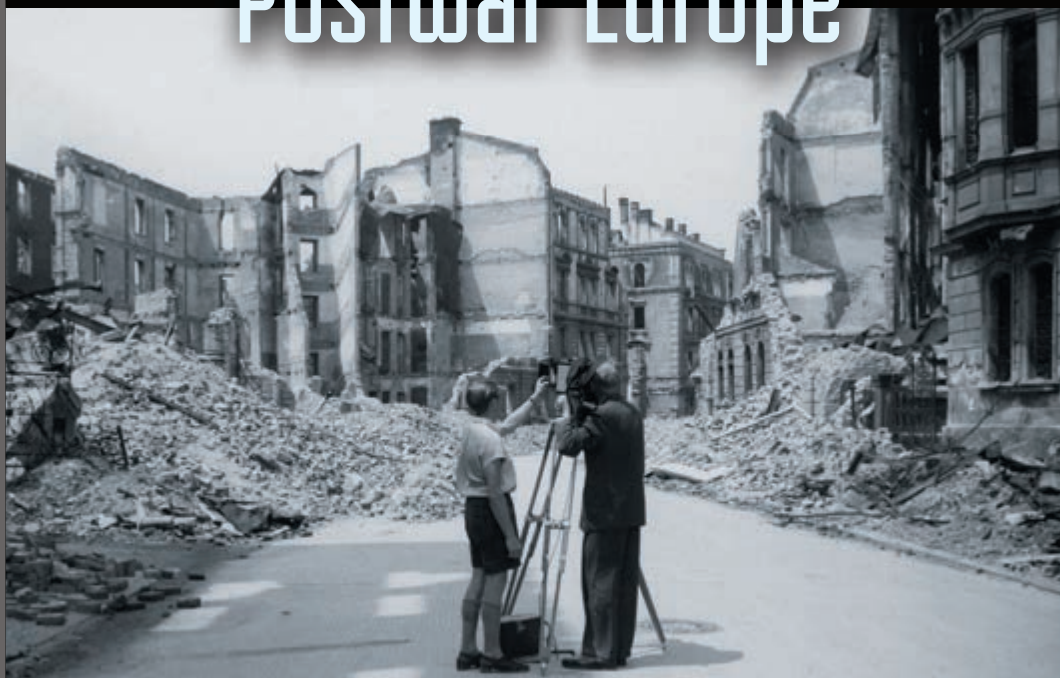


FILM
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

Non-Fiction Cinema in Postwar Europe



Visual Culture and the Reconstruction of Public Space

EDITED BY

LUCIE ČESÁLKOVÁ

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Amsterdam
University
Press

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*Edited by
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16. Curating Reconstruction in the Digital Realm

The Online Exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction*

Rossella Catanese and Andrea Průchová Hružová

Abstract

The chapter reflects upon the importance, challenges, and opportunities of a digital presentation of cultural heritage with a specific focus on a representation of audiovisual materials. It provides a complex insight into theoretical, conceptual, and curatorial strategies applied in the multimedia virtual exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction*. Thus, it serves as an analytical examination of one unique case study, but it also asks general questions which are relevant and significant for ways we think, act, and curate film heritage in the digital age.

Keywords: digital turn, digital memory, transnational perspective, curatorial work, film heritage, multimediality

Transnational Approach to Digital Memory

The digital turn that we have experienced in the past few decades has gradually, and yet significantly shaped our individual as well as collective social and communication practices. On the one hand, we can think about how much (among many other things) prophetic visions of digital devices being turned into prostheses of our physical bodies have become relevant, or even actualized (McLuhan 2003), or predictions that automatic ways of viewing will replace our performative sensorial experience (Virilio 1994). On the other hand, and for us more importantly, we must acknowledge that the digital turn has also profoundly changed the ways in which we use our mental capacities, including our memory. What, how, and when we remember or forget is nowadays heavily digitally mediated.

Of course, we can think of memory as always dependent on various kinds of media. Let's recall oral mythologies, community narratives, paintings, or fetishized objects, which served as both bearing and shaping forces of memory, or as "technologies of memory" (Sturken 1997, 9). Even though the nineteenth and twentieth centuries made the process of mediatizing memory greater and more visible due to a mechanical reproduction of technical images like photography or film, it is the digitization of cultural heritage that makes the process of mediating memory omnipresent. In our everyday life and through various digital devices and platforms like websites, apps, or online archives, we encounter various sources coming from the past as one rich, multilayered, and multimedia archive. We often even have an opportunity to actively contribute to it. We are asked to upload private family documents or can download materials for personal, educational, or artistic use. Regarding these great changes in our recent memory culture, it is helpful to recall Hoskins's term "connective turn" (2018). The author links it with a massive digitization of physically existing content that started by the new millennium. Hoskins sees it as an

ontological turn in what memory is and what memory does, paradoxically both arresting and unmooring the past. It has re-engineered memory, liberating it from the traditional bounds of the spatial archive, the organization, the institution, and distributed it on a continuous basis via a connectivity between brains, bodies, and personal and public lives. (Ibid., 2)

The ongoing process of digitization, being a part of a larger connective turn, makes memory a global phenomenon. More than ever before, digital memory and its platforms like online archives, exhibitions, or learning centers, open a perspective on understanding history as a transnational one. The still growing level of accessibility of digital historical content reconfigures the modern notion of history, which dates back to the nineteenth century and revolves around the writing of national histories. It hybridizes this traditional conception of history and makes it more relevant for the way we experience our social reality nowadays: as the interconnected one. We are connected through digital media as well as through national borders. As stated by De Cesari and Rigney, the nationally oriented methodological perspective seems to be an obsolete conceptual tool for today's world (De Cesari and Rigney 2016, 2). We should do our best to avoid any kind of "methodological nationalism" to be able to employ two crucial principles of transnational memory studies: multi-scalarity and sensitivity towards

a dialectical movement between the international and the national level (ibid., 5–7).

As will be explained in detail later, a presented case study of the online exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction*—which also represents a main public output of the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) international research project “ViCTOR-E: Visual Culture of Trauma, Obliteration and Reconstruction in Post-WWII Europe”—closely follows both these methodological guidelines. It does not avoid examining smaller local events and putting them in line with larger national happenings, and by that, it applies the principle of multi-scalarity. But foremost, it is interested in finding and highlighting mnemonic forms that had been circulating beyond national borders in non-fiction cinema of the early postwar period, thus capturing the international–national dialectics.

In the same way that digital memory hybridizes the traditional notion of history, it also hybridizes individual historical content. First, it obviously turns historical documents into digital files, but, more profoundly, it puts them into a larger multimedia online environment, where the digital memory can reveal its hypermediated character that accompanies its global nature. When browsing, we interact with historical sources, which come from all around the world, and which openly manifest their digital nature of being virtual files, that is, they are offered to us through a digital interface and we, instead of physically moving from one object to another like in a museum exhibition or archive, are clicking from one graphic element to another. Digital memory communicates through its technical infrastructure, and even though the graphic design does its best to hide the computational operations running behind it, it is impossible to engage with digital mnemonic platforms without experiencing their technical side.

In the realm of digital museology, one can usually encounter the term “virtual exhibition” more often. However, after three years of collaboration with film archives, cinematheques, photographic archives, and private collections, we as curators and researchers started questioning the notion of the “virtual” as related to the exhibition. In fact, despite the digital form of the public outcome provided, we have encountered the materiality of various artifacts, for instance, through the process of digitizing analog prints, when dealing with damages and the need for restoration interventions. Despite the general understanding to the term “virtual” as something false or simulated, according to the French philosopher Pierre Lévy, one of pioneers of the area of digital studies, the virtual represents the mode of existence that lies in the potency, when something virtual can be turned into the real action (Lévy 1995). When online interactions are called “virtual,” however, they enter

our mental framework as not actual. Therefore, we find the term “online” more effective, as it simply means the integration of a software through the internet, that is, the interaction with another software located elsewhere.

However, if we think about what physical archives, exhibitions, or educational centers have in common with their digital variants, it is the presence of an interpretative power of curators and researchers who stand behind them. It is they who select documents for public display, who build connections among them, who decide how certain topics will be narrated and which tools will be employed for communication with the audience. As Crimp (1995) observed in relation to art museums and Bennett (1995) for history museums, exhibitions represent a significant power *dispositif* through which a social order is produced and/or maintained. In this regard, the aim of this chapter is also to transparently articulate a process of curatorial work on the virtual exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction*. Eventually, we want to think of our own conceptual and curatorial work as another medium that steps into the process of digital mediation of memory, and therefore we pursue a discussion of the *role of curator as a medium*.

Film in the Era of Digital Education

Although this is not the place for an in-depth discussion of media literacy issues, we must acknowledge a recent tendency in contemporary theory which has currently focused on the relationship between film heritage and digital humanities and their role in education. (To deepen this topic, with specific reference to the role of non-fiction film in history education and media literacy, see Haváč and Villa, in this volume.)

Films, as an expression of collective memory, have become part of the common cultural heritage of humankind, which deserves to be safeguarded. Since its earliest days, at the end of the nineteenth century, film has developed into a pivotal medium, able to impact on culture on a global scale, and access to this heritage has a certain role in defining historical and cultural knowledge as tools for education. The digitization of film heritage through the acquisition of analog films by digital technologies is parallel to the changes that have occurred in the last years in the shooting, postproduction, and distribution of cinema. The current condition of audiovisual media basically implies a transition, where the analog and photochemical element has been gradually replaced by the digital apparatus, which becomes the standard (Fossati 2018). Despite the fundamental difference between analog and digital formats—namely, the absence of isomorphism in the latter

(Rodowick 2007, 49)—technological hybridization is considered the hallmark of the current media condition, with the coexistence of new and old forms and languages. Some scholars have insisted on a sharp division between the digital apparatus and the photochemical medium, such as Paolo Cherchi Usai, who focuses on the material specificity and historical identity of the film, by raising the issue of cinema's uniqueness, as a cultural experience related to the projection of images from a photochemical support (Cherchi Usai, Francis, Horwath, and Loebenstein 2008, 108). On the other hand, other scholars (such as Tom Gunning and Giovanna Fossati) have welcomed the use of digital technologies, acknowledging them as simply one of the thousands of patents, innovations, and implementations that have occurred throughout the long path of media history (Gunning 2003; Fossati 2018, 21).

Therefore, film and media studies have gradually incorporated both theoretical and practice-based paradigms that make use of computer-based techniques for learning and understanding audiovisual media, challenging the cultural significance of films in terms of medium specificity, while also leading scholars to reflect on new interdisciplinary research methods (Grant 2012).

Digitizing film heritage, the treasures of cinema history can be accessed on an unprecedented scale, since new platforms have emerged to provide and facilitate access, beside a different structural quality and delicacy, for instance, considering that digital copies are not subject to the same damage as analog film elements. On the other hand, the digitization of film heritage implies other challenges related to financial, legal, curatorial, and technological issues.

Besides the different theoretical views on the relation between cinema and digital technology influencing the perspectives on film preservation, too (that is, a certain degree of awareness about issues such as the material difference, the degree of image manipulation, the danger of obsolescence, and the logistical problems of archiving and standardized decoding), there is another layer of the discourse regarding the function that the digitized film heritage has on media and cultural education. The ever-increasing digitization of film heritage allows a more flexible use of easy-to-handle devices to access historical heritage, which can be interpreted both as a tool for knowledge and skills acquisition and is itself an object for study; moreover, such historical heritage has been made available on the web among a large number of resources that were previously less easy to access.

In the last decades, the whole cultural education field, on a global scale, has been investing in the chances of digitally acquiring and offering access to film heritage, as well as to other forms of cultural heritage, as a general

trend to enhance its value, understanding the opportunities of a massive approach through digital means. These international policies have resulted in an extraordinary amount of digitized historical audiovisual sources being available today, which is a major accomplishment. Unfortunately, having reached this goal does not in itself automatically lead to greater understanding or knowledge. On the contrary, this abundance may often risk the opposite effect, that is, the inability to read and distinguish the meanings and features of the sources available by being submerged in a kind of obsolescence. The availability of digitized sources must therefore be accompanied by deep curatorial work, which provides a selection work, a framework-building structure, and guidance towards an in-depth understanding of that heritage. If this is valid for every historical source, for non-fiction film materials there is also another layer related to the indexical qualities of film,¹ which tend to make you believe that they are faithful accounts of the past. Film heritage offers a testimony, a source for the historical knowledge, expanding the variety of historical sources beyond the written ones; being digitized, films are offered on online platforms in large quantities and become increasingly more dispersed and known when archives and other cultural institutions can provide context and guidance to a wide audience, such as through virtual exhibitions.

Online Exhibitions: New Opportunities and Challenges

The phenomenon of online exhibitions is not a new one, even though it has recently garnered a lot of attention.² They are currently acknowledged as

1 Indexicality describes relationships of contiguity in the representation of phenomena and refers to the existential bond between copy and reality. According to Charles Sanders Peirce, an index is a sign that is linked to its object by an actual connection or real relation (irrespectively of interpretation), for instance, by a reaction, so as to compel attention, in a definite place and time. André Bazin defined “mummy complex” as the idea that at the heart of the plastic arts—painting and sculpture—there is a need to immortalize the mortal, to preserve our being beyond its physical existence. The dream is to overcome death. According to Bazin, the reproduction of reality through the camera is imbued with an advantage because, unlike a painting or sculpture, a photograph is not an “ersatz” (a substitute of an inferior quality). Painting, or sculpture, is a replacement for an object, while film and photography are the reproduction, a powerful medium with a technical process of production which allows it to represent an object rather than replace it (Bazin 1967, 9).

2 Debates and research projects revolving around the field of online exhibitions have reached even more prominence in times of global pandemics with the emergence of the need to enable various publics the access to archival, museal, and learning institutions. It has also triggered a public discussion about a possible substitution of interdicted physical spaces for individualized

relevant counterparts to physical exhibitions, able to overcome space, time, and location restrictions, and allowing global visitors to access archival/museum heritage on an around-the-clock basis (Foo 2008). The rise of virtual exhibitions is highly stimulated by constant technological progress in the field of digital visualization, where new modes of computer-driven representations like 3D modeling and augmented or virtual reality have lately emerged. As Sylaiou reminds us, the first articulation of the idea of virtual museum can be assigned to André Malraux, who envisioned a museum as a spaceless institution in 1947 (Sylaiou 2009, 521). The first online exhibitions, however, which took place via the digital platform of the World Wide Web, happened with an ideological shift in the discipline of museology in the 1980s. They became an outcome of a greater turn brought about by the concept of new museology, which required a central revision of both the formal and content-related conservative characteristics of museal institutions. By 1991, professionals interested in the intersection of museum practices and the information and communications technology (ICT) sector were encountering each other through the International Cultural Heritage Informatics Meeting (ICHIM) platform. One of the leading organizations in this field, Museums and the Web (<http://www.museweb.net>), has operated since 1997. Nowadays there are a great number of research projects discussing technological infrastructures, curatorial approaches, or educational strategies of virtual museums and exhibitions as well as those focused on the responses and behaviors of online visitors.

To deliver a complex overview of the latest development in the sphere of online exhibiting is a daunting task, and also not a primary goal of this chapter. Nevertheless, we find it necessary to employ at least some of the existing theoretical concepts to ground and frame our thinking about the virtual exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction*. First, we must acknowledge the fragile position of this exhibition that oscillates between the spheres of mass communication and edutainment and the realms of academic research and curatorial practices. On the one hand, there exists a strong request for attractiveness of the content and its graphic interface, which would allure a great number of online visitors. On the other hand, we must constantly reflect critically upon ways of explaining and contextualizing chosen narratives, events, and topics (Carrozzino and Bergamasco, 2010). Second, we see this project as combining and following both paths of the digital curatorship outlined by Pescarin (2014). At once, it constitutes certain notion of *stability*,

digital environments. However, it is important to note that the project of the online exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction* was submitted and designed before the COVID-19 pandemics.

because it provides specific narratives of the past, which are linked together into a larger, internationally driven image-story, as well as employing the principle of *flexibility*, when “we need complex information [to be] divided into small parts or synthesized” (ibid., 132). According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM) categorization of virtual educational content, the exhibition presented mostly meets the criteria of the *learning museum* (Schweibenz 2004). It focuses on developing the multiple contexts, rather than on narrating individual objects, meanwhile it also asks users to visit the content repeatedly.

Frames of Reconstruction follows the most frequently pursued principles used to structure virtual exhibitions (Sylaiou 2009, 521). The project works with *several contexts*, in which cultural objects are narrated. In this specific case, as elaborated below, these contexts represent horizontally and vertically oriented topics, which help to build a multifaceted understanding to the European post-World War II reconstruction of the public space. It wants to communicate through good *instructional design* in order to make a user experience of the digital environment seamless. It emphasizes the importance of the *content for education*. In this regard, it even contains an international education tool kit that offers interactive tasks for high school students in five languages. These three highlighted principles also correlate with three basic layers that can be distinguished in most virtual exhibitions: technical performance, architectonic infrastructure, and educational value (Daniela 2020). In its spatial arrangement—in contrast to digital libraries or online archives—*Frames of Reconstruction* does not virtually present any existing collection that would be translated into the digital space. It represents a unique, digitally born set of cultural objects, consisting of digitized spatiotemporal artifacts, primarily non-fiction films, which are accompanied by posters, books, or other printed media and excerpts from oral history interviews. To conclude its theoretical description, we can suggest that *Frames of Reconstruction* fully embraces the idea of virtual exhibition as a *multimodal genre* of communication (Siefkes 2016), and in the following part of the text we will pursue revealing its basic formal and content infrastructure.

Curating the *Frames of Reconstruction* in Detail

Among the main partners of the ViCTOR-E project, the European Film Gateway (EFG) portal played a pivotal role in mediating the collaboration between researchers and key international film archives. EFG represents

the output of a project initiated by the Association des Cinémathèques Européennes (ACE, Association of European Cinematheques) and the Europeana Foundation in the years from 2008 to 2011. The portal had already collected hundreds of thousands of digitized films and film-related documents as preserved in European cinematheques, by facilitating online access to film heritage and to those institutions that hold the original materials. The previous online exhibition built by EFG entitled *EFG2014* focuses on films from the period of the First World War. *EFG2014* provides access to 3,000 titles, including newsreels, documentaries, propaganda and fiction films; this means a huge collection, which is even more valuable if we consider that around 80 percent of silent film production is lost. *EFG2014* therefore offered a very useful model of how to structure the newly built online exhibition due to the similar focus in the grand historical theme, the quantity, and the variety of the sources implied.

The social and cultural role of exhibitions acquired new layers of significance within the digital environments. As priority, there comes the idea of sustainability, as we have decided to design an online exhibition instead of a physical one. This decision was driven by the opportunities of achieving a wide-scale distribution with a minimum environmental impact. It reduced the intensity of processes of transportation and logistics, from carbon footprints to the impact on supply chains, as well as it minimized costs for keeping the variety of media included in the exhibition. Sustainability is typically associated with environmental sensitivity, but also with cost management to avoid waste. Moreover, this choice also implies a broader accessibility, to allow a wide audience the right to knowledge regardless of their geographical distance from the archives, museums, and institutions involved.

In order to design the key functionalities of the virtual exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction*, we were required to define a main curatorial approach to this digital project. In this regard, the transnational character of the research conducted and the diversity of four national film corpuses (Czechoslovak, French, German, and Italian) served as leading guides. In result, there were three main decisions reached. First, all media included in the virtual exhibition, that is, films, photographs, oral history interviews, printed objects like textbooks, posters, promotional materials, etc., are not divided into separate categories either based on their national origin, or based on their specific media character. By following this principle, the idea of diversity in terms of multimediality and transnationality was realized, and so the virtual exhibition offers the content of film heritage accompanied by various “plurimedial” items, in reference to Astrid Erll’s

definition of “plurimedial constellations of memory culture” (2012, 231). Second, the virtual show is structured around the principle of hyperlinkage, supporting free and impromptu associations without hierarchical order and cumulative and multilinear ways of organization. In the early years of the internet, the concept of hyperlinkage was based on disrupting existing hierarchies of text in favor of a networked structure of information (Snyder 1996, 75–76), therefore grounded on the idea of association and intertextuality. Such descriptions are quite similar to how philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari described their concept of the rhizome, which defines a nonlinear map with multiple entryways; an acentered, nonhierarchical, and nonsignifying system (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 21).³ The hyperlinkage and its nonlinear learning paths offer opportunities of visualization and critical understanding that are difficult to replicate in physical exhibitions. Third, it is possible to dynamically navigate within the exhibition narratives; specifically, users are able to examine horizontal and vertical narratives. This decision enabled highlighting of the dynamic and transversal character of media memory as well as avoiding the pitfall of reproducing grand historical narratives. The importance of regional historical events and the relevance of the experience of everyday life was acknowledged and treated with the same interest and care as widely known international happenings.⁴

Based on the articulation of these main curatorial visions, a set of key functionalities was designed. Five lines of experiencing the virtual exhibition were conceived. The first one emphasizes the *modality of time*. It provides the audience with a chronologically oriented function of a time line, which helps to get an overview of the most significant historical moments in the reconstruction period. However, the time line also follows the principle of transnationality. That is why it allows learning milestones of individual national postwar trajectories as well as displaying events on a transnational level. The second line highlights the *modality of space*. If it is possible to localize any displayed object geographically, be it a film or photography location, or a witness's hometown, it finds its specific place on a virtual map. This map can thus be understood as a multimedia platform that can serve as a unique derivation point for entering the virtual exhibition. The third line of navigation is oriented towards the *modality of life*. It allows experiencing events, which populate the transnational and the national time lines, and the places, which are marked on the map, through the

3 For more about a connection of the concept of the rhizome and the Internet, see Lévy 2001.

4 See the introduction of this chapter and the notion of “multiscalarity.”

perspective of witnesses and their specific stories. Thanks to extensive oral history research that was conducted in four countries and resulted in forty-two interviews, the exhibition not only offers information about internationally well-known political and artistic figures, but it also invites viewers to learn about the small histories of ordinary people, whose life had been significantly shaped by the reconstruction era.

The fourth trajectory of the virtual exhibition focuses on the *modality of storytelling*. It is based on twelve carefully curated chapters, which seek to provide a systematic overview of how non-fiction cinema captured the reconstruction period, and namely, how it contributed to shaping it. The chapters are as follows:

- Faces and Places of the Post-WWII Non-fiction Cinema
- Cinema as a Social Agent of the Post-WWII Transformation
- War Crimes Becoming Memories: Grief Guilt and Justice
- Ruins and Rebirth of Arts Heritage
- Materiality & Infrastructure of the Post-WWII Modernity
- Living & Housing in a Peaceful Era
- Maybe (Not) United Nevertheless Connected
- Visions and Attempts to Build a Transnational Europe
- Visible Borders
- Repatriation
- Expulsion
- Escape: Old and New Homelands
- (De)colonization
- Becoming Better through Labor
- Organized Culture: New and Old Traditions and Festivities
- Layers of Education: Schools Museums
- Public Fair
- Spaces of Democracy

Each multimedia chapter consists of film clips, which bear a main story, non-audiovisual objects like photographs, posters, maps, blueprints, or textbooks, whose goal is to use the full potential of examining the history through a great diversity of visual culture and oral history interviews. Almost all chapters include films and objects coming from all four if the countries researched, and their content is fully available in Czech, French, German, Italian, and English. So once again, the transnational approach can be detected here. At first glance, the line of storytelling might appear to have a dominant position within the exhibition complex and therefore, one

could be lured into reading the exhibition as a series of hegemonic or grand historical narratives. In order to avoid this interpretation, the horizontal line of storytelling is balanced by developing the *modality of topicality*. Each chapter contains links to other parts and objects of the exhibition, which allow the audience to reach a research-like experience, when users follow the complex system through individual elements. The most abstract and conceptual understanding of the exhibition is mediated through a set of tags. Almost every object displayed is connected with one or more tags that make it possible to group objects into thematic clusters. The list of twenty-four tags represents a set of higher thematic concepts, which often capture the dialectical dynamics of the ideological, societal, economic, political, and cultural processes of the reconstruction era that cannot be expressed in the form of individual chapters. These tags can mostly be encountered in the form of the opposite terms like “before/after,” “north/south,” “East/West,” “rural/urban,” “elite/masses,” or single tags, producing umbrella notions for individual objects, for instance, “collective participation,” “family values,” or “class struggle.” Through these tags and the network of links, the audience can learn more about the meta-topics that run through chapters and themes like the gender roles, the race, or the ideology.

A dynamic relationship between the lines of topicality and storytelling, however, applies to the whole virtual exhibition. All the modalities mentioned above, which can be understood as layers of one complex, are mutually linked and connected on various levels. Therefore, one film excerpt located within one chapter functions as a trigger activating a non-audiovisual object in another chapter, which can also serve as a mark on the map. Within this rich complex, there exists a multimedia and multilingual education tool kit that uses individual films and non-audiovisual objects from the whole universe of the exhibition.⁵

Frames of Reconstruction Seen through Case Studies

To explain the curatorial choices behind the virtual exhibition, we would like to propose an analytical perspective through a case study, in order to demonstrate how different layers of the exhibition can set up a dialogue among the diverse criteria and strategies.

Since virtual exhibitions cannot be too extensive and all-inclusive, but must find a compromise with audience engagement and the effectiveness of

5 For more details about the educational toolkit, see Haváč and Villa, in this volume.

the chosen materials, a strict selection was done to reduce the huge amount of metadata work that preceded the building of *Frames of Reconstruction*. This fact resulted in transforming some of the themes into *topical discourses*, which do run throughout the exhibition, for instance, like the theme of gender or race. In terms of the gender issues, when available, curators aimed to balance the selection of films made by female directors, even though they were produced in significantly smaller numbers, and also focused on the representation of women while choosing film clips. A good example is the clip from the film *Heimat ist Arbeit* (Home is work, dir. Bernhard Redetzki, FRG, 1949) from the chapter “Becoming Better through Labor.” The film features four stories of refugees getting back to Germany and looking for a job, but the only story selected is the one told by a woman. At the same time, the exhibition section “Personalities” only refers to two women, as the personalities are present in this section only if they are part of the exhibition content. Therefore this section demonstrates well the great debt of the postwar era to women’s history. In each exhibition chapter, at least one oral history clip has been included with an effort to present memories from an almost balanced number of men and women. Issues about the gender discourses are recurrent in various chapters and through different audio-visual materials. Representations of women are part of the themes that deal with the major issues related to the rebuilding of Europe in the postwar years, including the trauma of war atrocities. Their role is investigated in narratives of the mythology of progress in the infrastructural enhancements, and their presence and importance in everyday postwar life is highlighted. In terms of discourses of race, when discussing the representation of stereotypical roles, the period cultural and societal gaps were considered. The chapter “(De)colonization” deals with the legacy of colonialism and with the wars of independence that emerged immediately after the World War II. Although these took place mostly in Asia and Africa, they have also greatly reshaped European borders. The cinematic portrayal of the remaining colonial gaze, the tendency towards a cultural erasure of differences, and the cultural stereotypes in representing African and Asian countries in European media are central issues of this chapter. An emblematic case represents the West German newsreel *Samba in Rwanda* (Neue Deutsche Wochenschau, no. 1/1950). In the original newsreel, the ironic tone of the commentary and a pointless association of the images with (South American) samba music ridicule the event as an exotic spectacle for European eyes. The curatorial work expressed by the accompanying text aims to testify both to the unchallenged colonial perspectives on African politics in 1950, and to the lack of information

provided nowadays by the archival documentation of the newsreel. In fact, the voice-over locates the scene in Rwanda, and the original summary from the files of the production misplaces the event in Uganda. Thanks to the research done in the Rwanda Cultural Heritage Association, the main personalities involved were identified, with the result of paying tribute to the history documented by this newsreel.

These approaches towards gender and race issues aim to balance the historical plausibility with an effort to highlight the neglected destinies and roles of women and marginalized people. In all the exhibition chapters, the problems related to identity-building and cultural stereotypes are reflected, if possible, through the unique character of the material. To further demonstrate the effort for inclusivity, the inclusive language was used to describe individual subjects, narratives, and themes and is consistently used in all five languages.

The exhibition chapter “Spaces of Democracy” can then serve as an example of curatorial thinking about how to create a coherent, yet diverse and rich building block of the virtual exhibition. In this specific segment, curators tried to condense many key elements to frame postwar political discourses, both in the Eastern and the Western Blocs, and they questioned the issues of civic participation, propaganda, and demonstrations, among others. Here, five objects from thirteen items displayed in this chapter are discussed to provide an insight into the principles of the transnational, multimedia, and multimodal way of digital curation.

To build this chapter, we have started by considering that the end of the war triggered a specific turn in the political discourse. The first object is a photograph from the French Army’s audiovisual archive showing the celebration on May 8, 1945, in front of the iconic monument of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. It stands for values that were addressed to start a huge set of international celebrations by subverting the racism, violence, and cruelty of the Nazi and Fascist regimes. The item is linked according to a parallax structure, which ties together multiple audiovisual contents and visual objects. First, curators provided the object with geotagging references, placing the object in its due context (Paris, Arc de Triomphe) linked into a global map. A second link refers to a time line of the main historical events that happened in the relevant years 1945–56, and therefore the item is connected to the May 1945 event. Third, the conceptually driven tag was added. In this specific case, curators have chosen the effective couples of “freedom and democracy” and “hope and utopia” as some of the symbolic features that characterized the expectations and the perspectives of this time frame.



Figure 16.1. Photograph of Arc de Triomphe: *Fête de la victoire* (1945). Courtesy of ECPAD—Agence d'images de la défense.

Considering participation and the right to vote as the first step for citizens' engagement, another interesting item shows elections in the context of single-party rules. This is the case for the Czechoslovak film *Volíme šťastnou budoucnost* (We are voting for a happy future, CZ, 1948), which aimed to support a single-party candidate, whereas the way to protest against this candidacy was to cast so-called "white papers" (blank ballots). Curators decided to include four powerful and compelling frames of the film, creating a visually effective collage to stress the propaganda efforts behind this short documentary. The first two images show the election posters (the second with "white papers") and the second two images follow the rhetorical strategy of showing the contrasts of "what the future would look like" according to the Communist Party (prosperity, work), on the one hand, or according to those who cast "white papers" (strikes), on the other.



Figure 16.2. Collage of stills from *Volíme šťastnou budoucnost* (We are voting for a happy future, CZ, 1948). Courtesy of Národní filmový archiv.

The depicted exhibition chapter also includes one film funded by the Marshall Plan. The ERP established offices to guide the communication campaigns, and their film unit was pivotal, due to the popularity of the medium. The following item is an excerpt from an Italian cartoon, *Uomini e polli* (Men and chicken, IT, 1955), which presents clear anti-communist propaganda, according to the guidelines of the ERP, involving factory workers and trade unions. The main character here is a “chicken,” an Italian idiomatic term to mean a “fool,” one who joins a trade union that recruits workers for the purpose of a Bolshevik revolution, instead of defending the rights of workers. The event-driven link connects this excerpt to the event of the Marshall Plan in the time line and the content-driven link has been made to the chapter entitled “Becoming Better through Labor.”

Despite ERP funding, the American presence in European territories was a controversial subject in Western European countries, which in certain cases opposed US imperialism as a violation of national sovereignty, such as this excerpt from *Les Américains en Amérique!* (Americans in America!, dir. Raymond Vogel, FR, 1950), a film made by Raymond Vogel and commissioned by the French Communist Party. Its aim was to denounce the American influence in France at many levels. The documentary therefore criticizes



Figure 16.3. Still from *Les Américains en Amérique!* (Americans in America!, dir. Raymond Vogel, FR, 1950). Courtesy of Ciné-archives.

the presence of military bases in France as well as the impact of Hollywood cinema, Coca-Cola, comics, etc. The film is marked on the map as Paris. The conceptual tags, which belong to it, are “freedom and democracy,” “consumerism and individualism,” “power and resistance,” and “tradition vs. modernity” (especially for the sequence where the French people keep preferring their wine to Coca-Cola). The content-driven link refers to Robert Ménégoz’s film *Vivent les dockers* (Long live the dockers, FR, 1951) as part of the chapter “Visions and Attempts to Build a Transnational Europe,” and the historical time line is linked through the event of the Blum–Byrnes agreements.

Then there is an excerpt from the oral history section titled “Interview with Giuseppe Matulli about the Constituent Assembly and the Elections.” Giuseppe Matulli, who was the president of the Tuscan Historical Institute for the Resistance and the Contemporary Age, recalls his childhood memories about how the issue of the Constituent Assembly and legacies of Fascism and the Resistance were perceived in the postwar years. The place on the map is recognized as the witness’s hometown Marradi (Florence, Italy). The accompanying conceptual tags “freedom and democracy,” “collective participation,” and “private and public” were chosen. There are also two more links: one connects it to the event of the Italian referendum between



Figure 16.4. Still from the oral history interview with Giuseppe Matulli (2021). Courtesy of Giuseppe Matulli and Istituto Storico Toscano della Resistenza e dell'Età Contemporanea.

the republic and the monarchy, and the other to the item of “Ernesto Rossi’s Tray about the Ventotene Confinement” (held in the Tuscan Historical Institute for the Resistance and the Contemporary Age) in the chapter entitled “Visions and Attempts to Build a Transnational Europe.”

The detailed examination of the inner infrastructure of one of the exhibition chapters shows the crucial criteria applied on the selected sets of audiovisual and visual items: their networking through meaningful ties and references, placing on a map, insertion into a time line of historical events, and contextualization through the system of tags, which allow viewers to organize the exhibition content in relation to other layers of the theoretical interpretation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have sought to present the virtual exhibition *Frames of Reconstruction* as a case study of the transnational, multimedia, and multi-dimensional way of digital curating. We tried to understand this extensive project in the context of three significant cultural-technological changes that our globalized contemporary society has to deal with: a complex digital turn happening all over the culture, including memory; a transnational approach to memory and its study; and intensive efforts conducted in the field of digitizing film heritage. We believe that all these transformative forces should not be only reflected, but embraced and accommodated, within our

current digital curatorial practices. Their acknowledgment and appropriation, however, should be done with a critical reflection on how global, multimedia, and affect-driven consumer society operates nowadays. That is why our case study rather follows the directions set by the multimedia platform of the virtual exhibition, including its new possibilities and limits, than the directions set by the highly popular sphere of museum entrepreneurship and the never-ending influx of visual spectacle. Therefore, we sincerely hope to provide an example of transparent and self-reflective curatorial work, which carefully uses its power to investigate history and to put it onto digital display.

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