ROUTLEDGE GUIDES TO USING HISTORICAL SOURCES

HISTORY BEYOND THE TEXT

A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO APPROACHING ALTERNATIVE SOURCES

Edited by
SARAH BARBER and CORINNA M. PENISTON-BIRD

History Beyond the Text

Historians are increasingly looking beyond the traditional, and turning to visual, oral, aural, and virtual sources to inform their work. The challenges these sources pose require new skills of interpretation and require historians to consider alternative theoretical and practical approaches.

In order to help historians successfully move beyond traditional text, Barber and Peniston-Bird bring together chapters from historical specialists in the fields of fine art, photography, film, oral history, architecture, virtual sources, music, cartoons, landscape and material culture to explain why, when and how these less traditional sources can be used. Each chapter introduces the reader to the source, suggests the methodological and theoretical questions historians should keep in mind when using it, and provides case studies to illustrate best practice in analysis and interpretation. Pulling these disparate sources together, the introduction discusses the nature of historical sources and those factors which are unique to, and shared by, the sources covered throughout the book.

Taking examples from around the globe, this collection of essays aims to inspire practitioners of history to expand their horizons, and incorporate a wide variety of primary sources in their work.

Sarah Barber is Senior Lecturer in the History Department at Lancaster University. Her publications include *Regicide and Republicanism: Politics and Ethics in the English Revolution* (1998) and *A Revolutionary Rogue: Henry Marten and the English Republic* (2000).

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History Beyond the Text
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History Beyond the Text

A student's guide to approaching alternative sources

Edited by Sarah Barber and Corinna M. Peniston-Bird

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To Lee and Karl in this generation,
and Amelie in the next

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Acknowledgements

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1 Introduction

Sarah Barber and
Corinna M. Peniston-Bird

Spurred on by the sources themselves, and encouraged by subject centres, funding bodies, institutions and pedagogic frameworks, historians are increasingly turning to visual, oral, aural, virtual and kinaesthetic sources. These sources issue challenges to the historian, to the discipline of history and to its practice; yet, in the experience of the editors of this collection of essays, there is still too rarely a clear explanation of why, when or how they can be used. Every year we are faced by groups of Masters' level students open to discover how to incorporate such sources into their own work, but more comfortable with the well-worn notions of empirical evidence, the primacy of the document, and the reification of prose. Over the years we have felt our way through the darkness alongside our students, searching, often somewhat in vain, for insightful readings on approaching less traditional sources of particular value to students of the discipline of history. Seven years after first offering this Masters' level course, we decided to bring together chapters from historical specialists in the fields of fine art, photography, film, oral history, architecture, virtual sources, music, cartoons, landscape and material culture. Each author was asked to explore the theoretical and practical aspects of using the particular primary source while providing one case study or more to illustrate that process. In this introduction we address some of the issues of commonality and distinctiveness exhibited by the sources discussed in these chapters.

Document and documentary

Often discussion of less traditional sources employs language which is not only familiar to historians of documents, but is also taken from it. Hence, one often hears the phrase to 'read' a film or photograph; musicologists argue that the symbols used to represent musical sound annotate in the way of a text.[1] The term 'document' has a history which charts a turn-around in meaning and application. Its root, *docere*, meaning to teach, determined its early usage to mean 'a lesson, an admonition, a warning'.[2] The implication within scholastic pedagogy was that a documentary was far from value-free, but carried a deliberate and calculated message. It was directive of the manner in which one should read. Particularly with the growth of the discipline of history, the document became the core tool of historical interpretation and defined the responsibility of historical practitioners.

Hence, Arthur Marwick, in his exploration of a discipline of which he felt himself at the core but increasingly alienated from its other practitioners, stressed the division of primary and secondary sources involving precision and facts, and decried the notion that history could 'signify some *a priori*, unsubstantiated conception' in which historians exist to give meaning to history.[3] In his taxonomy of primary sources, Marwick placed above all others 'documents of record'. Such a source is one which 'by its very existence records that some event took place . . . it embodies the event itself', for example acts of parliament, peace treaties, charters and so on, and thus contains 'fact' or 'event', not 'ideology' or 'opinion'; these should be distinguished from 'records' – Marwick cites court transcripts or those of the Inquisition – which are subject to the accuracy of the scribe and the fallibility of the human agents involved in their telling or recall.[4] This distinction, however, can be masked by the elevation of prose so that, say, the parallels between the minutes of a meeting and a cartoon – both interpretations following certain genre-specific conventions – have not been obvious to our students.

Within the twentieth century, the term 'documentary' came to acquire connotations of dispassion, objectivity and factual accuracy which the original usage did not suggest. In a study of writing, painting and photography, John Corner has argued that 'documentary expression relates to the physicality of the object world', giving documentary a 'distinctive phenomenological character, rooted in obdurate particularity'.[5] In the 1920s, John Grierson coined the term 'documentary film' – as opposed to 'narrative fiction' and '*avant-garde*' – to describe 'the creative treatment of actuality', having witnessed a filmic anthropology of the people of Samoa, produced by Robert Flaherty, and *Nanook of the North* (who entered popular culture). He bemoaned that a similar record was not made of the lives of industrial, urban Britons.[6] Grierson's documentary film *Drifters* was, however, an account of Shetland herring fishermen, and its description emphasised the difference between documentary and artifice: '"Drifters" is about the sea and about fishermen, and there is not a Piccadilly actor in the piece. The men do their own acting, and the sea does its.'[7]

In 1934, Paul Otlet extended the definition of document to objects themselves, provided human beings are informed by the observation of them: the following year, Walter Schuermeyer's definition was 'any material basis for extending our knowledge which is available for study or comparison'.[8] This was extended by Suzanne Briet in the 1950s, for whom a document was 'any physical or symbolic sign, preserved or recorded, intended to represent, to reconstruct, or to demonstrate a physical or conceptual phenomenon'.[9] Frits Donker Duyvis's anti-materialist attempt to include a spiritual dimension within documentation as 'expressed thought' – which he adopted from Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy – could be said to pre-figure the twenty-first century in which virtual communication can render materiality redundant.[10] The growth of the study of semiotics – the object as sign – resulted in signifying objects' inclusion within the category of document, since before they fulfil any other function, signs have 'first furnished us with information', and for Barthes, objects 'function as a vehicle of meaning' which might be deconstructed to the point of the 'death of the author'.[11] A colleague thus queried

our title, arguing that the sources we investigate are not 'beyond the text', but are themselves 'text'. In our experience, however, the ways in which this could be true require a journey of discovery for students well versed in the primacy of the written word. Lurking behind their implicit value hierarchy is an assumption of a clear distinction between fact and fiction, document and interpretation: the sources discussed here, however, often remind us that that distinction is not so easy to draw, in any source of any genre. Furthermore, the parallels between prose and alternative sources should not mask differences between them, and the methodologies these require, as these chapters illuminate.

Subjectivity and intersubjectivity

Having strayed from his traditionalist definition, let us return to the comforting security of Marwick. In articulating a definition of the primary document of record as one that 'by its very existence records that some event took place' and thus 'embodies the event itself', he was, in fact, overlaying traditional history in the archives onto the rather more modish concept of intersubjectivity, which can be found particularly within philosophy, psychology, anthropology, performance theory and linguistics. All human communication posits a tri-partite relationship: the person communicating, the manner or means of the communication, and the receiver or audience. Thus, within speech we have the speaker, speech act (utterance), and hearer; in our sources this could translate to, for example, the painter, the painting, and the viewer; or interviewer, tape/transcript, interviewee, and so on. Intersubjectivity suggests the relationship between the three elements, alerting us to potential mutualities.[12] But the discussion so far has focused on objectivity, not subjectivity. It is the level of subjectivity in both the creation and the understanding of such sources as art, film, music, oral testimony, or chat rooms, which supposedly sets them apart. Marwick's definition of the document of record posits an unproblematic relationship between the intention of the author of the document, and its subsequent interpretation by the historian. Elements of human bias, fallible memory, or hidden agendas are subsumed by the accurate and dispassionate recording of events, such that Marwick could be as sure as he could be that his historical document was stripped of elements of human subjectivity, to produce the idealised objective historical fact.

Marwick's respect for the document of record stems from this ability to seem to reduce it to objectivity, but the historian must still continue to ask questions of even the most objective-looking document, and in any event, should human communication, past or present, be subject to such reductionism? Is historical investigation of subjectivities not of equal interest? As part of their craft, historians excel at placing any information within a context: such a context involves subjective judgements of the creator, the object and its receivers. All media are extensions of human expression and a historian might wish to be alert to the implicit elements of human expression, the unanticipated consequences of innovation and technologies, unwitting testimony, or political (a term used here in its widest application) intent. Every change in scale, pace or pattern which an invention or

innovation brings to human affairs changes the message of humanity because it brings a change in inter-personal dynamics. Thus, the significance of a news broadcast lies not only in the events described, but also in the reasons behind the timing of its airing and concurrent changes in public perception of, say, immigration, or in the creation of a climate of fear. As Mark Federman argues, 'we can know the nature and characteristics of anything we conceive or create by virtue of the changes – often unnoticed and non-obvious changes – that they effect', and we have a definition of Marshall McLuhan's famous 'Equation', in effect itself a statement on the intersubjective trinity: 'the medium is the message'.[13]

Subjective elements constantly affect the relationship between creator, creation and receiver. Some of these are born of our humanity: how as a historian, can we ever detach emotion from less subjective forms of human expression and should we try? An art-work may invoke the sublime, or may provoke pity; a cartoon relies on the audience recognising ridicule, disdain, or burlesque; a piece of music is seldom composed without an intention of stirring some emotion in its hearer. A medium which relies on performance – story-telling, drama, oral testimony, music and song, correspondence in cyberspace – introduces elements which are unique and ephemeral. The historian has also to recognise that the introduction of new technologies – film, the internet, sound recordings – changes the nature of the thing itself by capturing and freezing it.[14]

Each type of source has its own history which overlaps and influences those of other sources. The *camera obscura*, for example, provided a technology deployed by artists to capture an image and to 'distort' a scene beyond what could be taken in by the naked eye, but the process of capturing and fixing that image by discovering photo-sensitive papers and compounds, rather than re-creating it using the artist's own painterly skill, led to a series of experimenters – Professor J. Schulze (1727), Thomas Wedgwood (1800), Nicéphore Niépce (1816), Henry Fox Talbot (1834), Louis Daguerre (1837), Richard Leach Maddox (1871) – who transformed the camera and thus the photograph. Other pioneers altered the role of the photograph. In the space of fifty years, key roles for the photographer were established. In mid-century Paris, Felix Toumachon and Adolphe Disderi sparked an explosion of interest in studio portrait photography; a decade later, Mathew Brady and his team processed 7,000 negatives documenting the American Civil War; the United States Congress sent William Jackson, Tim O'Sullivan and others to document the opening up of the West; George Eastman's Dry Plate Company led to the first half-tone photograph appearing in a daily newspaper, the *New York Graphic*; and in 1890, the publication of Jacob Riis's collection of photographs from the New York tenements, *How the Other Half Lives*, announced photography as a medium of social history and reform.[15] Together these ousted the painting as the visual medium of record, and blurred the boundaries between fine art and photography. As photographic techniques were employed in art – for example Man Ray's 'rayographs' (from 1921) – artists were freed to explore the abstract and the surreal, and photographers began their own debate about the relationship between documentary and creativity, for example through the creation of the f.64 group (Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, Willard

Van Dyke, Edward Weston and others), dedicated to 'straight photographic thought and reproduction'.[16] All these changes affected the relationship between the photographer and the viewer, opening up the issue as to whether the object might be the camera, the photograph or the subject of the photograph. Finally, from the inception of the 'box brownie' camera in 1900, a series of commercial decisions and technological changes transformed photography into a medium with mass affordability, and separated technological knowledge from the taking and producing of photographs. With the arrival of digital imaging – which could be said to take the process full circle, in that the image has become mutable and, digitally represented, is no longer necessarily 'fixed' – photography took another step as a democratic medium and the relationship between photographer, image and viewer has changed once again.[17]

It is not the case, therefore, that analysis of these sources can be reduced to a simple and direct inter-relationship between author, object and receiver, such that it parallels that between writer/document-of-record/historian. There is often no single author, or the work cannot be traced to an identifiable author. A painting may be the work of a number of hands, as a workshop production, or the carving in a church the work of 'humble' artisans. A website often functions on the basis of such extensive democratisation that the author is untraceable, or a person being interviewed may wish to adopt a pseudonym. Consider the transformation that has taken place in the presentation of feature films in the past sixty years. In the 1940s, when actors, writers, directors and crew were owned by the company, the person credited with the creation of a film was the producer. Increasing recognition given to the multiplicity of roles in the creation of moving pictures now means that the credits roll for many minutes after the narrative has concluded.

Creator, created, and audience

Approaches to source analysis have chosen to focus on different elements of the tri-partite relationship between creator, created and audience. The narrative which most frequently determines historical analysis is that of authorial intent, although postmodern literary criticism holds that trying to determine authorial intent is futile.[18] In Film and, subsequently, Media Studies, we find a school of analysis focusing on the *auteur*. Auteur theory was coined in the work of French film critic and theorist André Bazin (1918–58), who, having begun to write about film in 1943, was one of the co-founders, in 1951, of the influential film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Bazin's original views were based on a person-centred, humanist ontology which constructed a theory of film based around 'objective reality' and 'true continuity' rather than experimental effects and editing, in which the director became invisible and scenes representational, such that the interpretation of a scene was the responsibility of the viewer. Ironically, this led to his belief that the film should represent the director's 'personalist' vision, which gave birth to auteur theory in a piece in *Cahiers* by François Truffaut who in 1954 referred to 'les politiques des auteurs': the conscious decision to look at a film and to decide on its remit and value.[19] The originators of auteur theory – almost exclusively film

directors themselves – also assessed actors' input, and the legion influences which determine the film's overall shape.[20]

A work may be a commission, and thus reflect the interests of the commissioner as much as the creator. What audience does the creator have in mind when a work is created, or is there a specific audience in mind? How has the gaze changed over time? A portrait was usually painted at the behest of the sitter, to grace private rooms in which in the gaze was strictly regulated by the subject. Once that painting has been detached from its original purpose and becomes the property of a gallery, the gaze is democratised, made dispassionate sometimes to the point of anonymity, and is constantly in motion past the painting. A building remains relatively fixed, but it contains both a public and a private architecture. The gaze of a potentially universally available website is atomistically private; a film viewed within a cinema is the subject of highly directed gaze, whilst the same images projected via television broadcast or DVD is not.[21] Whilst the painting, cartoon, photograph, film, building, or interview can be frozen at the point of creation, its reception by successive audiences, across time, cannot, such that as historians we can also follow the critical cultural reception of a work and its changes. A landscape or a website is subject to change, whereas the visual representation of the landscape within a map, or the date of access to or date of last review of a website, can be fixed, the object itself is subject to change.

The historian is encouraged to distinguish between the multiplicity of creative inputs, object creations and audiences which are represented by the intersubjective trinities which attach to each of the types of source represented in this volume. With a traditional document, we are more seldom asked to trace these. Either an individual author is known and his/her personal slant in creating the text known to the historian, or the very anonymity of the individual creating the historical record invests the resulting historical text with documentary objectivity. For example, the historian is able to read the primary printed text of United States' government debates, *The Congressional Record*, which noted that on Thursday 4 December 1873, 'Mr. Sumner' presented a petition, in support of his civil rights bill, and recited its words to the Senators: '[w]e meet the greatest barrier when we present our children at the public schools and are rejected. All this, and more, we are compelled to endure because we are colored'.[22] Alternatively, we could be presented with an accounts ledger from a mid-nineteenth-century factory – a documentary record of incomings and outgoings.

The account of the Senate debate makes the assumption that the transcriber made an accurate transcription, that he or she caught every word and printed every word. It makes no comment about the reception of Sumner's reading of the petition, and the historian seeking to use Sumner's speeches is unlikely to use the full text. Factory accounts ledgers were arranged in standardised format, but without background context about how this format came about – double-entry book-keeping, for example – or any attempt to question whether the figures might be accurate. How many insurance or compensation claims are accurate[23] and how many wages slips altered? The historian must be aware of the extent to which this record is determined by the employer or agent.[24] Information contained within even

the most straightforwardly textual historical document is, by the nature of the information being captured and the partial survival of information over time, ephemeral. One consequence of engagement with the concept of intersubjectivity is the encouragement it gives to historians to be aware of their own narrative voice, possible implicature and the degree to which they may be identifying with elements of the trinity of intersubjectivities.

In some of the sources discussed here, oral history and virtual communications in particular, the impact of the mode of communication and the medium on intersubjectivity is a particular focus of analysis: Mark Dery commented on emails, for example,

> electronic messages must be interpreted without the aid of non-verbal cues or what socio-linguist Peter Farb terms 'paralanguage' – expressive vocal phenomena such as pitch, intensity, stress, tempo, and volume . . . [as a correspondent suggested] 'I think the attempt to signal authorial intent with little smileys is interesting but futile'.[25]

The collection of oral testimony, and more particularly its transcription, introduces the problem of re-presenting the data at the most basic level: does the sound copy of the interview accurately convey the intent behind an utterance and does the transcriber include marginal notes of this within its textual form? The three transcriptions of the statement,

- I had no idea what I was doing;
- [laughs] I had no idea what I was doing;
- [crosses arms] **I** had no idea what I was doing [coughs];

include a variety of possible authorial intent markers, alert us to the presence of the interviewer in assigning meaning of both aural and physical cues, and highlight some of the issues of translating from one medium to another.[26]

The historian's concern with time, chronology and the placement of objects, ideas and individuals within an identifiable past introduces yet another layer of interpretation. The ways in which the products of an artist,[27] architect,[28]cartoonist, musician,[29] interviewee, or landscape designer function may be a consequence of authorial intent, but may also be interpreted as a witting or unwitting consequence of contextual influences on the creators, reflecting the historical period in which they were framed. The term which is most often appropriated to describe a medium's relationship to the period in which it was created is the German *Zeitgeist*, meaning, in literal translation, 'time-spirit'.[30] *Zeitgeist* has been appropriated into several languages, and is most commonly translated as 'the spirit of the age'. Although it possesses earlier origins, it is most associated with the dialectical philosophy of history promulgated by Georg Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel was a key figure in what might be termed the 'speculative philosophy of history', and held that each nation-state has its own mind or spirit (*Volksgeist*), which conjoined to produce a spirit of the world (*Weltgeist*). For Hegel, human thought culminated in its creative output,

art, for example, not being solely a means to express or evoke feelings, but a kind of thought and a means to apprehend reality.

Such progressivism, however, cuts across another concept beloved of historians, that in which the transmission of ideas remains constant, or continuously borrows from previous expression. A historian (sociologist, anthropologist or folklorist), for example, might express this as 'tradition'.[31] Artists might be considered to be working within genre traditions, or cartoonists within a tradition of satire, and thus the historian who wishes to use such work is faced with the prospect of distinguishing that which is personal to the creator and is innovatory from that which borrows from a past.

Tracing expression across time also introduces the manner in which interpretation is determined by the audience and audience reaction is determined by their own cultural concerns and contexts. Take a moment to imagine a street scene in the nineteenth-century American Mid-West. Dwell on its individual components. Now consider: does the scene include a wide, single main street, stretching back like an exercise in drawing perspective, its most prominent buildings a saloon with louvered swinging doors? Is there a horse tied up on a post outside, assailed by swirling dust and tumbleweed? This view bears little relation to that represented in living history museums, such as Bodie, California, Old Cowtown, Wichita, Kansas, or the Pioneer Living History Village, Phoenix, Arizona. Instead, individuals from a period after the birth of film are influenced by their consumption of film, and within that, a genre of film itself – the (Spaghetti) Western.[32] The twelfth-century history of Midlands England may never be viewed in the same way after the varieties of mythical re-workings of the story of Robin Hood and, in the late eighteenth century, the highest form of painting was the representation of historical scenes, but through the prism of first the Enlightenment and then the Romantics' love-affair with the classical past.[33] When a contemporary is interviewed, tying the interviewer, interviewee and interview in coincidental time, oral historians must consider how the recollections of the interviewee – his or her memory – are affected by the passage of time which has elapsed between the history being related and the point of relation. All these are examples of the 'cultural circuit', whereby a continuous inter-relationship between memories of events and cultural representations of events, and thus between past and present, is set up, which the historian seeks to disentangle while aware of the impossibility of ever doing so. The cultural circuit can be identified in all eras, but the impact of some of the technologies discussed here – film being one obvious example – cannot be overstated.

Truth, veracity and authenticity

Historians often praise their own sense of scholarship. We like to think of ourselves as purveyors of a discipline which not only seeks after truth but also provides as much verification and corroboration of statements as possible. We often talk of triangulation – that a piece of information should be corroborated in two other ways