

Ways of Narrating Memory: Hannah Arendt's "Eichmann in Jerusalem" and Steven  
Spielberg's "Schindler's List"<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

It is self-evident that events of the past are bound to places and acting people, they are playing a decisive role for memory and history. Meaning and importance of places and actions in the past depend on their contexts and each change inevitably also changes the meaning of the events itself. I would like to demonstrate some of the consequences of such a change by comparing Hannah Arendt's "Eichmann in Jerusalem" with Steven Spielberg's "Schindler's List" who decontextualized a factual story and thus changed places and acting people. But before doing this, I would like to emphasize the importance which places and acting people play for memory and history with some perhaps unusual remarks. They refer to the official European history and politics which seem to be marked by the absence of places and acting people.

**Resúmen**

El cineasta Wim Wenders señaló que la historia tiende a alejarse de sus lugares. Las películas norteamericanas se distinguen por una historia cuyo lugar es permutable en la mayoría de los casos, mientras que las películas europeas están más marcadas por un sentido de lugar, de particularidades regionales y locales. Wenders asignó a este *sentido de lugar* el rol clave en su trabajo cinematográfico. Para sus películas, los lugares constituyen las fuentes más fuertes de imágenes, ellas escriben la historia, no el autor del guión, para cuyo texto solamente se tiene que buscar cualquier lugar adecuado. Para Wenders los ángeles que se encuentran en todas partes en Berlín fueron las fuentes de inspiración para su película "El cielo sobre Berlín" (1987) y las calaveras en todas partes en Palermo para su película "Palermo Shooting" (2008). Además de los lugares, para Wenders los caracteres de los personajes están igualmente formando historias; son figuras alucinantes, personas que no son meramente marionetas de eventos sino que escriben con sus experiencias historias. Ambos, el sentido de lugar y los caracteres, tienen igualmente una importancia significativa para la narración de historias. La Historia ocurre casi siempre como acción humana en ciertos lugares marcados por hombres y mujeres. El alejamiento de estos lugares y la

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narración sin su tiempo específico y su lugar concreto cambian inevitablemente el contenido de la historia. La comparación del libro "Eichmann en Jerusalén" de Hannah Arendt con "La lista de Schindler" de Steven Spielberg nos mostrará como Arendt desarrolló una narrativa específica del contar lo que existe, mientras Spielberg narra la historia (story) de un holocausto sin lugar y atemporal.

## 1. History without places

Currently, a so-called "House of European History" is being built in Brussels. It is to be opened 100 years after the beginning of WW I in 2014. This project was encouraged in 2007 by the German president of the European Parliament Hans-Gert Pöttering with the following remarks: "I should like to create a locus for history and for the future where the concept of the European idea can continue to grow. I would like to suggest the founding of a 'House of European History'. It should [be] a place where a memory of European history and the work of European unification is jointly cultivated, and which at the same time is available as a locus for the European identity to go on being shaped by present and future citizens of the European Union."<sup>3</sup> A committee of nine historians, among them two women, from nine countries published a concept of 28 pages.<sup>4</sup>

The notion of "locus" and "places" is misleading. It is only about the house of the history and not about the places in which history took place, and not about the stories which happened. In this paper the main topics are strung together in 116 numbered paragraphs ranging from the "forms of higher culture ... around the Nile, the Euphrates and the Tigris" to the entry into the European Union of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. As could be suspected, these experts are committed to a vision of history that defines Europe as the

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<sup>3</sup> Conceptual Basis for a House of European History, paragraph 1 [www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004\\_2009/.../dv/.../745721\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/.../dv/.../745721_en.pdf) (last visit 23/8/10).

<sup>4</sup> The members of the Committee of Experts are: Włodzimierz Borodziej (PL), Professor of Modern History, University of Warsaw, Giorgio Cracco (IT), Professor of Ecclesiastical History, University of Turin, Michel Dumoulin (BE), Professor of History, Catholic University of Leuven at Louvain-la-Neuve, Hans Walter Hütter (DE), Professor, Chairman of the Foundation for the House of History of the Federal Republic of Germany, Bonn Marie-Hélène Joly (FR), Chief Curator, Deputy Director of the Remembrance, Heritage and Archives Directorate, Ministry of Defence Matti Klinge (FIN), Emeritus Professor of Nordic History, University of Helsinki Ronald de Leeuw (NL), Professor, retired Director of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam António Reis (PT), Professor of History, New University of Lisbon Mária Schmidt (HU), Director, House of Terror Museum in Budapest

exclusive ensemble of Greek, Roman, humanistic, Christian and scientific culture and progress. They did not mention the role which the Arab culture played for the Renaissance, the expulsion of the Moors in Spain, the Jewish history, the history of anti-semitism, the French Revolution, the importance of social and political movements, or the crimes of colonialism. The latter is only dealt as a matter of political rivalries.<sup>5</sup> Neither the civic movements in Eastern Europe are mentioned, with the exception of Solidarnosc, nor the migrations.

This fiction of a European History cleansed from its respective places, regions and cultural spaces appears in a void, and this history without visible actors seems to be moved by ghost hand. With this sort of politics of history the involved historians do not only discredit their own reputation and that of the historical science but they also contradict the spirit of plurality and deliberation not only within the community of democratic and federal societies in Europe but also with extra-European societies. And plurality and deliberation does not only refer to actual debates but also to debates about history. A common European history requires the perception of the whole diversity of different histories, the telling of all the different stories and the assumption of the perspectives of the others.

In a very strange way this comprehension of history without places and acting people corresponds to the Euro banknotes. They show bridges passing over nothing and leading to the nothing, windows and fronts without houses, porticos without streets and places, and doors opening to the void. Places without sense, unfit for communication, not-places, desert.

The film-maker Wim Wenders indicated that stories tend to detach from their places. American films are characterized by a story whose places are often exchangeable while European films, according to Wenders, are distinguished by a stronger sense of place and local and regional characteristics. Wenders assigned this sense of place the key role in his work. For his films, places are the strongest creators of images. They write the story, not the script writers. For their stories only the right place has to be found. For example, for Wenders the angels everywhere to come across in Berlin where the inspiration for his film

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<sup>5</sup> See paragraph. 44, 47

"Wings of Desire" while the death's heads on Palermo inspired him to make the film "Palermo Shooting". In addition to the places, personalities are equally relevant, exciting persons and their experiences. They are the authors of stories and no mere puppets of events.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise both, places and personalities are important for the telling of history. History always takes place as human action at certain places which are formed and shaped by human beings. To withdraw oneself from these places and to tell the history as a history without its specific places and times unavoidably changes its content.

The comparison of Arendt's "Eichmann in Jerusalem" with Spielberg's "Schindler's List" will show, how Arendt developed a narrative of telling, influenced by Herodot's "to say what is", while Spielberg does not tell all, he tells the placeless story of a timeless Holocaust.

## 2. "Eichmann in Jerusalem" – pictures of a story

For Arendt "to say what is", as she called it,<sup>7</sup> is the task of the historian, and she defended this task with her essay "Truth and Politics" as response to the enduring controversy about her report on the Jerusalem trial. To the factual truth which Arendt did not want to conceal belonged the fact that the trial "offers the most striking insight into the totality of the moral collapse the Nazis caused in respectable European society – not only in Germany but in almost all countries, not only among the persecutors but also among the victims."<sup>8</sup> This truth revealing itself during the trial was uncomfortable and criticized as mere opinion what often happens in similar cases and as an inappropriate polemic and lack of love of the Jewish people.

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<sup>6</sup> Wim Wenders, *Auf der Suche nach Bildern – Orte sind meine stärksten Bildgeber*, in: *Iconic Turn. Die neue Macht der Bilder*, ed. by Christa Maar und Hubert Burda, Köln 2004, pp. 283-302

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern*, in: *Between Past and Future*, New York 1961, p. 64

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York 1963, p. 125f.

As Leora Bilsky explains in her essay "Between Justice and Politics. The Competition of Storytellers in the Eichmann Trial"<sup>9</sup>, the trial was about judging the events what led to different narrative forms. While the prosecutor Hausner split the history and only wanted to tell the classical Jewish history by concentrating on the stories of the victims to underline the importance of the state of Israel, Arendt concentrated on a story which included all facts. She wanted to prevent the emergence of holes in the collective memory by concealment or self-deception. Therefore, she aimed at a comprehensive historical judgment and studied above all the new form of crime. Thus, she exceeded the particularist perspective at the crimes against the Jewish people in favor of a study of the crimes against humanity without adopting an exclusively universalistic perspective. According to Bilsky Arendt rather chose "a universalistic approach while speaking within the particularity of the Jewish experience."<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, Arendt did not aim at "a ,final judgment' that would master the events once and for all. This could not have been further from Arendt's intentions. In her view, judgment cannot be reduced to the court decision with this title, nor is it the whole book where Arendt struggles to render Eichmann's acts and deeds meaningful. Rather, judgment is an act of narration that sets a process in motion; an act of participation in the public realm, informed by a sense of individual responsibility to the community. A sign of a good judgment is the way that it binds together actors and spectators in a human community. Such was indeed the effect of Arendt's book. It was not meant to produce consensus but to set in motion a process of deliberation and public debate."<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, Arendt wrote, according to Bilsky, a "counternarrative, the story that was not told but should have been told in the courtroom."<sup>12</sup> Arendt called her report an historical monograph with the accused in its center who had to do with an unknown crime, the administrative mass murder. She concentrated on three topics, the moral, political and juridical aspects of the trial, discussing them on four levels: first the trial as a theatre with its

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<sup>9</sup> Leora Bilsky, *Between Justice and Politics. The Competition of Storytellers in the Eichmann Trial*, in: Steven E. Aschheim (Ed.), *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, Berkeley 2001

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 245

<sup>11</sup> Leora Bilsky, *When Actor and Spectator Meet in the Courtroom: Reflections on Hannah Arendt's Concept of Judgment*, in: Ronald Beiner, Jennifer Nedelsky (eds.), *Judgment, imagination, and politics: themes from Kant and Arendt*, Oxford 2001, p. 273

<sup>12</sup> Leora Bilsky, *Between Justice and Politics*, p. 232

own dynamics, second the personality of the accused, his capacity to judge, his conscience and the deconstruction of the radical evil, third the description of the course of events of the destruction of the Jews and fourth the shortcomings of the court and the final speech in defence of the establishment of an international court of justice.

I would like to go briefly into details on the first three points to emphasise some main aspects in her report:

- First, *the trial as a theatre*: he did not only take place in a building originally planned as a theatre but he adopted inevitably the form of a play with all its actors and their interaction: the prosecutor, the accused, the judges, the witnesses and the audience. The play, i.e. the course of the trial, had its specific dramatic aspect: the prosecutor wanted a political trial on behalf of Ben Gurion, "the invisible stage manager"<sup>13</sup>. The accused proved to be neither a conventional mass murder nor certifiably insane in his stereotype language and ridiculousness. He had ill-fitting teeth and near-sighted eyes, and kept throughout the trial "craining his scraggy neck toward the bench" and "desperately and for the most part successfully maintains his self-control despite the nervous tic".<sup>14</sup> The judges were old-fashioned and tried hard to understand the criminal and its crime, or in Arendt's words: "That they never did come to understand him may be proof of the 'goodness' of the three men, of their untroubled and slightly old-fashioned faith in the moral foundations of their profession."<sup>15</sup> Finally, the audience in the often half-empty room consisted of "'survivors', with middle-aged and elderly people, immigrants from Europe, like myself, who knew by heart all there was to know."<sup>16</sup>

Nothing corresponds to the common anticipation of a trial and the role the participants are usually playing. Arendt's counternarrative culminates in the statement that "it was precisely the play aspect of the trial that collapsed under the weight of the hair-raising atrocities."<sup>17</sup> The accused stood no longer in the center of the trial and in some

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<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 5

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 146

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8f.

respect "the lessons were superfluous, and in others positively misleading."<sup>18</sup> At best the witness K-Zetnik still had some theatrical character because being interrupted in his endless and irresistible testimonies he thereupon promptly fainted.

Finally, the witnesses were hardly able to contribute something new to the trial, they had not the ability of "simplicity" or "to tell a story"<sup>19</sup>. "The endless sessions" showed "how difficult it was to tell a story, that – at least outside the transforming realm of poetry – it needed a purity of soul, an unmirrored, unreflected innocence of heart and mind that only the righteous possess."<sup>20</sup> To these few moments belonged Abba Kovner's story of the rescuer Anton Schmidt, a story which appeared in Arendt's strong image "like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness"<sup>21</sup>.

- Second, *the personality of the accused*: Eichmann as the main character of the trial proved at the same time as an anti-personality which in all important aspects did not correspond to the image of a monstrous criminal. This man turned out to be no monster but a "clown"<sup>22</sup>. His main flaws were bragging and "his almost total inability ever to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view"<sup>23</sup>. His language was bizarre and made the horrible appear to Arendt "not only ludicrous but outright funny" and funny was also "his heroic fight with the German language"<sup>24</sup> confounding metaphors and stringing together clichés. His memory was "like a storehouse, filled with human-interest stories of the worst type"<sup>25</sup>. "The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*."<sup>26</sup> He wallowed in changing moods what altogether formed his "undeniable ludicrousness"<sup>27</sup>. Everything Eichmann had started on his own failed, "nothing but frustration; a hard luck story if there ever was one"<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 10

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 224

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 229

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 231

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 54

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 47f.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 48

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 81

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 49

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 54

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 72

- Third, *the description of the course of events of the destruction of the Jews*: describing the destruction in detail Arendt concluded that there was a common moral collapse, not only of the criminals but also of vast parts of the population. What is called conscience has gone lost in Germany according to Arendt<sup>29</sup>, and Eichmann's conscience apparently got becalmed by the fact "that he could see no one, no one at all, who actually was against the Final Solution"<sup>30</sup>. So, he had many "opportunities for feeling like Pontius Pilatus"<sup>31</sup>, i.e. to "feel free from any guilt"<sup>32</sup>. When during the trial the role of the Jewish councils came up Arendt called it "undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story"<sup>33</sup>. It was about the already mentioned most striking insight into the totality of the moral collapse the Nazis caused in respectable European society including perpetrators and victims. Therefore, the story of the soldier Anton Schmidt saving Jews from being murdered is so unusual: because his action was not only so rare and possessed "the hollowness of respectability"<sup>34</sup> but also because it was an example for how to frustrate the destruction of the memory together with the victims.

### 3. "Schindler's List"

Spielberg's film differs in all essential aspects from Arendt's "to say what is" and her judgment about the "totality of the moral collapse". In "Schindler's List" the main character, Oskar Schindler, a rescuer of his Jewish forced labourers, confronts the SS-man Amon Goeth, commander of a labour camp, both surrounded by further Nazi officers and the group of Jewish victims. Unlike Eichmann, Goeth represents the sadistic evil. He gives his lust to kill free rein and shoots down over the course of time more than 500 inmates of the camp. In their historical study "Remembrance in a Global Age: The Holocaust" studying the changes in

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<sup>29</sup> See the additional sentences in the German edition, München 1964, p. 138

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 116

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 135

<sup>32</sup> See the additional phrase in the German edition, p. 173

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 117

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 232



the public discussion about the Holocaust in Israel, Germany and the United States the author Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider mention the difference among Eichmann and Goeth. Arendt emphasised that Eichmann was not Jago or Macbeth and had not decided like Richard III to become a bad guy. "With this remark she wanted to depersonalize evil and place it in the system of totalitarianism. Spielberg brought the evil back again to the level of the individual. Goeth was Jago and decided to become a bad guy."<sup>35</sup> Goeth was ruthless, brutal, arbitrary and corrupt; he accepted bribes. Alcohol, women and violence were his passions beyond any limits.

Eichmann in contrast had no sadistic inclination and could hardly bear his visits in extermination camps; and he did not accept bribes. Though in Spielberg's film the interpretation of Goeth is historically correct, he does not represent the members of a totalitarian system. This system was dominated by ideology and party discipline excluding individual preferences and passions. It was based on rules and not on the absence of rules. What the film does not tell is the fact that the SS arrested Goeth because of bribery and was to bring him to court just when the war ended. In a similar case the former commander of Buchenwald, Karl Koch, was condemned to death and executed because of bribery. So, while the SS did not tolerate private enrichment the Nazi system in Spielberg's movie appears as a system of unrestrained individualists.

But in the center of the movie stands the figure of Schindler. A smart, amoral selfmademan, party member and bon vivant acting full of self-confidence. His strong point is his ability to present and commercialize his products, to corrupt influential people and to deal on the black market. After years of hope, he declares, he finally becomes successful, but not with the help of good fortune but with the help of war. The war offers him the unexpected chance for the cheap takeover of a factory and the exploitation of cheap Jewish workforce. He gets into conflict with the SS who wants to deport his right-hand man, the accounting clerk. When the SS transports his workers into a labour camp he can only keep them with the help of bribery, and only when other Jews ask him for help and call him a rescuer he becomes aware of the fact that his workers are not only workforce but men and

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<sup>35</sup> Daniel Levy, Natan Sznaider, *Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter: Der Holocaust*, Frankfurt 2007, p. 166

women. This evokes a strong humanity snoozing deep in his interior. In a moving talk he consoles Helene, Goeth's Jewish maid suffering from his arbitrariness without any rules. And in a discussion with Goeth Schindler explains that true power does not consist in the freedom to kill but to be able to kill without doing it. For a short time Goeth actually hesitates to go on with his joyful killings. Schindler always tries to help where help is needed. So, he orders to spray a deportation train waiting at the station with water to cool it down in the burning summer sun. When the labour camp is going to be dissolved and the inmates are to be deported to Auschwitz he rescues again, this time 1,100 men and women by naming them on his famous list and transporting them to another factory in Czechoslovakia where he starts to fabricate munition. And once again he rescues with the help of bribery when the already rescued women by mistake are transported to Auschwitz. Finally, in his new factory Schindler produces only defective munition.

At the end of the story Schindler is bankrupt and confesses in a moving declaration towards his workers that he had lived from slave labour and therefore would be chased in the future. He leaves the decision to the security forces to liquidate the workers and become murderers or to let them free. He gives each worker cloths, vodka and cigarettes and bewails that he could not rescue more people.

The story shows how Schindler due to the circumstances changes from an egoist to an altruist, from an exploiter to a rescuer. "What I have learned in that time more than any other thing," declared Spielberg after filming, "is the insight that a single person really and indeed can change things. A single person can - in a metaphorical sense - breathe life into others. Oskar Schindler is such a righteous person."<sup>36</sup> He only had to decide to do it, nothing more was necessary, because he was a morally sound and deeply humane man. Bigger than the others, pretty and in bright suits, rhetorically predominant and morally prudent he acted with the posture of Superman. He is the incarnation of the American businessman putting his feet on his writing desk. "The war brings forth horrible things", he declares and means

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<sup>36</sup> "Auch ein einzelner Mensch kann die Dinge verändern" Michel Friedman im Gespräch mit Steven Spielberg, in: <http://www.shoahproject.org/links/specials/spielberg/welt980912.html> (last visit 24/8/10)

brutish behaviour. But the totalitarian domination which on his part brought forth this war remains unmentioned.

The victims appear as a homogenous cultural and religious community, innocent and cultivated. The role of the kapos is only mentioned shortly and mild, the Jewish councils remain unmentioned. At the end of the film a group of the surviving so-called Shindler Jews is shown and the commentary explains that in Poland only 4,000 Jews survived, while the Schindler Jews with their descendants 50 years later already had grown numerically to 6,000.

### 3. Decontextualizing the story

"Schindler's List" deals with a narrative of the Jewish history like prosecutor Hausner during the Eichmann trial, but it is accompanied by a notable shift in perspective. Now, the message is no longer: here we are witnessing the totality of the moral collapse of the society but: a pronounced egoism which does not spare the use of war and the exploitation of labour force does not contradict a marked humanity ready for action in an emergency case. The distinction between right and wrong, good and evil works. "You can rescue, you only have to decide to do it."<sup>37</sup> This message clearly contradicts the threatening assumption of Arendt that we are facing the moral collapse of a whole society. Rescuers and victims are not affected by it. Similarly, the film contradicts Arendt's assumption of depersonalization, of Eichmann's anti-personality. Arendt's theory of the banality of evil often misunderstood as making evil harmless is actually much more troubling than the radical evil of Goeth. The Jerusalem judges would have understood better the supposedly more horrible evil of Amon Goeth.

The troubling of a society being unable to judge adequately moral and political questions gives way for a clear confrontation between good and evil. The good ones who are

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<sup>37</sup> Daniel Levy, Natan Sznajder, *Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter: Der Holocaust*, p. 167

not affected by totalitarianism in their capacity to judge confront the evil ones being succumbed to their unlimited passions and are able to put them into their place by reason and humanity.

Spielberg does not tell a counternarrative but on the contrary leads a "counternarrative" reality back to a safer world where the classical story of the fight between the protagonists of good and evil is still adequate. This classical story follows the Aristotelian model of telling a story, which is still valid today and the recipe of almost all successful Hollywood films.

To sum it up, we can say that though the story of the film is based on facts Spielberg changed fundamentally the perspective, he removed the story from its historical context and its place -he decontextualized it. He also changed the personalities: rescuers and victims correspond to the actual common citizen in liberal democracies with their intact moral judgment facing a tyrannical domination gone wild. Thereby the movie proves astonishingly actual. Levy and Sznajder declare that "Spielberg always maintained that the film deals with Bosnians in Serbia or with black Americans." When black youngsters in Oakland made fun of the film scene in "Schindler's List" showing a wild hunting of Jews Spielberg rushed there and "created a new course in the local highschool called 'The Human Holocaust: The Afro-American Experience'".<sup>38</sup>

This decontextualizing entails a threefold change of perspective:

- First the *emergence of the perspective of the witness* with which the actual German post-war generations can identify wholeheartedly. This explains the unanimous success of the film in Germany. Levy and Sznajder summarize it as follows: "Schindler are all who want to rescue, Goeth are all who want to kill and the Jews are the victims everywhere."<sup>39</sup>

- Second, this allows a *universalization of the Holocaust*. The Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington stands for this universalization. The museum is not only part of the national mall and gives the impression that the Holocaust is part of the American history, its

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 166

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 164

exhibition starts also with the liberation of the Jewish inmates of concentration camps by American troops.

Furthermore, the Holocaust is not only an event of the past but a permanent threat, a warning of its possible recurrence. Therefore, the seriousness of the promise "Auschwitz never again" was put on the test bench in the cases of Bosnia, Kosovo and Ruanda and an obligation for all European countries since the Holocaust conference in Stockholm in 2000.

- Finally third, the decontextualization corresponds to the *end of remembrance*. More or less, the generation of those involved in the events is not alive anymore. Nobody does dispose of any experience of that time. This loss is not trivial and cannot be simply compensated by information and knowledge. It promotes the possibility of decontextualization. This is because experiences are more than mere adventures and embedded deeper than rational knowledge. They are part of one's orientations and knowledge bases which are shaped by an intersubjective everyday life, a so-called "conjunctive space of experience"<sup>40</sup>. This conjunctive space of experience is according to Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge the basis for understanding. The acquisition of history in the sense of understanding takes place on the basis of shared implicit knowledge bases. This understanding differs from interpretation, reflection and science which need an explication of these knowledge bases.

So, dealing with a past not experienced by oneself has consequences for understanding and the ways of its acquisition. The presence of the conjunctive space of experience is much stronger, it shapes the image of the past and decontextualizes it. Therefore, the temptation was close to Spielberg to emphasise the supposed actuality of the story, to delocalize it and to change the personalities. He transported them into our place and our world. Therefore, we meet ourselves in the film and not the others, we understand our world and not the world of totalitarianism. Arendt's conjunctive space of experience is shaped by totalitarianism, Spielberg's conjunctive space of experience by liberal democracy.

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<sup>40</sup> See Ralf Bohnsack, *Qualitative Bild- und Videointerpretation. Die dokumentarische Methode*, Opladen 2009, p. 130

#### 4. Medial stories

In addition, we have to take into consideration the media and their special role in the creation not only of pictures but above all of images. Since several decades, the media are far more influential in presenting history than the historians themselves. Historical science still sees itself as a textual science and missed to realize so far that films also construct collective views of history.<sup>41</sup> And those historians participating in the production of documentaries about National Socialism and broadcastings about this part of history succumb to the temptation of the simplicity of "Hitler sells" what raises TV ratings figures but reduces at the same time the whole problem of totalitarianism to the rule of the Führer.<sup>42</sup>

But it is possible to produce successful historical films as counternarratives. This is proved for example by the two films of Clint Eastwood, "The Flags of our Fathers" and "Letters from Iwo Jima", both from 2006. The films show the battle of American and Japanese troops about the Pacific island of Iwo Jima during WW II, seen from the American perspective in the first film and from the Japanese in the second one. "The Flags of our Fathers" dismantles the American myth of heroes and a heroic war. The famous photo of hoisting the American flag on top of the hill of the island which was the model for the sculpture of the U.S. Marine Corps War Memorial in Arlington National Cemetery was only a fiction. It was used to drive the heroes who supposedly hoisted the flag around the country to stir the war-tired population to buy more government bonds of war. The story told by Clint Eastwood does not follow the Hollywood Aristotelianism but jumps backwards and forwards during the reconstruction of the history – a method blamed as a dramaturgical weakness.

To name one detail of the counternarrative: Drucilla Cornell emphasises in her book about Eastwood's films a scene at the beginning of "The Flags of our Fathers" implying a critic of Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan" (1998). In Spielberg's film an elite troop is sent to the just occupied France to bring the soldier Ryan safely back to his family because all his

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<sup>41</sup> Günter Riederer, Film und Geschichtswissenschaft. Zum aktuellen Verhältnis einer schwierigen Beziehung, in: Gerhard Paul (Hg.), Visual History: ein Studienhandbuch, Göttingen 2006, p. 102, 104

<sup>42</sup> Frank Bösch, Holocaust mit 'K', in: ibid, p. 326

brothers had already been killed. Eastwood shows that everyday life during that war was quite different from that and that neither the state nor the army cared about the private fate of a single soldier. He demonstrates this in a scene where a convoi of warships is approaching Iwo Jima and when suddenly a soldier falls overboard. Another soldier throws a lifebuoy into the sea but it gets lost. "Oh they'll pick him up," says a third soldier but the convoi with dozens of ships and thousands of soldiers does not stop at all to pick up a single soul. "So much for ,no man left behind'", comments the main character the hollow slogan which is used everywhere. The fate of a single private soldier is of no interest.

The second film "Letters from Iwo Jima" shows the other perspective in this war and the individual faces of the Japanese enemy: the commander Lieutenant General Kuribayashi who had studied in the United States and whose personality is revealed by his moving letters to his family, and the show jumper Colonel Takeichi Nishi, winner of a gold medal at the Olympic Games in Los Angeles in 1932.

The films of Eastwood try to tell the unexperienced past by searching an adequate form of narrative, they demonstrate another way of telling a story, of saying what is. But in addition they also show another form of decontextualization: not a decontextualization which delocalizes, changes the actors and makes the understanding of experiences and memory impossible but a decontextualization which exceeds national limits, interests and exclusive national historiographies. It exceeds the exclusiveness of the particular without running the risks of a decontextualized universalism.

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