

# Visualising the Imageless Past: Film and Audio-Visual Media in Archaeological Museums

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the use of film and audio-visual media in an exhibition context, as a means for mediating the objects of culture on display, which in turn supports the narration of the exhibition. The paper focuses on two German museums, one of archaeology and the other of prehistory, to examine exhibition practices through the different functions of audio-visual media. How does audio-visual media help to visualise the past? How do they contribute to unveil the immaterial side, i.e. the “meaning” and significance of the objects on display? What kind of picture does the synergy between material objects and audio-visual media paint of our ancestors? Moreover, how can audio-visual media help museums to deal with the basic problem of archaeology (and historiography in general) and the representation of history? Finally, in what ways are audio-visual media used to inform the discipline and methods of archaeology, as a process for gaining knowledge?

The analysis will demonstrate how the exhibition spaces of prehistory museums have distinct ways of integrating moving images, thus reflecting the different attitudes they have towards the materiality and mediality of the museum object and, as a consequence, the representation of history in the museum space.

**Keywords:** Film in museums; Media in museums; Prehistory museums; Museums Analysis; Representation of history in museums.

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Recently, discussions have been taking place on blogs, social media, and at conferences, mainly within the museum community itself, about the (future) use of new and interactive media in cultural-history exhibitions, and the role virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) will play. A number of issues have been debated with great enthusiasm including the pros and cons of VR and AR, the technical obstacles that arise and visitors' interactions with the new technology.

To move beyond these points of discussion, I will examine what is happening in the exhibition space, focusing on the use of audio-visual media and, in particular, film. I will consider how the exhibition context acts as a means for communicating and mediating other exhibits and objects on display, and how it supports the overall narration of the exhibition. I will take a closer look at how the exhibition practices of two German museums of archaeology and prehistory, the Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte Halle (State Museum for Prehistory in Halle, Saxony-Anhalt) and the smac — Staatliches Museum für Archäologie in Chemnitz (State Museum for Archaeology, Chemnitz, Saxony). Relying on archaeological discoveries from their respective regions, both museums dedicate themselves to Middle European Prehistory, defining the era they cover according to the region and the archaeological remnants of their collections. While the former finishes its exhibition with the clash of the prehistoric civilisation of the Germanic people with the high civilisation of the Romans, the latter expands the period covered until the formation of an own writing culture on middle German territory.

When considering the use of audio-visual media in historical museums, it must be noted that archaeological museums dealing with European Prehistory engage with a topic and a phase of history which has left almost no trace, in terms of photographs, films or other mass manufactured images. There are hardly any images from the period in question, so the common practice undertaken by other historical museums to supplement and enrich their exhibitions through historical images, such as paintings, sketches, engravings, old photographs or any other illustrations, is simply not an option for archaeological museums. In contrast to museums of classical (i.e. Roman) archaeology, prehistory museums do not even have *any* images from the era to draw upon, the lack of images from the period makes it both more difficult and easier to work with any kind of “visualisations” of the past. On the one hand, it is more difficult because the curators have no historical examples and imagery to follow, on the other hand, it is easier because the curators have freedom to create imagery without falling prey to representational realism while relying too unthinkingly on historical imagery and iconography. Moreover, the material remains of the past are sometimes scarce, too. And they are strange and unfamiliar and not always easy for the average museum visitor of today to decipher. Material objects from the past require context and explanation as they are not only physical remnants, but signs and traces of the more immaterial parts of the past. They are charged with broader meanings about the social and cultural life of our ancestors (te Heesen 2015: 35). Every exhibit or “museum thing” (*Museumsding* a term coined by Gottfried Korff, one of the leading German museum theorists, Korff 1995) is a physical object, a material artefact, that can be put in a showcase. There is an inseparable link between the materiality and the mediality of an object, museum things are “tools of communication” mediating between the visible and the invisible, “between the materiality of the viewable and the immateriality of the memorable” (Korff 1995: 22, my translation). Hence, audio-visual media and film in the museum help display and visualise an invisible, hidden memory component. The purpose of every museum is to make the invisible visible, to visualise functions and meanings of things, not visible in a material surface. They visualise broader concepts, i.e. experiences, social structures and ways of thinking about the past, as well as scientific findings that are not tied to specific objects. Furthermore, a museum does not simply visualise the past, but also, a contemporary image of the past. Korff states: “The museum does not illustrate, it is an illustration in itself” (1999: 332, my translation).

Bearing this in mind, my paper poses questions such as: how do audio-visual media help to visualise the past? How do they contribute towards unveiling the immaterial side of the objects on display? And how do material objects and audio-visual media work together to create a coherent narrative?

Moreover, I will answer question about how audio-visual media can help museums to deal with the basic problem of archaeology (and historiography in general), i.e. the representation of history: What is the correct, the most efficient and interesting way to reconstruct history and by which means? How are facts to be kept separate from fiction or how is fiction to be used to communicate facts?

And finally, my paper explores the ways audio-visual media are used to inform people about the discipline and the methods of archaeology, its process of gaining knowledge so that the visitors are enabled to draw

connections to their own living conditions and help to establish contemporary relevance.

## 1 Archaeology and prehistory museums and the representation of history

In his introduction to museum archaeology, Hedley Swain breaks down the essence of any museum dealing with the past into the assertion that museums “aim to communicate a real event that happened in a real place at a real time, but do this in a different place and different time with some of the objects that were once ‘real’” (2007: 214). This statement appears mundane, but it pinpoints a crucial issue for any museum: that the stories it tells with the help of objects from material culture are just a construction made of particles of a former reality (Pohl 1996). Bearing this in mind, one wonders if and how a few products from durable technologies (e.g. metal objects such as tools and weapons) that are now isolated by time and context are able to represent a vibrant and complex society of the past (Wood and Cotton 1999: 28). Less durable artefacts for everyday tasks (such as food preparation and clothing) are preserved less often, to say nothing about intangibles such as social constructs and customs and manners that left no direct material remains. To put these parts of history on display, museums must rely on other ways to communicate those ideas, be it in the written word, 3D-models, images or film and audio-visual media.

Despite the basic idea of the New Museology that “every museum display means placing a certain construction upon history” (Vergo 1989: 2–3), that every museum is thus a kind of narration of history, archaeology museums still tend in practice to exhibit positivist and material-based typo-chronological presentations of a certain region or a certain period, as Karen Aydin (2010: 64) observes for German archaeological museums. The life-world of the Stone Age is still often depicted in a simplifying and stereotypical way (Beusing 2011: 141) with a strong emphasis on continuity that omits inconsistencies and uncertainties. As Nick Merriman states from a more global perspective, archaeological museums still tend to present authoritarian versions of history (1999: 4) which reinforce dominant culture. As museums are perceived by the public as an authority, as “places that know”, they are, understandably, reluctant to undermine their position by presenting views that challenge or subvert established views of knowledge (Wood and Cotton 1999: 32). Instead, they “cling to a modernist notion of ‘progress’ in a didactic, often safely consensual way” (Wood and Cotton 1999: 31).

It is only recently that museum practitioners began to question authoritative approaches and tried to use post-modern and relativist approaches of the past in a new method of display. As we will see in the analysis of the German archaeological museums, audio-visual media can help implement these changes in perspective in the museum space.

The historiographic approaches, which emerged after the linguistic turn claim that attempts to write about the past result in a narrative construction, hence “history” is always being constructed through the interpretation of facts, based on choice. This approach can be especially helpful for the presentation of the past in a museum. If curators acknowledge and accept that creating a museum display is not only a representation or interpretation but a *narration*, they are free to include all means at their disposal, which can include a combination of material objects, texts, images, scenography, light and of course film and audio-visual media. To cite Korff again: “A presentation in a museum basically does the same as narrative historiography. *Res factae* have to coalesce with *res fictae* to stir historical imagination. The fictional inevitably comes into play if historiography wants to be more than mere archiving of the remains and the knowledge of the past” (1999: 331, my translation). However, museums not only have to be aware that the past is a narration “always constructed in the service of the present” and that “there is more than one past that can be portrayed” (Merriman 1999: 4), but also to involve visitors in this self-reflexive thinking and actively communicate the constructed nature of the history on display — perhaps with the help of audio-visual media.

## 2 Objects and audio-visual media in the exhibition space

The most important “media” for narrating one of the aforementioned versions of history are the material objects, the physical remnants of history, the “real things”. In museums concerned with prehistory these objects are often very small, fractured and rather unspectacular. The main disadvantage of these unremarkable looking things from the distant past is not that they are hardly visually attractive, but that they alone cannot

communicate their significance (Swain 2007: 211). Their meaning must be “excavated” by other means. This usually means the inclusion of texts: “Words remain the primary medium used by museums to explain their objects and stories and to give cohesion to a display” (Swain 2007: 218). Classical museum displays, used painting, illustrations, models, reconstructions and mannequins to breathe life into ancient objects. This is where, in newly refurbished exhibitions, film, video, slide shows and in the recent past AR and VR come into play. Film and audio-visual media are used to impart more knowledge about the use and context of an object: how it worked, how it was made, but also its social value and what it meant for people in the past. Film and other audio-visual displays can furthermore help impart the “intangible heritage”, i.e. those elements of culture that are not represented in a material object or written document, such as customs and norms, oral traditions, family and social relations, etc. (Swain 2007: 51–52; Beier-de Haan 2012). The main challenge of using audio-visual media is that they tend to convey a certain level of certainty about what the past looked like. One has to be aware that there is no passive or neutral style in rendering images (Swain 2007: 221). These images tell as much about how the past looked, and about how people of today imagined the past to look like.<sup>1</sup>

By actually “showing the past” these media visualisations run, as Swain has stated, “the danger of overpowering the real evidence and projecting images that by their nature will have to rely on conjecture and will not be in any sense real, *while appearing very real* [my emphasis]” (2007: 231). The examples that will be discussed below show how museums deal more or less successfully with the pitfalls of representational realism and the indexicality of the filmic image.

Given the delicate matter outlined above, why do museums rely so extensively on images, audio-visual and others? Apart from the fact that these audio-visual images illustrate the invisible past, and hence stir the imagination of the visitors, they create a direct connection to the past, between prehistoric man and the visitors to the exhibition space. By appealing to the emotions of the visitors, they are able to transcend time and space, evoking a certain empathy for, and thus an understanding of, our human ancestors. Through their own emotions, visitors can find a link to the distant past so that they can begin to understand what the artefacts meant to these people and intuit their relevance for today. More than perhaps any other medium, film has the capacity to create such an understanding through empathy and emotional involvement.

Because of this capacity, it is even more important that the otherness of the historical beings and their living conditions and social environment are not left out and that museums refrain as much as possible from projecting their own ideas and values onto the images of the past.<sup>2</sup> Knowing that it is almost impossible to avoid seeing and displaying other cultures through the filter of our own culture and time, museums should find ways to openly reflect on this in their media displays.

### 3 Audio-visual media in the exhibition space: two examples

Before providing an analysis of the audio-visual media in the two examples chosen, I will clarify what kind of media objects I will incorporate into my examination. I will focus on the audio-visual media and moving images inside the exhibition space, and disregard films presented on museum websites and on social media. I will focus on any kind of moving image, regardless of the technical container (i.e. monitor, projection, touchscreen etc.). Audio objects without images and slide-shows will not be included, nor will VR and AR installations, for the simple reason that — despite all the discussion surrounding these new interactive media — most museums still do not include them as part of their displays. If there are interactive media, they can be reduced on a close inspection to moving images. The audio-visual elements I examine for the exhibition include historical films like news reels or expedition films, excerpts from existing documentaries and even feature films. I will do a close reading of the audio-visual elements in the overall context of the exhibition with a view to the content

1. Just think about the numerous popular Hollywood imaginations of the Roman period from different decades from *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914) to *Ben Hur* (Fred Niblo, 1925; William Wyler, 1959), the various versions of *Quo Vadis* (Lucien Nonguet, Ferdinand Zecca, 1901; Enrico Guazzoni, 1913; Gabriellino D'Annunzio, Georg Jacoby, 1924; Mervyn LeRoy, 1951) and *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960) to *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) and many more. Swain furthermore states: “Archaeological images have influenced the views of the past as much as the archaeological discoveries they support” (2007: 211). For more on that see Moser 1998.

2. For example, in displays about the everyday life of prehistoric men many museums used to reproduce contemporary stereotypes of the division of labour between men and women without solid knowledge of the actual historical circumstances.

and aesthetics of the single elements and their connection to the surrounding material objects, as well as their role within the narration and dramatic composition (chronology) and scenography (topology) of the exhibition. Both museums observed are prominent State funded museums relying on the archaeological findings within their greater geographical region. They have large collections with a regional focus, containing important and spectacular discoveries, such as the Nebra Sky Disc in Halle. I have chosen to limit my analysis to two examples because media displays need extensive description not only of the filmic images themselves but of the whole display of material objects, scenography etc. they relate to in order to reveal their function in the overall exhibition and the implications regarding the museum's concepts of historiography. Nevertheless, I will try to put their ways of using visual media into a broader perspective of other prehistory museums.

### 3.1 Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte Halle (State Museum for Prehistory in Halle, Saxony-Anhalt): object-centred use of audio-visual media

The permanent exhibition of the Prehistory Museum in Halle covers an area of approx. 1,800 square metres. Since 2003, the permanent exhibition has been in a continual process of remodelling, with the last area of the Roman period refurbished in 2015. The history of early man is depicted in chronological order, starting with the oldest regional finds from the Palaeolithic Age.<sup>3</sup>

Spanning two floors of a building exclusively erected to host a museum for Prehistory, the exhibition contains nine different audio-visual objects. Besides, there is a "cinema" where people can watch two programmes of documentaries on the work of the museum, as well as some of the documentaries from the exhibition. Throughout the exhibition, the use of audio-visual elements is quite limited, the exhibition is more focused on the actual objects of material culture, which are displayed both as single items and *en masse*. All in all, the films and audio-visual media are low-key, but purposefully employed and well-integrated in the scenography.

Three of the nine AV elements are (excerpts from) already existing ethnographic documentaries about the hunting and craft techniques of different ethnic groups.<sup>4</sup> Integrating ethnographic images and films into displays is a common technique to overcome the lack of actual images in archaeological museums, but it has its pitfalls. The two ethnographic films displayed in the first section of the exhibition at the State Museum for Prehistory on Halle are from France (1985) and the USA (1975). They show hunting techniques of the Pygmies and are integrated into an arrangement with the remains of a killing of an elephant by a group of prehistoric men almost 125 000 years ago. The bones of the elephant with traces of cutting and the worn stone blades excavated at this site are exhibited in the showcases and accompanied by a large model of a prehistoric elephant. The excerpts from the ethnographic documentaries on contemporary hunting practices in Africa are placed near the exhibits to visualise the possible hunting techniques of prehistoric man. These are auxiliary images that function as a kind of re-enactment to bridge the *temporal distance* between today and the Early Stone Age. By using images from a *spatial distance* (Prehistoric European man and contemporary African people) as evidence, the museum intends to make a cross-cultural comparison. An intertitle of the film hence reads: "The ethnological comparison indicates the Stone Age hunting strategies and techniques". This raises ethical questions, whereby visitors may project views and prejudices about the historical subject onto the contemporary subjects of the films, jumping to inverted conclusions (such as: "look, these pygmies are still as underdeveloped as Stone Age people"). To avoid that, the curators chose to "historicise" the films by rendering the colour images black and white, aiming to create a certain historical distance. From the viewpoint of a film historian, this is a somewhat dubious intervention into the integrity of the historical images. In addition, it is doubtful that this type of strategy accomplishes its intended effect.

There are two more thematic sections where the curators chose to illustrate prehistoric crafts through ethnographic documentaries. One compares the making and use of wooden tools in the Neolithic Period with the crafts of the Lagda in New Guinea (*Langda – L'herminette de pierre polie en Nouvelle-Guinée*, 1991). The other illustrates the manufacturing of iron in a melting furnace in the section about the early Iron Age. With a commentary by anthropologists, these documentaries try to bestow scientific credibility to the objects, while

3. [http://www.la-lda.de/en/state\\_museum\\_of\\_prehistory](http://www.la-lda.de/en/state_museum_of_prehistory) (last accessed 19-11-2018).

4. *Komba – Dieu des Pygmées* (Raymond Adam, 1985), *Pygmies of the Rain Forest* (Kevin Duffy, 1975) and *Langda – L'herminette de pierre polie en Nouvelle-Guinée* (Bruno Ther, Pierre Petrequin, Ann-Marie Petrequin, 1991).





Figure 1. Elephant butchering site at Göbern: view of the whole room.



Figure 2. View of monitor integrated into the wall.

at the same time adding moving images to the static displays. By showing examples from contemporary ethnic groups, the museum aims to draw attention to the topicality and relevance of the cultural practices and crafts. The films are used to contextualise the finds and as exhibits in their own right. But their status as an actual exhibit of the same value as the archaeological finds is diminished by their technical and scenographical presentation on small monitors with no object labels; ultimately reducing them to mere comments and illustrations of the material objects.



Figure 3. Film on monitor comparing the making and use of wooden tools in the Neolithic Period with the crafts of contemporary Lagda people in New Guinea.

There are also other films specifically made for the exhibition to help contextualise finds and inform visitors of their use, with regard to function and historical importance. In the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic sections of the exhibition, prehistoric bifaces (hand axes) and later flint blades are displayed *en masse* in long showcases along the gallery walls to evoke a certain aura and sense of value. This is intended to stress the cultural and historical relevance of the invention and manufacturing of stone tools, but also the skills and craftsmanship required to produce them. The curators chose to add filmic images to the display to enhance the learning experience.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the ethnographic films, these films are shown on free-standing custom-built black monitors, giving them, too, a certain value and relevance in the scenography. On the monitor the visitors can watch a specialist of experimental archaeology work on a piece of stone, turning it into a biface, a flint blade. In the image the hands of the man are working with great care on the stone, which is set against a black backdrop. These images are documentary and aesthetically pleasing and, at times, almost experimental at the same time. Because of the close-up of the hands, the lightning and black backdrop, their actions on screen appear both functional and targeted, but also somehow ritualized and mystical.

Because of the visual aestheticisation of the manufacturing process, the visitors subliminally understand that the process of crafting stone tools was, and is, not just some primitive, outdated prehistorical task, but at that

5. These films were produced by the museums itself specifically for the exhibition.



time high-tech and ipso facto an important part of our intangible heritage. These films perfectly enhance the cultural significance of the immaterial through material objects, while simultaneously illuminating their material qualities. The films are simple and powerful, and act as didactic tools and aesthetic objects in themselves.



Figure 4. Experimental archaeology: manufacturing of a stone blade.

Equally simple, yet just as effective is another short film shown at the back of the showcase of a very tiny object. The object is a little piece of adhesive made from birch tar that might be the oldest artificial man-made artificial material (80000 years old) with possibly the oldest human fingerprint of a Neanderthal man. The adhesive was used to “glue” a flint blade to a wooden handle. When an object is so small and looks like a little piece of mud, how can its cultural relevance and uniqueness be communicated to visitors? Owing to the fingerprint the immaterial significance lies directly on the surface of the materiality of the object; it literally left its traces on the surface. These traces of the past are visualised in the animation behind the object. Like a forensic animation, the film zooms into the digitized version of the object, highlighting and circling the traces. Otherwise, the scratches, and fine lines of the fingerprint would be invisible to the human eye.

The film not only functions as a didactic tool, it *is* somehow — by creating its digital twin — the actual object. The combination of the material object and its digital counterpart shows the transformation of an object into the realm of the digital. Through the digital duplication, which in this case is *not* a substitution, scientists and visitors gain deeper insight into the object. Although this highly scientific imaging procedure was chosen to scrutinize the object, this very method highlights the aura and authenticity of the seemingly nondescript object all the more. While it is normally the “sensual impression” (Korff) of the material object which produces historical authenticity, in this case it is the *digital* “deep dive” into the materiality of the object which prompts a deep dive into history, and hence creates a certain fascination with its own media-specific strategies of authentication (Sabrow et al. 2016: 14).

While all the aforementioned films have a distinct didactical purpose with regard to special objects, there is one audio-visual installation that functions more like an element of scenography. It is mainly an aesthetic

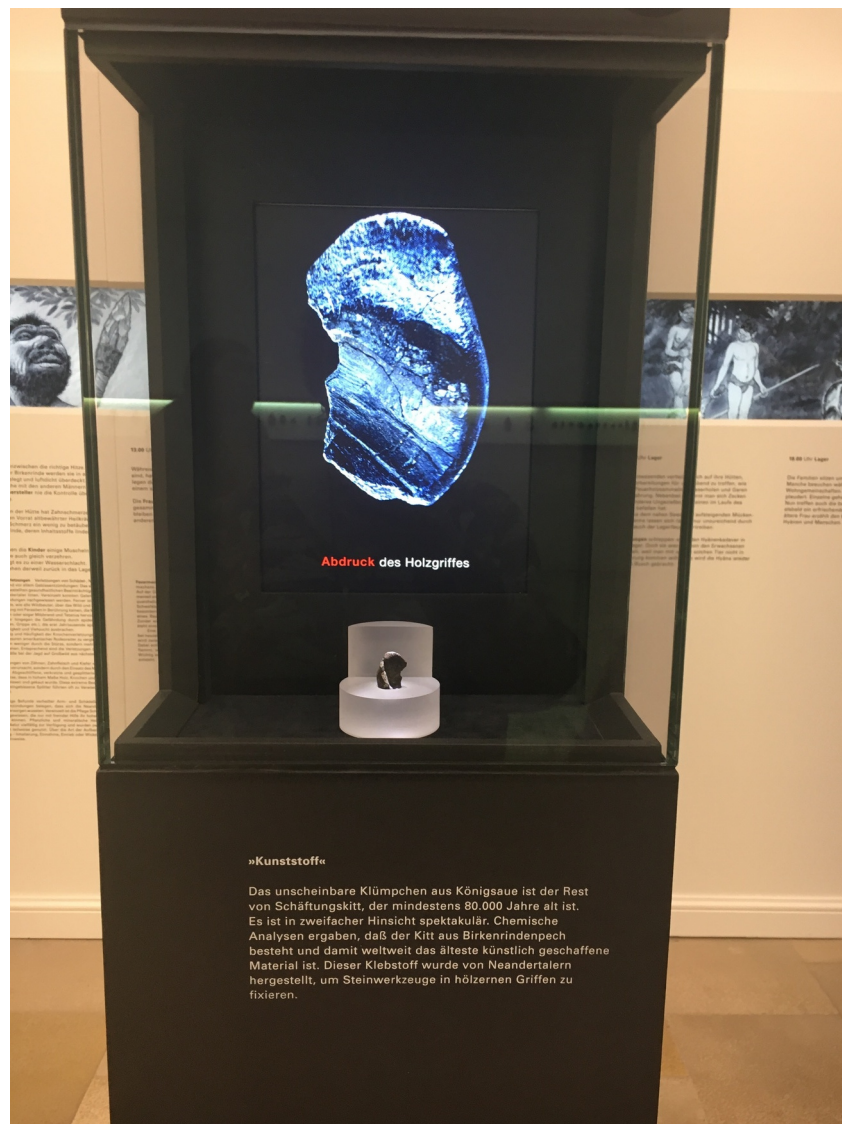


Figure 5. Showcase with material object (oldest artificial man-made material with fingerprint) and zoom-in animation in the background.



Figure 6. The Neanderthal lab with the image and film rotunda in the front.



element with the key purpose of creating a certain mood via a visual impression. It is a large projection of a burning fire on a curved vertical screen interspersed with white text lines on black ground from Homer's *Iliad* about the burial of his friend Patroklos. It does not mediate any information about the topic or any object nearby, but serves as a visual bracket for the whole section of the early Iron Age and the overall theme of fire. In this section, fire acts as the link between the history of religion and rituals and the history of technology and economy. In the showcases are objects related to ancient burial rituals using fire, as well as remains from early attempts at iron smelting; both processes rely on the transformative power of fire, and its ability to transform matter from one aggregate state into another. The monumental projection visualises the historical significance of fire and its multi-faceted importance for the evolution of man. By appealing to the emotions of the visitors and calling upon something primordial and universally human, this audio-visual installation aims to connect the contemporary visitors with their prehistorical counterparts.

Another popular “genre” of films that can be found in many archaeological exhibitions are classical documentaries, for example, about an excavation or the restoration of an object. The Museum for Prehistory in Halle shows these documentaries in a separate auditorium on the first floor. The only classical documentary in this exhibition is a ten-minute documentary of the discovery of a Neolithic circular enclosure near Goseck in Saxony via aerial archaeology and the excavation of the site. Other archaeological museums rely heavily on these kinds of documentaries. The film shown on a wall monitor near some of the remains of the monument — which at the same time was a holy place and a means for sun observations — was commissioned by the museum to depict the process of the excavation and to reflect on the findings and knowledge gained by the archaeologists. It features experts as talking heads, while also integrating the computer renderings of what the structure might have looked like. In this case, the film acts as a substitute for the actual ground monument, which cannot be transferred to the museum, and as a means of explaining its appearance and use.

### 3.2 Smac - Staatliches Museum für Archäologie in Chemnitz (State Museum for Archaeology, Chemnitz, Saxony): a polyphony of images - images of polyphony

In its permanent exhibition, the smac charts the development of Saxony from the time of the first hunter-gatherers around 300,000 years ago, up to the early industrial period. The Chemnitz exhibition focuses on 3000 square metres over three-floors; an exhibition on how humans gradually transformed their natural environment, firstly, into an agrarian settlement structure and eventually into the modern cultural landscape of today.<sup>6</sup>

Compared to the Prehistory Museum in Halle, the smac uses a lot more and multi-variant media throughout its exhibition, although most of them remain just technical platforms offering visitors more text and images to deepen their understanding. The museum also introduces classical documentaries about the work of the State archaeologists and features various other experts. They use computer graphics as data visualisation, a technique which gathered popularity in the museum landscape over the last number of years. The visualisation of the excavation, along with the projections of 3D landscape models, are employed to show the changing landscape. Furthermore, the exhibition is equipped with over 6,000 exhibits so that visitors sometimes might be overwhelmed by the number of objects and information provided.

However, if one takes a closer look at some of the audio-visual installations, they prove to be well-conceived and innovative, not only regarding technology but also in the content they communicate.

One interesting conglomeration of different films and audio-visual media is the section “Neanderthal Research” on the first floor called “Fluctuating climatic conditions” that deals with the Palaeolithic Age. This so-called “lab” compares the specialities of Neanderthal man with modern man and deals with the extinction of Neanderthal and the arrival of homo sapiens.

At first, the visitor enters a shiny rotunda whose inner walls are plastered with static images, from art history, old encyclopaedias and excerpts from fiction and documentary films about prehistoric man throughout film history. Ranging from Charlie Chaplin's *His Prehistoric Past* (1914) and Buster Keaton's *Three Ages* (1923) to *One Million Years BC* (1966), starring Raquel Welch, and Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Quest for Fire* (1982). These

6. <https://www.smac.sachsen.de/en/archaeological-exhibition.html> (last accessed 19-11-2018).





Figure 7. Contemporary people wordlessly answering questions about Neanderthal man.

images, of different provenance, visualise what kind of pictures we paint of our ancestors. This installation conveys in an amusing way that every statement about history is just an image, a fictionalisation, and in no way the “truth”. The wall text in the rotunda reads: “Pictures of the Neanderthals produced by scientists and artists are influenced by knowledge and the ‘Zeitgeist’. [...] Details [about their appearances] remain unknown”. With this installation the museum self-reflexively looks at its own approach, actions and role, and thus reflects on the role of the visitors. It highlights the blank spaces in its knowledge about the past and acknowledges the constructed nature of writing and displaying history. Just like the films on display, historiography is always narrated.

In the subsequent filmic installation, this time on the outside of a similar rotunda, seemingly static photographic portraits of ordinary contemporary people are displayed. When nearing the installation, the visitor notices with surprise that these are actually videos of motionless people who sometimes blink or shift a little. This reminds us of the familiar literary and filmic tropes, of when a portrait suddenly comes to life. The videos of the people alternate with written questions concerning the circumstances of the Neanderthals: did they bury the deceased? Would we understand their facial expressions? Did they make art? The people in the videos wordlessly answer these questions by painting a picture or making universal facial expressions. By letting the ordinary people of today answer these questions and not the experts, the museum again underscores suggests that in writing history, the posing of questions might be more important than finding the “correct” answers.

Moving forward, visitors find a third filmic installation in the form of shiny test tubes. Embedded in the tubes are video monitors on which international Neanderthal experts communicate different opinions on why the Neanderthals became extinct. Scientific discrepancies and conflicting opinions are presented, but unlike the previous installation, the scientists calmly gaze at the visitors sometimes smiling as they convey their opinions. To conclude, this section not only deals with the actual history of the Neanderthals, but equally with the way contemporary people, such as scientists, curators and ordinary people, visualise the past.

On the third floor, captioned “From Slavic settlement to industrial revolution”, there is another filmic arrangement. In the period between 800 and 1850, Saxony gradually evolved into a modern cultural landscape. Wars, alliances and territorial changes altered the landscape dramatically. But these historical events had little effect on people’s everyday lives, which are depicted on the “Everyday wall”, a 40-metre-long showcase, hosting over 1,300 objects from the eight to the nineteenth century. The six media stations opposite the long showcase tell the viewer about the political and territorial developments in Saxony, the big history, while the material objects in the showcase depict everyday culture which remained largely unaffected by the grand narrative of history and whose material goods change very slowly. Through the interaction between the objects and the films, the visitors can learn how archaeological findings and written sources complement each other, offering different insights to the past. With this juxtaposition of these two distinct categories of remnants of the past (material and written) the exhibition spatialises the transition from prehistory to modern history.

The films in this setup uses animation, a stylistic choice made by a lot of historical museums.<sup>7</sup> Here, the animations are quite simple yet poetic, borrowing their imagery from historical book illustrations and paintings, or mimicking a paper cut aesthetic. By using animated images and not a re-enactment, an alienation effect is created that reduces the risk that photo-filmic images might appear too “real”, by faking authenticity and covering up their constructed nature.

The films not only hint aesthetically at the constructed nature of history, but the storytelling itself refers to the polyphony of historical sources: the first film recounts the events leading to the Bautzen peace treaty in 1080 between the Emperor Heinrich II and the Polish Duke Boleslaw Chobry written in the memoirs of Bishop Thietmar. The film begins with a rough paper cut animation of the hand of the Bishop writing down his version of events, while a voice-over recounts the occurrences. The animation then changes into two historical opponents from the bishop’s memoirs. By showing the act of writing in the animation the visitors learn that they are about to hear (and see) a *story*, a version of history and an image of the events by a bishop who was not present at the peace treaty in person. At the end of the film, the visitors once more see and hear the bishop reminiscing about his writing — “I have always endeavoured to record everything as it really was.

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7. The use of animated film in cultural historical museum might be worth doing a separate study as this type of audio-visual exhibit is becoming increasingly popular in exhibition about the past.



Figure 8. Experts on the reasons of the extinction of the Neanderthals.



Figure 9. The “Everyday Wall” and the facing monitors with short animated documentaries about the territorial and political history of Saxony.



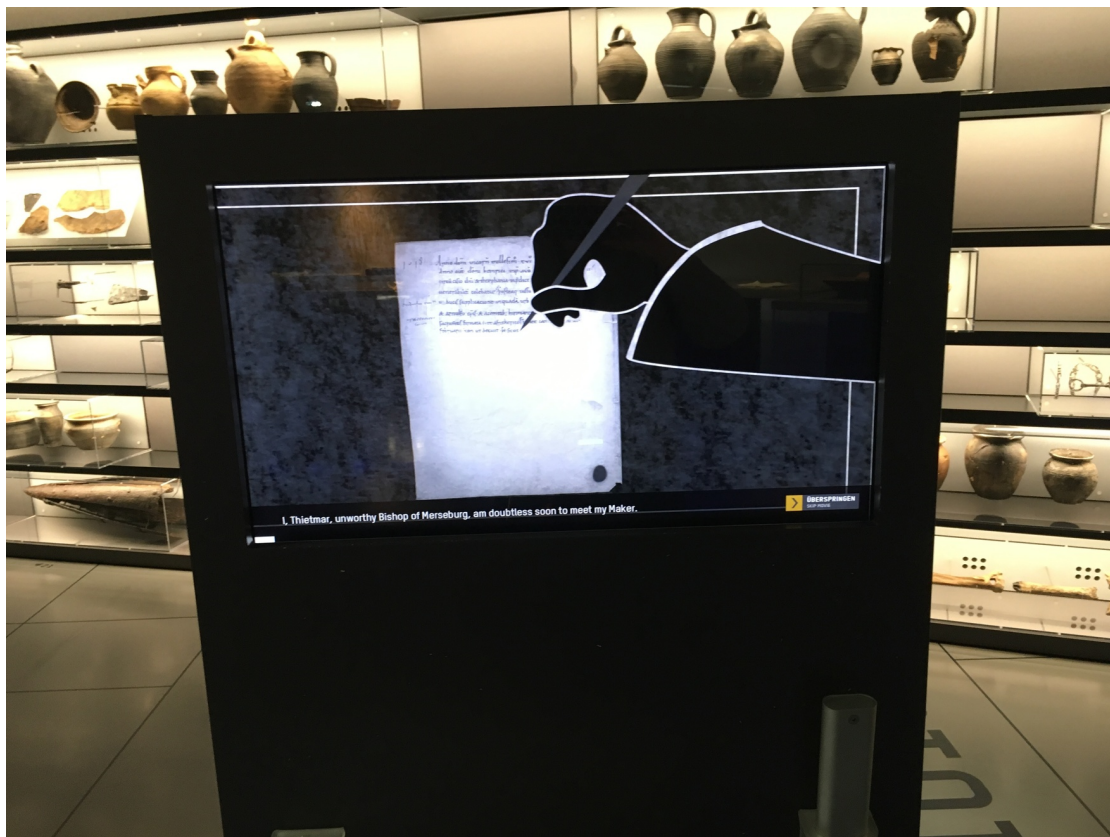


Figure 10. The animated hand of Bishop Thietmar writing down his version of the events at the Bautzen peace treaty in 1080 between the Emperor Heinrich II and the Polish Duke Boleslaw Chobry.

But the truth is only known to God, the Lord!” — while the occurrences appear in a thought bubble above his head. It becomes clear once more that historical documents and chronicles are not historical facts *per se*, but are written under the influence of the writer’s position in history. Here, the museum is putting into practice the perspective of most historians which emerged after the linguistic turn which acknowledges that all forms of historiography have a narrative structure.

The second film also presents historical events as a mosaic, a tessellation, made from different historical sources. It tells the story of the first Margrave Heinrich III from the house of Wettin through animation, where the viewer “enters” a room with a desk and opens the book on top. The book contains the “tesselae” in the form of genealogical trees, church documents and images from medieval books. On the desk next to the book is a lamp, maps and other documents, which come to life and tell the story of Heinrich III. These animated scenes narrate the historical events, breathing new life into mediaeval book illustrations. Here again, the constructed nature of the historical events is underlined by the lack of representational realism in the animated scenes. The end of the film — when the book on the desk snaps shut — shows that the film, and with it the museum as a mediator of knowledge, do not claim that the visitors have seen the “truth”. Instead they saw one possible version of historical reality.

Both the media installations discussed from the smac, work with a polyphony of images to disclose the museum’s concept of history: the version of historical events shown are only possible and temporary. This proves that well-executed and self-reflective fictionalisations of historical events can be more truthful, and hence more authentic, than the authoritarian and positivistic presentations; on condition that the visitors — who by the very nature of the museum believe that the things that are shown to them are “true” — are placed in the position to tell facts from fiction.

In summary, the analysis of different films and audio-visual objects in these two German museums on European archaeology and prehistory has shown that museums occupy different positions regarding the value of material objects, the use of audio-visual media and the relation between the two.

In the State Museum of Prehistory in Halle, the media mainly serve to mediate material objects. Their aim is to bring out the aura and authenticity of an object. Hence, the audio-visual media fluctuate between education and fascination. A deeper reflection on the work of the archaeologists and the museum’s concept of history only marginally takes place in the exhibition space but can be found in the documentaries shown in the “cinema” on the first floor.

At the smac - State Museum for Archaeology, Chemnitz, material objects and audio-visual media are almost of equal importance. They are both perceived as elements of knowledge in their own right. The latter is used to depict the methods and the processes of archaeological and historical knowledge gain in general; sometimes to the disadvantage of the material objects and the clarity of the museum space and the information provided.

All in all, both museums depict the current scope of film and media usage in history museums and illustrate the useful multi-variant ways to integrate audio-visual media into the museum display so as to visualise the imageless past.

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