and digital materials and practices. He terms this approach *digital hermeneutics* or "hermeneutics of in-betweenness" and defines it as a "set of skills and competences that allow historians to critically reflect on the various interventions of digital research infrastructures, tools, databases and dissemination platforms in the process of thinking, doing and narrating history."[30] To incorporate the perspective of digital hermeneutics into the practice of public historians thus means to significantly challenge the fundaments of the discipline itself due to its origin in the analogue era. Evoking the writing of the Finnish philosopher Erkki Huhtamo, Fickers proposes to use Huhtamo's term "thinkering".[31] By putting together the verbs "thinking" and "tinkering", "thinkering" requires the production of a constant self-reflective loop in considering the environment, material, established practices and communities that public historians work with. The principle of self-reflexivity should also be accompanied by the careful documentation of every action taken as part of the research and communication process. Lastly, and importantly, digital hermeneutics asks us to consider the ethical implications of our work that – as just said above – can communicate with other materials and groups in the digital realm.

Fickers also articulates the imperative of the *shared authority* that consists of two elements.[32] Firstly, it makes us aware that in the sphere

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29 Andreas FICKERS, Digital Hermeneutics: The Reflexive Turn in Digital Public History, in: Serge Noiret – Mark Tebeau – Gerben Zaagsma (eds.), *Handbook of Digital History*, Berlin 2022, pp. 139–147.

30 Ibidem, p. 140.

31 Erkki HUHTAMO, Thinkering with Media: On art of Paul DeMarinis, in: Paul De-Marinis (ed.), *Buried in Noise*, Heidelberg 2011, p. 33–39.

32 A. FICKERS, Digital Hermeneutics: The Reflexive Turn in Digital Public History.

of digital public history, our research work and production of digital projects should be primarily driven by the idea of sharing the knowledge with others. According to our understanding of this formula, digital public historians function as mediators between two often competing discourses: the professional discourse of academic history and the non-professional discourse of bottom-up history. The far-reaching process of digitization has significantly empowered the latter discourse, and therefore we find it even more difficult to conceptualize and run the professional discourse of academic history as a singular and elite practice. The second element represents the *FAIR principle* relating to the use of digital data. The data involved in digital public history projects are supposed to be *F*indable, *A*ccessible, *I*nteroperable and *R*eusable. Therefore, the work of digital public historians is supposed to be open not only to other materials and communities on the level of interpretation, but it should also be reachable as a source with a potential use in other projects on the production level.

Towards a Complex and Sustainable Digital Public History

The specificity of the Victor-E project is its academic background, from which the outputs of digital public history grow. It is therefore not a project strictly separating academic history and public history, but rather, it connects them on a methodological and a personal level. The basis for the construction of the exhibition has therefore been extensive research into archival nonfiction films from the post-WWII era. Such a corpus of sources traditionally stands rather outside of the main focus. It is either used purely illustratively towards the public or interpreted primarily as Cold War propaganda. The archival research that sought to capture all surviving nonfiction films of the period allowed us to disrupt these stereotypical models of presenting nonfiction film heritage to offer a more nuanced approach that takes into account different functions of these films while placing them in the broader context of lived history and memory, and also allowing for their balanced educational use. Nevertheless, the format of the online exhibition must

be seen as an ambivalent form – offering many new possibilities but bounded by various limits.

In addition to the wide accessibility of online exhibitions, one of their key advantages is the fact that the display of digitized materials often makes it easy to present documents or artifacts that it would not be possible to use in a traditional exhibition due to their rarity or specific physical condition.[33] As a result, cultural heritage that has not been seen before can be brought back into circulation. In the case of films, this aspect is particularly crucial for nonfiction films, which are often preserved on low-quality 16mm prints, as reproductions, or as negatives only. A normal screening of such prints is often impossible, as there is the risk of irreversible damage to the material, and therefore careful digitization or digital restoration is preferred. In the *Frames of Reconstruction* exhibition, there are many materials, especially from the field of instructional or amateur film, whose fate is characterised by these circumstances, and which are thus reaching the audience often for the first time since their creation.

Some authors also mention the potential "openness" of online exhibitions and the possibility of adding certain elements or functionalities (e.g., learning or edutainment activities, online forums, etc.) as their advantage.[34] At the same time, however, it is necessary to be aware of the limits of the user's attention even in the seemingly infinite environment of the Internet and to consider the specific factors influencing their attention and interest in the exhibition in the highly distracting digital environment. Soyeon Kim highlights "personal, social, content, and environmental factors" that influence audience/user's engagement with the online exhibition.[35] Individual visitors approach an online exhibition equipped with personal preunderstandings and an-

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33   Chern Li LIEW, Online cultural heritage exhibitions: a survey of information retrieval features, *Program: electronic library and information systems* 39, 1/2005, pp. 4–24; Schubert FOO, Online Virtual Exhibitions: Concepts and Design Considerations, *DESIDOC Journal of Library and Information Technology* 28, 4/2008, pp. 22–34.

34   S. FOO, *Online Virtual Exhibitions: Concepts and Design Considerations.*

35   Soyeon KIM, Virtual exhibitions and communication factors, *Museum Management and Curatorship* 33, 3/2018, pp. 243–260.

chored in specific social givens. Through the ways in which the exhibition information reaches them and how the exhibition itself communicates with them, they may be attuned to its perception in a certain way. However, the content itself, its layout, its navigability and interactivity, its user-friendliness and clarity, are crucial.

In the case of *Frames of Reconstruction*, considerations about the overall interface, thematic breakdown, selection of specific objects, their arrangement, and the comprehensibility of texts were complicated by the multilingual focus of the exhibition, which reinforced the need to explain historical events, personalities and socio-political context in a way that can be understood by everyone, not just a person familiar with certain national histories. The need to communicate *transnational histories* therefore became an important aspect of the overall concept, which sought to ensure an even representation of objects, people, and memories from all the countries represented across all the sections and themes of the exhibition (for more on the transnational aspect of the project, see last section of this text).

This approach was then reflected in the teaching materials, again conceived as chapters in transnational history and defined by more general themes affecting all the studied post-war societies – for example, the questions of migration, changing borders, mobilisation for labour productivity, and many more. The specific issues presented in the teaching materials then pursue a dual purpose – firstly, to develop students' media literacy by challenging them to think about forms of audiovisual communication and the means of expression of particular messages (typically, for example, the role of music, editing, or animation), and secondly, to develop the ability to make comparisons between contexts – to find similarities and differences. As Linda Daniela notes, one of the limitations of online learning environments designed in this way is the need for a teacher's assistance.[36] *Frames of Reconstruction* does not avoid this impasse by assuming that the learning exercises associated with the online exhibition will primarily be used by teachers directly in the classroom. It also offers model lessons spe-

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36   Linda DANIELA, Virtual Museums as Learning Agents, *Sustainability* 12, 7/2020, pp. 1–24.

cifically for teachers, encouraging them to place each topic in the context of the material they are currently focusing on. It allows them to modify (shorten or expand) the exercises according to their needs and expects them to discuss and to provide commentary or explanations for students' answers. As the target audience for this interface consists primarily of teachers, the project team worked with them through workshops and a communication campaign in the phase of the exhibition development. However, in the wide environment of the Internet, theoretically anyone can come across the exercises, including the students themselves, to potentially practice their knowledge and skills. According to Daniela's broad research from 2020, only a minimum of online learning environments works with the pre-set feedback[37] and it is therefore advisable to think about and actively work with this limit in the future.

A similarly challenging question related to the digital outputs of research projects is the question of *sustainability*. With regard to the short-term funding of such projects, it is often said that they create vast "digital wastelands"[38] of websites or online exhibitions that fall into oblivion once the project's visibility has ended. There is therefore a growing call for concepts of data management and sustainability of the underlying documentation of these research interfaces and their archiving.[39] Such concepts should be built directly into project proposals and become part of the discussion on data preservation responsibilities with the institutions that underpin the research projects.[40] In the case of *Frames of Reconstruction*, the question of sustainability is closely linked with the extent of the licensing rights that institutions (or other rights holders) were willing to grant to make the digitized

37 L. DANIELA, *Virtual Museums as Learning Agents*, p. 15.
38 Christine BARATS – Valérie SCHAFER – A. FICKERS, Fading Away… The challenge of sustainability in digital studies, *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 14, 3/2020, p. 2.
39 A. FICKERS, Update für die Hermeneutik. Geschichtswissenschaft auf dem Weg zur digitalen Forensik?, *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 17, 1/2020, pp. 157–168.
40 Ch. BARATS – V. SCHAFER – A. FICKERS, Fading Away… The challenge of sustainability in digital studies, p. 24.

films available. Although in some cases it was possible to negotiate un-restricted use, this does not apply to all objects in the exhibition. How-ever, the institutional guarantor of the project, the Deutsches Filminsti-tut & Filmmuseum, together with the Association of European Film Archives, has been responsible for the long-established European Film Gateway project, which it maintains and further develops. From the outset of the application process, it was thus crucial for Victor-E to col-laborate with archives actively involved in these international initia-tives. As such, partner archives were aware of both their responsibility towards the project and the benefits that working with academics can offer in terms of communication of a specific cultural heritage to pub-lic.[41] Similarly, the *Frames of Reconstruction* teaching materials are linked with Historiana.eu, a portal actively used by the community of teachers and managed by the European Association of History Educa-tors. Connecting online exhibitions to larger, longer-established projects with stable funding and backed by stable public institutions is one way to at least partially address the key challenge of sustainability. Although perfect solutions may be more aspirational than realistic, this seems to be one specific example of how to partially sustain a digital project.

Collapsed Roles: Researchers-Digital Curators

In the following section, we would like to explore the specific experi-ence which one encounters as a professional researcher curating digital content. Firstly, the issue of *collapsed roles* emerges. Since the very be-ginning of the research phase, a digital interface of the *Frames of Re-construction* exhibition was considered as a main communication plat-form with the public. Despite "traditional" extensive research in physi-cal and digital archives, our research activities were permanently shaped by acting also as digital curators. Therefore, the roles of re-searcher and digital curator collapsed into each other and led to the

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41   Rossella CATANESE, How to Benefit from Academics? A Roundtable with Film Archives, *Iluminace* 34, 1/2022, pp. 107–114.

articulation of new research criteria. Four of these were considered when we acted as researchers-digital curators: (1) interconnectivity, (2) tellability, (3) visual attractivity and (4) originality.

The criterion of *interconnectivity* was established to follow the above-explained methodological approach. Simply, we wanted to detect the plurimedial constellations of memory at work. As our primary research material consisted of a corpus of international short documentary films, we decided to trace their circulation in a larger period visual culture to supplement them with photographs, photobooks, or posters. This criterion can be explicitly seen e.g., in a curatorial selection done in the exhibition chapter "Ruin and Rebirth of Art Heritage", exploring the theme of war-damaged cultural heritage. Here, the plurimediality was employed at best in the case of representing the reconstruction of the Zwinger complex in Dresden. Viewers can watch a short film describing the process, including its technical details, then have a look at a famous photo book promoting the reconstruction of the whole city and finally, they can listen to the personal story of the cameraman Ernst Hirsch, who documented the reconstruction efforts. Pursuing interconnectivity was important to us not only from a methodological point of view, but it also enabled us to fully employ a digital hyperlinkage of objects within the exhibition. Throughout the exhibition, visitors can encounter hyperlinks inviting them to explore thematically, periodically, and medially connected objects. In the case of the already mentioned chapter, such links are mostly made to items presented in two other chapters about museums and galleries and living and housing.

The second criterion, *tellability*, closely relates to the first one. By conceptualizing the exhibition as a network of objects in dialogue, we aimed to create narratives of various scopes. On the most extensive level, there are the *meta-narratives* speaking about one issue throughout the exhibition. In this way, the theme of, e.g., gender is highlighted throughout the digital content. We can also trace *transnational* stories showing how people, ideas, and films circulated throughout Europe, while often surprisingly crossing the growing ideological division between the East and the West. Explicitly, these types of stories can be

seen in the exhibition chapters on migration and travelling, however – as will be explained in the last section of this article – every single chapter of *Frames of Reconstruction* is built around the notion of trans-nationality. *Community stories* are involved as well when, e.g., the communities of filmmakers or LGBTQI+ people are provided with a voice through films, oral history interviews, and objects. Lastly, our goal was to tell *stories of individual objects*, and thus a short description accompanies each digital item, yet it does not stand as a singularity, but usually interacts with other items through a hyperlink.

The third criterion leading our work, *visual attractivity*, related to the fact that the exhibition was created in the context of visual history. We aimed to present materials which online visitors would find visually appealing in terms of their aesthetic qualities, especially if themes like architecture, living, or festivities – in which the period design and visual communication played an important role – were considered. Exhibited items come from important period cultural figures like Le Corbusier or Josef Sudek, and at the same time, viewers are introduced to the anonymous, yet high quality and telling graphic design of booklets, posters, and textbooks. By bearing in mind the aesthetics, we could also acknowledge the emphasis that the reconstruction era put on aesthetic education as a tool for the cultivation of the eye.[42] Lastly, the material selection was guided by the search for *original material* in the abundance of digital historical sources. In this regard, we used the great advantage of establishing a well-functioning network of institutional partners, especially film archives from all around Europe, with whom we gradually worked on the digitization of the analogue material that – in many cases – had not been publicly seen for decades.

When following these criteria, we felt the great pain of extensive research reduction that comes with any public history project that is supposed to be comprehensible for diverse audiences. And as digital curators, we were aware of the limits imposed by a specific type of digital platform with which we can work. Due to technical and financial limits, we were not able to open the exhibition for the direct participa-

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42 Lucie ČESÁLKOVÁ, *Atomy věčnosti*, Praha 2014.

tion of users in the form of the implementation of a feature for uploading their own documents or comments related to the exhibited topics or to a historical era as such. This issue led to the crafting of even more levels on which stories could be told to diversify the monolithic structure of historical exhibition. We also had to abandon the idea of providing individualized user profiles to researchers and teachers, who could intensively work with the content. Later, this problem was dealt with via the differentiation of various levels of content for different types of users. Specifically, next to the chapters guided by one grand theme, a more nuanced understanding of the content can be reached by examining the transnational timeline, the chronological timeline, or hyperlinks. To accommodate a more research-oriented approach to the exhibition, we have offered a list of tags which conceptualize the whole body of the exhibition through advanced and abstract categories (see Figure 1). For each film item in the exhibition, there also exists a link leading the visitor to the European Film Gateway, where the films can be watched in their entirety. And as already explained, teachers can find a separate section where audio-visual teaching materials are provided with professional guidance.

Figure 1: Research-oriented tagging interface of the online exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction*.
Source: Authors' personal archive.

In our understanding, despite the limited technological design of the exhibition platform, the FAIR principles were fulfilled: (1 – Findable) all the film data can be found outside the exhibition in a larger digital portal, (2 – Accessible) access is granted to anyone who understands any of the five languages (Czech, English, German, French and Italian) and comes as a regular visitor, a teacher, or researcher, (3 – Interoperable) the items are connected through a system of hyperlinks and (4 – Reusable) the data can be used by others as we provide relevant sources for each item.

Private, Local, Transnational

If we perceive the format of the online exhibition as one of the variants of digital public history, then due to the wide accessibility of the web, it explicitly encourages the disruption of national memory schemes and represents a challenge to local and national history by promoting a transnational perspective. Following the call to avoid "methodological nationalism"[43] formulated by Ann Rigney and Chiara de Cesari, the environment of the multimedia hypertext of the online exhibition offers the opportunity to actively apply the principles of multi-scalarity and to think about individual or regional stories in the context of national and transnational history and memory. As Noiret argues, "digital technology helps overcome spatial-temporal barriers in order to unite similar audiences and publics, which favours the transnational, the global, and the comparison between different — yet, nevertheless, similar — local realities."[44] In this way, digital public history allows us to re-arrange and re-think previously established scales and hierarchies of the importance of particular voices and memories in historical narratives. Alongside the histories of elites who usually told their stories during their lifetimes, it positions the local histories and personal life stories of ordinary people, often members of marginalized communities, whose in-

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43 Chiara de CESARI – Ann RIGNEY (eds.), *Transnational Memory. Circulation, Articulation, Scales*, Berlin 2014, p. 2.
44 S. NOIRET, *Digital Public History*, p. 121.

timate reflections can more easily become part of a transnational hi(story).

In the Victor-E project and the online exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction*, history mediated by non-fiction films and visual culture is complemented by the testimonies of eyewitnesses – usually ordinary people who experienced WWII, its end and the transformation of post-war European societies in different contexts. Our intention was to thoroughly connect the memoirs with the central themes of our research so that, on the one hand, selected eyewitnesses represent key professions of post-war reconstruction (e.g., architects, construction workers) and its media reflection (filmmakers or amateur filmmakers). At the same time, eyewitnesses feature the plurality of the period experiences (different perspectives on the problems in border areas – displaced persons, remaining persons; reflections on women's rights, etc.), including the representation of marginalised communities (ethnic communities, LGBTQI+ communities, etc.). The stories and views of these people were then matched to the themes of the exhibition and specific films based on the thematic coding of the oral content, so that they always provided a new layer of discussed issues.

As Donald A. Ritchie puts it, "Public history is an organized effort to bring accurate, meaningful history to a public audience, and oral history is a natural tool for reaching that goal."[45] Victor-E worked with oral history as public history: in an effort to connect with local communities, to understand their experiences of the post-war reconstruction, to convey their voices and to place them in the broader context of the transnational post-war history. Publishing such memories in a digital environment, however, is another challenge that requires an ethical and consensual solution. In the case of Victor-E, all narrators were informed of the intention to publish their testimonies online in video format before the interview was conducted, and they also signed a consent form. Nevertheless, they were then free to withdraw this consent at any time. All videos published by the Victor-E project were thus fully

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45   Donald A. RITCHIE, *Doing Oral History*, Oxford – New York 2014, p. 28.

authorized by eyewitnesses. If any of them change their minds, the particular video will be removed immediately.

Linking private memories with (trans)national stories in more generally framed thematic units, local events that have thus far appeared to be primarily stories of national history could become part of more general types of historical narratives in a transnational framing. A very good example of this is annihilation of Lidice, which was compared to similar events in other countries (such as the massacre in Oradour-sur-Glane) as early as in the initial post-war discourse and was thus presented as a part of transnational memory and trauma. Analogically, we can view the issue of Czech-German relations and the expulsion of the Germans after the WWII in a more general light by placing it alongside the conflicts surrounding the Italian-Yugoslav border, which also erected boundaries between former neighbours and acquaintances.

Similarly, the very nature of nonfiction film and its position in the post-war culture and society encourages a transnational perspective. Nonfiction film was a key medium of information for the pre-TV audiences and its production was often based on a commission of various regional, national, and transnational actors who used it to articulate and promote their interests.[46] At the same time, these films were produced in synergy with other visual media, and it is therefore essential to analyse and present them in this transnational and transmedia context. The circulation of these films was also transnational, as they were screened not only in the artistic framing of film festivals or art exhibitions, but also in a number of different contexts – political or diplomatic, in the case of events at foreign embassies,[47] during trade fairs, in schools, etc. – both at home and abroad.

The interconnectedness between nations, the circulation of films and their images across national contexts, and the implications of this circulation for digital public history can be illustrated to this day on the example of *Die Grenze* (1953), a documentary film produced by the West German Zeit im Film. This film, representing the West German

46 L. ČESÁLKOVÁ, *Atomy věčnosti.*
47 L. ČESÁLKOVÁ, Film as Diplomat: The Politics of Postwar Screenings at Czechoslovak Foreign Embassies, *Film History* 27, 1/2015, pp. 85–110.

propagandistic view of communist Czechoslovakia, could not be found in the German archives, and it was only through cooperation with the Italian research team that we were able to identify its Italian language version, *La Frontiera*. The film was dubbed into Italian in the mid-1950s, shown in Italian cinemas and as such helped to shape the Italian perception of the Eastern Bloc. Although it captured a very specific area of the Šumava-Bavaria border, its significance went far beyond this region. It was the post-WWII period that significantly reinforced the need for transnational networking through film, as institutions such as the UN and UNESCO saw nonfiction film as a tool for bringing foreign cultures together.[48] However, as we know and as exemplified by *Die Genze/ La Frontiera*, it also began to function simultaneously as a tool for defining antagonists in the new, post-war geopolitical order. To adequately present such a film in a digital exhibition, we believe, also means to explain the whole context of this film's international life.

Conclusion

The larger theoretical and methodological contextualization of our own experience as researchers-curators, who have entered the realm of digital public history, made the scope and the intensity of the process of hybridization through which our work has undergone lately on many levels highly visible to us. In terms of research, we still count on traditional archival research and use established research practices of citations or object indexing, yet we are more willing to enter the extensive digital pool of various official and unofficial information infrastructures from which we can take research data and objects. As far as curatorial practices are concerned, we still employ grand narratives and are eager to discover new information, objects, or relations. But we build these constructions while also crafting the nuanced and previously marginali-

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48 Zoe DRUICK, 'Before Education, Good Food, and Health': World Citizenship and Biopolitics in UNESCO's Post-War Literacy Films, in: Christian Bonah – Anja Läukotter (eds.), *Body, Capital, and Screens: Visual Media and the Healthy Self in the 20th Century*, Amsterdam 2020, pp. 249–278.

zed links among themes, communities, objects, and information that can now become present and visible thanks to the technical infrastructure of the online exhibition platform.

Based on this experience, we believe that analogue and digital research and curatorial practices penetrate and interact with one another in mostly positive ways. They make our research and its public outcomes more informed, accessible, and interesting for various publics. This is why we find making the distinction between analogue and digital historical work to be obsolete and unproductive – after all, our professional and personal lives have transcended this binary opposition a long time ago. In the same way, we also understand the spheres of academic and the public history as operating much more closely to one another than ever before in the current moment, when the history discourse has become a part of public life through (firstly) mass media and (secondly) digital platforms. History today plays an important role in the digital communication of individuals (e.g., through the digitization of personal archives, finding historical information online and sharing it), communities (e.g., using the opportunity for the articulation of counter-hegemonic narratives or to create independent digital archives), institutions (e.g., the mass digitization of collections), and nations (e.g., the use of digitalized cultural heritage to trigger certain mnemonic narratives and feelings). We favour the conception of history as a dialogical realm in which historians do not possess all the power and find themselves in the role of gatekeepers, but rather, facilitate discussions among mnemonic groups, mediate conflicts over interpretations, and do not hesitate to extend their interest to vernacular histories.

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Visual Culture and Hybrid Practices in Digital Public History: Contextualizing the "Frames of Reconstruction" online exhibition

SUMMARY

The article centers around the theoretical, methodological, and practical aspects of the newly emerging field of digital public history. It derives from the direct experience of authors as researchers and curators of the international online exhibition Frames of Reconstruction (www.frames-reconstruction.eu). First sections of the article explores a complex relationship between the academic and the public history while mostly focusing on two points: the "outside academia" discourse of the public history that nowadays is enhanced, amplified, and widely enabled by the availability of digital communication platforms within and outside academic and public institutions, and the omnipresence of visual representations through which the public history is communicated, yet theoretically, visual culture in form of visual history, stays still overlooked and/or taken for granted. In terms of theory and methodology, therefore, the article examines and employs the plurimedial memory network analysis by Erll (2011) to demonstrate the vital and dynamic role of visuals in how history is mediated to the public in both, physical and digital space. This analysis itself is taken as one of two starting points for the critical reflection of own´s research and curatorial experience in the digital realm. The second, then, represents the contemporary writing on the discipline of digital public history by Serget Noiret (2018) and Andreas Fickers (2022); specifically, Ficker's concept of digital hermeutics, imperative of shared authority and the FAIR principles are discussed and directly applied on the gained practical experience. Throughout this critical reflection of one own's practice, four main issues related to digital public history projects are tackled: collapsing roles of researcher and curator, sustainability, transnational-

ity, and potentials of democratic education. In this second analytical part of the article, the specific examples from the digital exhibition are provided, while main research-curatorial principles of work are debated as interconnectivity, tellability, visual attractivity, and originality.