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The main purpose of this text is to present an argument for the importance of contextualising both the visual material and the researcher or narrator in historical research that uses visual media as a primary source of information. To achieve this end, I will begin by briefly presenting an example of how visual material can be used to derive information in research.83 The following section will then problematise this example from the viewpoint that it is essential to critically assess not only the media presented, but also the presenter of the media in question to gain an acceptably accurate account of the validity of the presentation. The final section will discuss the pictorial analysis in relation to the theoretical discussion presented in the preceding section.

Visual History in Practice

The presentation below attempts to show that spatial segregation of pupils constructs and maintains social segregation. This will be done by analysing a picture, and by presenting a historical contextualisation of the same picture. We will begin with the historical contextualisation.

The school in question is an upper secondary school located in a town in central Sweden.84 The town is of average size by Swedish standards, and it has a long history as a town with

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83 In the present case, a photograph taken by the author of this text (Figure 1).
84 Both the town and school have been anonymised due to ethical considerations.
both a large industry and an important seaport, thus giving the
town a large working class and a wealthy class of merchants.
The merchants generally lived in the northern and southwestern parts of the city, and the industrial workers lived in the eastern, southeastern and southern parts of the town. There was, in other words, a spatial segregation between the two social groups in question. Since it can be argued that this spatial segregation hindered social integration, it is assumed that the social groups were also socially segregated.

Today the social configuration of the town is partly different due to the economic changes that have occurred in the latter parts of the 20th century: the town no longer has a wealthy merchant class (although it is still an important seaport) and there remain few industries. There are also relatively large immigrant or ex-immigrant populations in the city. However, and most importantly for the argument presented below, the habitations and inhabitants of the city are still spatially segregated, with social segregation as a result.

According to the curriculum in Swedish upper secondary schools, education should promote values such as tolerance and respect for basic human rights. If one believes that social interaction is a factor in promoting interaction between individuals belonging to different social groups and that this interaction is a prerequisite for the promotion of tolerance and respect, it should be important to organise schools in such a way that interaction between different groups of pupils is facilitated. The school I have studied offers both preparatory and vocational educational programmes, hence the pupil population is rather heterogenous: in the preparatory programmes, the overwhelming majority of the pupils have what could be called a non-immigrant middle class background, whereas the pupils in the vocational programmes have mixed ethnic backgrounds and come from working class or lower middle-class backgrounds. Thus, you could argue that the school’s head-
master faces an important task in encouraging pupils of different backgrounds to interact.

Ian Grosvenor states that images can be used as evidence in historical research, if they are treated as documents. Few historians would use a historical document as evidence with no information about when it was written and by whom. Photographs should be treated equally, according to Grosvenor. Historians need to critically engage with the context in which the photograph was taken in order to be able to use it as historical evidence. If treated in such manner, photographs can give the historian valuable information about the past that texts cannot. In the following section I will try to illustrate what it could mean to critically engage with a picture and use it as a primary source of investigation.

Spatial and Social Barriers

Featured below is a schematic of the school I have chosen to study. Its purpose is to inform pupils and visitors where to find the different school buildings. The picture has been anonymised

Figure 1. Spatial segregation: Schematic of an upper secondary school in central Sweden. Photo: Robert Thorp (2012).

87 Grosvenor (1999), 86–90.
88 Ibid., 91–95.
in order to not convey information that could reveal the identity of the school. Given the information I have presented above, the reader will already be aware of the fact that the school offers a wide range of study and that it has a relatively heterogenous pupil population. Furthermore, the school consists of six separate buildings. There is a canteen (skolrestaurang), an auditorium (aula), and a gymnasium (gymnastik-salar) that are common for all pupils. We also have the main building (huvudbyggnad) that hosts the school administration and the Economy (preparatory) and Trade and Administration (vocational) programmes, the “Fordon/Media” building hosting the Mechanics and Media programmes (both vocational) and, finally, the “Västertull” building hosting the Civic Science programme (preparatory).

Consequently, pupils are spatially segregated according to the programme they attend. This has practical reasons: the Mechanics and Media core subjects require a lot of equipment that is not easily moved from one building to another. This does, however, cause significant social reverberations. Pupils are consigned to their “home buildings” for most of the school day, with the result that interaction between the different pupil populations is limited. Considering the social background of the pupils, this is regrettable since the opportunity to afford social interaction between groups that do not normally interact is lost along with, it seems, a chance to further promote the educational objective of increased tolerance and respect for basic human rights among the pupils. Hence, one can argue that school organisation, in this case, hinders social interaction between pupils because of the spatial barriers it erects. A contextualisation of the image allows us to conduct a rather far-reaching analysis of what at first glimpse seems to be nothing more than an ordinary schematic.

To Contextualise the Contextualisation

The presentation above will hopefully have illustrated how images can convey information that may be difficult to disseminate in written form. I also think it illustrates that a historian or researcher requires quite a lot of information about the image to be able to derive rich information from it. This points
us towards two problems; the first is the need for knowledge to “decode” a picture, and the second is the positionality of the observer/historian/researcher.

Regarding the knowledge needed to understand what the image conveys, you could argue that it would render the image superfluous: you still need a lot of written information to understand what the picture is about, and then the picture becomes at best an illustration of what is already shown in text. One needs, however, to remember that an image can be used in a number of ways when doing research, and the argument above highlights the illustrative use of images. The use I am concerned with is the use of a picture as a primary source of information, and in the present case the image is in fact the only source used.” While I possess what might be called a “knowing gaze” when observing the picture, the same reservation would in fact be true had my source been a written document: I would still have to know something about the document, the context in which it was written, and the “truth” to which it refers, in order to be able to understand it.

This leaves us with the second problem: the positionality of the observer or researcher. To what extent is the “knowing gaze” a methodological problem in historical research? This is, in fact, not a problem unique in using visual material as historical evidence, but visual material highlights the problem, since the amount of information in a picture is quite limited compared to the amount of information in most texts. Or, rather, the text in a written document itself says something, or has a message, even though that something is of second-order importance in historical research. It is only less conspicuous in texts than in images, so to speak.

Consequently, the person I am, the knowledge I possess and the views I hold influence my assessment and analysis of the historical source, and to some this might present a problem: are not historical investigations and artefacts of historical knowledge supposed to be objective? If my personal characteristics shape what I present, does that not render everything I say scientifically worthless since it is biased? Firstly, this argument rests on the assumption that there is an “objective reality” that

we can observe regardless of who we are. One can argue that such a position is difficult to defend, since all meaning we have is created by who we are and how we perceive things.\footnote{Cf. Markus (1996), 10–13.}

Secondly, an alternative way of looking at this problem is to regard matters of objectivity and subjectivity not as absolute opposites, but rather as two ends of a continuum. As researchers and human beings, we find ourselves in different positions on this continuum, according to the circumstances. We simply need to know what requirements science forces upon us to become good scientists. In history, one way to avoid being debunked as biased is to have a solid and transparent method of research. As long as you are open with the material you have used in your research, how you used it and for what reason, all is well. You could in fact argue that to ignore this “subjective” or “postmodern” perspective on science constitutes a failure to fully realise how historical knowledge is constructed.\footnote{Cf. David Carr, \textit{Time, Narrative, and History} (Bloomington 1986), 2–4.}

On a similar note, Australian historian Robert Parkes argues that history should be seen as a representational practice, and for this reason we need to engage with how it is represented. Parkes presents what he calls the “historiographic gaze” that will allow us to scrutinise not only historical representations as such, but also the historian that creates them. He insists on the importance of meta-theoretical analysis of how history is created, thus extending the “gaze of the historian to everything, even [him- or herself], revealing the specificity of historical knowledge and practice”.\footnote{Robert J. Parkes, \textit{Interrupting History: Rethinking History Curriculum after 'The End of History'} (New York 2011), 102.} Without the historiographic gaze, pieces of historical knowledge take on the appearance of being objective and factual, when they are in fact the result of a particular historian’s conscious choice and interpretation. Through the historiographic gaze, we get the full picture of how history is created and gain a richer appreciation for the importance of sound methodology in historical research.\footnote{Ibid., 119–120.}

I want to use an example to illustrate my point further. Michael Schratz and Ulrike Steiner-Löffler argue that letting pupils take photographs of their school environment enables them to
show what they really think of school. They assume that the limitations of language have allowed adults to control them, since adults have more highly developed language skills. It is further assumed that schools are generally regarded with mistrust, since they are institutions that control and punish. It is then shown through photographs that children are indeed able to express themselves through the use of images.

In my opinion, this is an example of biased science, since the authors’ presumptions about schools and the ability to express oneself are left without discussion. Thus, the result of the study becomes circular, since the researchers find out what they already knew: children communicate better through the use of images. Given the theoretical assumptions of Schratz and Steiner-Löffler, it is doubtful whether their research could have reached any other conclusion than it did. Furthermore, to be able to state that pictures are a better way for children to communicate, we need to know something about how they communicate in writing. How do the same children communicate when asked to write a story instead of taking pictures? Finally, the pictures that the children have taken also need to be decoded using language, and if one assumes that language hinders children from communicating what they really want to say, then we are back at square one; the adults will “control” the analysis of the pictures. The problem is contextualisation, not of the pictures used in the research, but rather of the researchers using the pictures. What values do they have and how do they influence their choice of field, design of research method, and results?

Visual History in Practice: Revisited

Canadian historian Stéphane Lévesque writes that “contextualisation [...] may thus push historians to self-examination of their own projections, beliefs, and frameworks of meaning,” which seems to be in full accordance with the argument presented in the present text. He also stresses the fact that histo-

95 Ibid., 247.
96 Stéphane Lévesque, Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-first Century (Toronto, Buffalo 2008), 152.
rians’ “value judgments” influence the conclusions they draw from their research to a very high degree: two different historians can reach completely different conclusions even though they use the same empirical data and research methods.” This is neither surprising nor controversial, considering that in qualitative research, the interpretation of empirical data is an essential, if not the essential, component, and what a researcher thinks significant thus influences her interpretation: she chooses to focus on certain aspects because she thinks they are important, and vice-versa. Hence, the historian’s interpretation is contingent on how she views the world and creates meaning, or as Lévesque puts it, “contingency, as opposed to certainty, appears to be the rule in [the historical research community].”

Donald Warren, an American historian, urges historians to engage with their personal inclinations in their research instead of denying them: a historian’s personal or private knowledge as well as oral sources can lend new perspectives to research, and fill gaps left by the written documents. To gain a scientifically acceptable distance from the research material, Warren suggests that the text should be written as a third-person narrative, to put focus on the material instead of the interpretation, and that statements made in the text or non-written material should be verified by external sources, i.e. they should be corroborated, which of course is a fundamental requirement in “traditional” historical research as well.”

Returning to the pictorial analysis above, we see that it has certainly been written in the third person, and my personal opinions are seemingly not in focus; the presentation and the conclusions drawn are done in a matter-of-fact manner. The analysis does, however, lack information about the person performing the analysis, i.e. me. Essential to the analysis is the fact that I have been a practicing teacher at the school in question and that I have been witness to the organisational changes made in the school. When I began working there, pupil populations shared the spaces a lot more than they do now, and my personal conviction is that this is a change for the worse. I do

97 Ibid., 94.
98 Ibid., 101.
however know that there are other perspectives that can be applied to my analysis: pupils from different educational programmes did not interact more before than they do now and furthermore, when they did, the interaction was frequently of a negative nature: there were conflicts between groups of pupils because they shared the same space. Some might think that the school works better now, since conflict has become rare.

Moreover, the contextualisation of the image lacks reference to external sources. What I write about the history of the town, its contemporary situation and the school in question is not corroborated at all, and this is a severe flaw in the analysis. I would need to refer to external documents or studies to be able to verify my assertions. This is crucial, since these assertions are central to the conclusions I draw, and, you could also argue, for my choice of research topic.

But even if I were to verify the claims I make about the city and school, I would still be left with the far more subtle and complex questions of how I construct meaning and how this has influenced the entire undertaking, i.e. the contingency, positionality and historiographic gaze referred to above. It could be argued that what I write sounds “leftist”; focusing on the town’s history as one of segregation between merchants and workers and extending this to the city’s contemporary configuration by claiming that there is segregation between “Swedes” and “immigrants” is a classic left-wing approach. Instead, I could have focused on the individual and how she perceives her school and city environment. All these objections are valid, but one must remember that these objections are also based on a personal preference. The question of how candid a researcher should be with her political convictions is simply a matter of how essential they are for the conclusions she draws from her research. If the conclusions are founded in corroborated sources and if the researcher’s method of investigation is solid, transparent, and relevant to the research, then, as I have written above, all is well.
Concluding Remarks

The present text has argued for two things: the potential of images as primary sources in historical investigations and the need not only to contextualise the images, but also the user of the images. A researcher that does not treat herself as a person possessing knowledge, presuppositions and values about the world runs the risk of letting these personal characteristics determine the scientific value of her research. Hence the importance of a historiographic gaze.