

**FROM A HISTORIAN'S EYE: IMAGES, WORDS AND HISTORICAL SYNTHESIS**Presentation at the Advanced Oral History Summer Institute  
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The work of the Laboratory of Oral History and Images, which has been developed during recent years, combines oral and visual research, conceptual discussion and teaching practice. The technical images explored include the role of visual images as a historical source, an object for historical studies as well as the relationship between images and society, and the role-played by the actors in the social production of images. These three points support the research developed at both undergraduate and graduate level courses. In addition, we produce research tools related to these issues, for instance: catalogues of the institutions that archive visual sources, a data base composed of digitized images, repertories of taped oral interviews produced during the research, etc. All of this information can be accessed at our site on the web: [www.historia.uff.br/labhoi](http://www.historia.uff.br/labhoi).

I will structure my presentation today, firstly considering the status of technical images as a historical source and a subject for historical studies; then the relationship between words and images, identifying oral sources as a important support for this dialog; and finally I will present our last experience developed in the form of collaborative research together with history and film undergraduate students, when we produced a video about a case study: the fire at the *Norte Americano Grand-circus*, Niterói, December 1961. In this video we tried to re-create a narrative for the event through the rhythm of the memory joining words and images.

Let's start with the images:

Analyzing images as a historical approach is nothing new. *Ideologies and Mentalities*, published in 1987, by the French historian Michel Vovelle, considers the use of images by historians among other topics. I won't enumerate all the other publications on this subject, as it will take too long a time, but it is worth pointing out that, from the 1990's, both inside and outside Brazil, works about the historical interpretation of images have been published regularly.

From the perspective presented by this work, a historical method must be developed that addresses the non-verbal nature of visual documents. Both at heuristic and hermeneutic stages of the historical method, many strategies must be applied in order to: organize the research information (such as data bases, descriptive forms, graphics etc.); develop the external critique (such as dating by styles, analyses of the technique applied, the kind of instrument used, etc.); develop the internal critique (such as analyzing intervention in the image – if it is false, why it has been falsified; recovering the social circuit of the image- production, the circulation and consumption of images by society).

The goal is to move past the concept of approaching images in a single way. The application of this concept requires much care and attention to: the conditions in which the image was created, the kind of icons and symbols featured in the image, the communicative capacity of the image, and the channel of its transmission.

In general images can be divided into five categories:

1. Graphic images: drawings, statues, designs, paintings, etc.
2. Optical images: mirror images, photographs, light projections.
3. Perceptive images: information from the senses and appearance.
4. Mental images: dreams, memories and ideas.

## 5. Verbal images: metaphors and descriptions.

For each of these categories, an institutional discipline has been created. However, such a strict categorization has its limits, and, above all, we need to consider the capacity of interrelation among the different kinds of images, requiring a kind of cross-disciplinary perspective.

Working with photographs as a historical source, we must begin from a general definition. In the first place, there exists the distinction between visual and verbal images; and secondly, the photograph taken as a visual message created by a technical apparatus, differing from painting, design, poetry and dreams by its specific language.

Using a photograph as a historical source demands a new kind of criticism from the historian. The photographic record is worthy of consideration, no matter if it was made to document or to provide a self-portrait representing a particular life style. Hence, paraphrasing French historian Jacques Le Goff, one must consider a photograph both as image-document as image-monument.

As an image-document, the photograph is conceived as an index, as a trace of a past reality in which objects, people and places inform us about how this past was – living conditions, fashion, aspects of material culture, labor conditions, etc.

As an image-monument, the photograph is a symbol, anything that in the past society has been elected to present this self-image, something that can be given to future generations. But we must never forget that every document is also a monument, because if a photograph informs, it also conforms to a certain vision of the world.

This perspective leads us to the “social circuit” of the photograph in different periods of history, including all the steps of producing, circulating and consuming photographic images. Only by tracing this movement can we re-establish the conditions of

production, emission and reception of the photographic message, as well as the social tensions that surrounded its creation. In this way, text and context are taken into consideration.

The visual texts, including photographs, are the result of a close relationship between a form of expression (the technical and aesthetic options) and a form of content (subject, objects, location, etc.) which involves three components: the author, the text itself and a reader (or the audience/receiver). Each of these three elements takes place in the final result. Every social product involves a locus of production and a producer, who manipulates certain techniques and has specific knowledge related to the activity. There is also a reader or a receiver, conceived as a trans-individual actor whose responses are linked to a code of behavior from the social and economic group to which they belong, and, last but not least, a collective meaning as the result of the social relationship between the photographer and photographed.

As the corollary of all these reflections we can consider the photograph as a text which supports a certain historicity. This premise leads to another: the concept of inter-textuality. From this notion of inter-textuality, photographs are always interpreted through the relations they establish with other historical texts, such as: letters, oral testimonies, other kinds of visual representation, verbal accounts, etc.

Text, context and production of sense, conceived as analytical categories, are based on a referential frame which understands culture as a result of the social practice of communication and signification. In our daily lives we have to deal with several codes, that have to do with cultural and historical context, expressed through objects, thoughts, behavior, words, gestures, etc, assuming a great variety of sign functions in the endless process of social *semiosis*.

One of the several conditions, for the realization of the communication process, is the production of texts. Texts are considered as a macroscopic unit of the communication process (Vilches, 1992, Cap.2), with a specific nature which combines a signification system and a communication one. Thus, the interpretation of texts must be concerned with the variables previously explained, just to recap: production conditions, circumstances of emission, the positions of the speaker, the channels of emission, etc.

Hence photographs, movies, architectural devices, oral sources, etc. can be conceived as texts. This plurality is the condition for working with the notion of intertextuality. Its principle states that textual analysis is a social practice built upon another social practice. Thus, a text can only be interpreted from a series of previous texts. In this process the message receiver realizes the meaning of the message from its cultural competence. This competence takes for granted a social-cultural experience, in which people produce a great amount of social texts

In the dimension of historical subject, the study of photography in Brazil from the 1990's onwards, has overcome the limits of the history of photography as solely concerned with technical discoveries and the life of famous photographers, and has turned its focus to a historiography exploring the social uses of photographic images, the social circuit of photographs, and the possibilities of communication in cultural and ideological terms. This tendency is represented, in Brazil, by a generation of social historians who have been working on the possibility of a new epistemology for the photograph as a historical object.

This perspective leads us to an important point: the relationship between image, technique, and society. Let's begin with a simple question: why do we still keep on taking pictures?

As a contemporary practice the photographic act is related to the recording of our daily experiences and life events perceived to be of interest to future generations. The history of the twentieth century is a history that can be told through a sequence of photographs. However, a question must be posed: what kind of relationship have different audiences and different viewers established with this history composed of images? At the same time, the interest in memory as a field has been renewed with the development of new technologies and the increased capacity for storing images. From family albums to the bytes of a computer there is a long history. In this process, the relationship between the historical actors, the production of their self-images and their transmission/preservation to the future generations, has also changed and needs to be considered.

Looking at the act of taking a photograph, we can establish as a principle that everyone who looks through the camera lens, presses the button and takes a slice of reality from what they have seen, does this applying previous knowledge, either about the equipment, or about photographic aesthetics. Leaving aside the discussion about the automatic genesis of photographic images – which would introduce to the photographic act a technological process that is not controlled by social or cultural conventions – we must consider the individual photographic act as informed by a collective action. Let me explain myself: taking pictures is a matter of choice - the best pose, the right smile, the suitable place – based upon technical and aesthetic norms and cultural conventions that result from the dynamics of society, that are always historical or becoming historical.

Hence, when we take pictures we are dialoging with a series of previous photographs that we have seen somewhere and which influence our selection. In this process we can see, interpret and recreate reality through multiple texts. From this arises

the possibility of the idea of the trans-individuality of the photographic act, as well as the possibility of photography to be conceived polyphonically and dialogically.

Since 1993, when our Lab was reorganized, with new members and new funds, many results have been produced, such as: monographic works, dissertations, PhD theses, research projects, books, articles, besides institutional activity such as academic agreements and interaction inside and outside Brazil.

In our Laboratory we are improving the studies of the relationship between visual and oral sources. This tendency is linked to the broader movement that considers History from a cross-disciplinary point of view.

In this sense, the co-ordination of different kinds of texts and testimonies in the research of historical issues, is based upon the principle of intertextuality – as explained previously. Nevertheless, in order to keep the epistemology of this concept, it must be considered in its hermeneutic dimension, responsible for the enlargement of historical interpretation - as, in its dimension as a social practice, it is ruled by disputes and conflicts related to the social production of meaning.

In the first case, the notion of intertextuality implies that historical textuality (production of texts understood as production of meaning) is composed of different historical sources that are conditioned by each other. For instance, a series of family photographs, either organized in an album or kept in a shoe box, may say very little about the social trajectory of the family, unless you complement and cross its interpretation with other sources such as: letters, diaries and oral accounts. It is not just a juxtaposition of different texts, but fundamentally an attempt to recover the meaningful substance that gives sense to the web of words and images.

## **WORDS AND IMAGES**

We can start this second part of my exposition from a very simple question “Is an image worth than a thousand words?” It’s a very simple question that hides a complicated problem, because both word and images play a very important and exclusive role in the communication process and in the framing of social memories

Usually the interpretation of images depends on its translation into words. However, recent studies on the psychology of perception and semiotics of non-verbal systems have shown that image is structured differently from verbal language. Thus to deal with image and words we have to conceive them as autonomous texts provided by a historical context.

Concerning such autonomy, word and images must be understood as different messages that are based upon different processes of production. A word can be emitted through an oral or written discourse, the control one has upon the final product of both types of discourse depends on:

1. The conditions of the enunciation of the verbal discourse (biographical narrative, interview, public speech, etc.)
2. The reception possibilities (dialog, identified large public, unidentified large public, etc.)
3. The place from where from the discourse is emitted (private circle, domestic environment, from an institution, street, etc.)
4. The topic of discourse (special themes, spontaneous recollection, interview prepared for a specific project, etc.)
5. The type of discourse support (live, recorded by VCR, type recorder, transcription, etc.)

All these elements interfere with the interpretation of the words organized in discourses conceived as texts. The same thing happens to images.

In this case variables are:

1. The type of apparatus (photographic camera, film camera, digital camera)
2. Relationship between subjects (producer and consumer of images)
3. Process timing (production, circulation and consumption of images)
4. Storage type (family albums, RAM memory, shoe boxes, public archives, private archives, etc.)
5. Topic of images (daily memories, fictional narrative, evidence, public issues, etc.)

Usually in works dealing with the concept of memory, visual and oral sources are seen as very important terms to ransom the memory, as if it were hidden in the simulations of the past. The ideas of ransoming, recuperating or even redeeming are not concerned with the inter-text that builds memory, which is always constructed within a present time discourse.

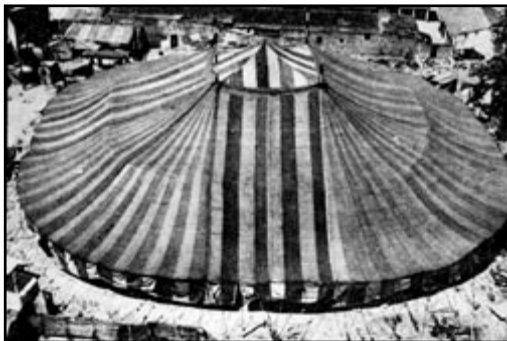
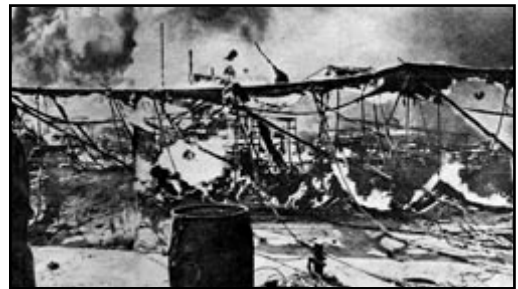
The oral account recollects the past, through a dialog with present time texts, the main purpose of which is usually a time in a future planned and desired. I am speaking now, about the past looking to the future. The memory discourse is conceived as a present text inserted into an inter-textuality involving the production of time as a social practice.

In the process of recalling past to a present time, we elaborate a composite past made by the dialog established between the society and us, considering the way we insert ourselves in this society. In fact, it is the social position that frames our cultural competence, playing a decisive role on the elaboration of visual and oral discourse.

**A case study – the fire at the circus and the rhythm of the memory – how we were able to join words and images in a new text of memory.**

I have been working with photography as a historical source for more than ten years and, at every opportunity, I have joined oral accounts and photography as a way to work with the notion of intertextuality.

Our last work was about a fire at the circus in Niteroi, the city where our university is located. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, 1961, just after the death jump of the trapeze artists, the *Gran Circus Norte-americano*, caught fire. At that moment, there began the most terrible tragedy ever to happen in the history of the circus anywhere in the world. The fire left behind: 317 deaths, 500 injured, among them 120 mutilated, a source of pain and sadness, which is kept alive in the memory of the survivors.



This event provoked a great commotion, not only in the city of Niterói, a small town near Rio de Janeiro, but all around the country. Many photographs were taken and the newspapers from this period covered every item of the tragedy. Forty years later, in 2001, a group of professors and students, from the Laboratory of Oral History and Images, from the Universidade Federal Fluminense, Brazil, studied this case to characterize through different sources how a collective traumatic experience organizes a certain memory of the urban past based on the perception of the tragedy. This project involved the University and the community of the town in a very intense collaboration.

One of the products of this research was a video made by history and film undergraduate students, which I co-ordinated. The plot of the video narrative was built on the relationship between urban memory, trauma, and city identity. The video polyphonic narrative captured accounts from those who were interviewed, following a schedule depicted in the photographs from press and historical archives, and written accounts



published by the newspapers and magazines of the period.

The main purpose was to produce a **place** of memory from the event that could be recognized by the people involved in it, valorizing the oral narrative as a way to recount the history.

This project was first conceived as a discipline at undergraduate level at the history faculty, developed during the second semester of 2001. During this period we had to organize the process into coordinated phases:

In the beginning, we discussed theoretical texts about memory and trauma, while, at the same time the group went to public libraries to research and summarize all the news covered by the major news organs in Rio and Niteroi, on the day after the tragedy, December 18<sup>th</sup> 1961, and in the following weeks, until the moment the subject disappeared from the headlines, exactly a



month later.

The preliminary work with the news organs, in particular the photographs from the newspapers and magazines, provided us with a definition of the main issues that punctuated the daily agenda of the period of the tragedy, such as: victims, first aid, solidarity, suspects, grief and mourning. These issues, like concentric rings, around the tragic event showed the actors and the synchronicity of historical time. Based on these issues we oriented the interviews conducted by the students with three survivors, three doctors and nurses, one volunteer, one policeman, two survivors who escaped without injured and three relatives of victims.

The result of the discipline was a report from the students where they had to organize the oral sources, operating certain archivist rules – identification cards, transcription, etc – and also make an evaluation of the whole process and its results. Many students were interested in creating a product to return to our interviewees, so we decided to make the video. It took a year and a half to be made, as we are a state university with very few resources for working with images. Despite the poor working conditions we were able, working as a crew to build a narrative where the rhythm of the memory leads the images to re-create the event historically.



The oral history teaching experience with undergraduate students has enabled me to evaluate the great contribution of this field of work for the education of future social historians, significantly enlarging their perspective of history.

It is history with a face and a voice, made by flesh and blood humans, where historical events are dealt with by the dimension of

memory, imposing a new epistemology with the notions of time and scale. I believe the main conquest of this group work was to enlarge and renew the concept of the art of the historian.