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Students interpret historical culture

Insights from two data collection settings in an exploratory design

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Abstract

This article asks how students interpret objectivations of historical culture and how far data collection settings pre-structure observable interpretive action. Drawing on cultural semiotics, historical culture is conceptualised as a sign system where meaning emerges relationally between sign-carriers and recipients' reference concepts; the research setting is treated as part of the semiosis under study. Using the documentary method, group discussions with students from various school types are analysed in two settings: sequential discussions of three objectivations (Hermann Monument, Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture *Him* (2001), TikTok search results) and of ten photographic icons, varied through wildcards, reasoned selection and Instagram comments. Four groups serve as illustrative cases. Across groups, a shared sequence of interpretive operations emerges (activating knowledge, naming, contextualising, interpreting elements, evaluating morally), whose depth and reflexivity differ. The article contributes a semiotic vocabulary for students' participation in historical culture and proposes deliberate variation of elicitation settings as a heuristic data source. All findings are exploratory hypotheses.

Keywords

Historical culture, history education, cultural semiotics, empirical learning research, documentary method

1 Introduction

1.1 Research interest, desideratum and research questions

Historical culture has become a contested field. Today interpretations of the past circulate across museums and memorials, monuments, feature films, historical fiction, video games and, increasingly, social media platforms whose algorithmic logics reward affective intensity over evidentiary care. Cultural forms of expression with historical interpretive offerings encounter students in various media formats and genres today (see Korte & Paletschek, 2009; Hinz & Körber, 2020; Geyken & Sauer, 2019). At the same time, the present appears to many as "uncertain

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times"[1] of media fragmentation and cultural polarisation, characterised by post-factuality, right-wing populism, and a historical culture transformed by social media, popular cultural narratives and algorithmic communication logics (see Hartung et al., 2024). Against this background, the ability to critically interpret the historical-cultural *signs of the times* and the interpretive offerings, ideologisations and narratives referenced by them proves to be an indispensable democratic resource. This connects to calls to understand historical learning not only as a school-based process but as a societal one taking place across institutional and non-institutional contexts (see Thyroff & Nitsche, 2019). The view that students should learn to navigate a controversial and plural historical culture is accordingly widespread in history didactics (see Kuss, 2001; van Reeken, 2004; Pandel, 2005; Rüsen, 2020; Thyroff & Hubacher, 2022; Deile, 2023).

Two desiderata remain, however. Empirical research has produced substantial evidence on students' evaluative and identity-related orientations (von Borries, 1995; Bernhardt, 2007; Levstik & Barton, 2018; Peck, 2019) and on teachers' reservations concerning students' analytical capacities (Münch, 2021). Yet students' interpretive operations have rarely been analysed as *semiotic* practices; that is, as situated acts of assigning, negotiating, and withholding meaning in relation to perceived sign-carriers. That tasks and elicitation contexts shape what can be observed of students' historical thinking is uncontroversial. Quantitative research models such influences as sources of variance, for instance through testlet models or the multilevel treatment of clustered data (e.g., Trautwein et al., 2017). Qualitative research typically reflects them as conditions of validity (see Dörner et al., 2019). Far less common, however, is the deliberate variation of settings within one study, with the resulting differences treated as data in their own right.

The article therefore pursues a substantive and a methodological objective, and these do not stand side by side but in a relation of derivation. The substantive objective is to reconstruct how students perceive and interpret selected historical-cultural objectivations and which orientations they may have within historical-cultural orders (see Rüsen, 2013, pp. 221-223, 246-251; Schreiber, 2007). The methodological objective is to examine how different data collection settings shape the interpretive action that becomes observable. The second objective follows from the premises of the first: if meaning is generated relationally between sign-carriers, situated recipients and discursive contexts (Section 1.2), then the research situation itself is such a context. It supplies objects, sequences, prompts and framings, and thereby co-produces the phenomenon it records. The testing of diverse approaches is intended to help overcome possible *blind spots* (see Dörner et al., 2019) of individual survey settings and to make as many different facets of communicative action accessible as possible.

Three questions guide the study:

1. Which interpretive operations do students perform when they collectively engage with objectivations of historical culture, and which reference concepts become reconstructable in these operations?
2. Which indications emerge as to how the mode of presentation, the design of the prompt and the discursive contextualisation of an objectivation may shape the interpretive action that becomes observable?
3. Which methodological consequences follow for the design of qualitative studies on historical-cultural learning?

Given the exploratory character of the study, these questions are pursued in order to generate theoretically grounded hypotheses and to refine a research design, not to establish generalisable relationships.

Contribution and audience. The article addresses researchers in history education who study students' engagement with historical culture, and in particular those working with qualitative, reconstructive designs. It does not argue against deficit views of students as such; that students act as meaning-makers in their encounters with the past is well established in the international literature (e.g., Barton & Levstik, 2004; Wertsch, 2002). What is less developed is a vocabulary that specifies *which* operations constitute this meaning-making in the encounter with concrete objectivations. It is equally underdeveloped how elicitation arrangements can be varied to make these operations observable. The article contributes to both questions: substantively, by reconstructing a shared sequence of interpretive operations; methodologically, by treating setting variation as a heuristic resource rather than as a nuisance factor.

1 "Uncertain Times. History Didactics in Democracy" is the titular theme of the biennial conference of the German Society for History Didactics (30 September–2 October 2026) in Bielefeld.

1.2 Historical culture as a sign system: The analytical lens

The theoretical frame of reference is a cultural-semiotic understanding of culture as a system of symbolic meaning production structured by signs (Posner, 2003; Kimminich, 2023). Its basis is Peirce's triadic concept of the sign, according to which a sign is "a thing which serves to convey knowledge of some other thing, which it is said to stand for or represent" (Kloesel & Pape, 2000, p. 204, own translation). The sign thus links a mediating entity (the sign-carrier), a mediated object and the idea evoked in the recipient (the interpretant). Since in principle anything can become a sign-carrier, being a sign is not a property of things but a relation between them. Applied to historical culture, this means that sense and meaning are not firmly inscribed in historical-cultural objectivations. They arise relationally between the perception of objects as sign-carriers and the reference concepts of recipients. Perception itself is already interpretive: it "proceeds synaesthetically, that is, with all the senses ('overall experience'), [but] in doing so we already make 'causal interpretations' that are based on our sociocultural prior knowledge" (Kimminich, 2023, p. 45, own translation). A historical culture understood in this way consists of acting sign-users. Within specific material arrangements, they receive and produce interpretations of the past and draw on conventionalised codes through which messages are addressed to others. Historical-cultural objectivations are thus not merely memory stores but elements of a sign system in which past and present societal self-understandings, values and conflicts are articulated.

Because cultural semiotics is not a standard reference framework in international history education research, its assumptions and the categories derived from them are set out explicitly. Three assumptions are decisive. *First*, as outlined above, meaning is not a property of objects but an event: it is actualised in semiosis, the triadic process in which a sign-carrier mediates an object to an interpretant (Kloesel & Pape, 2000, p. 204). The "same" photograph therefore does not carry the same meaning across situations of reception. *Second*, semiosis is unlimited: every interpretant may become the sign-carrier of a further interpretation, so that meanings shift as discursive contexts change. *Third*, perception is never unmediated (Kimminich, 2023, p. 45). Building on these assumptions, the analysis draws on six categories (Table 1). They are not used as a coding frame but as sensitising concepts that guide analytical attention (see Section 1.4).

Table 1: Cultural-semiotic categories used as sensitising concepts in the analysis

Category	Definition as used here	Analytical question
Sign-carrier	Perceptible entity through which something is mediated, including its materiality and medial form	Which features are treated as bearers of meaning?
Reference concept	Knowledge, experience and expectation recipients bring to bear	Which resources are mobilised — school knowledge, media discourse, personal visits?
Interpretive offering	Conventionalised reading an objectivation makes available and that may be accepted, modified or refused	Is the offering taken up, ignored or contested?
Sign mode (iconic / symbolic)	Relation of sign-carrier to object: resemblance vs. convention	Is the object read as depiction or as convention-based symbol?
Naming as ordering operation	Assignment of a name as a condensed cultural text establishing order and memory (Pärli & Rudakovskaja, 2002)	What can be named, what cannot, and what happens where naming fails?
Recontextualisation	Shift of meaning when a sign-carrier moves into another discursive or medial context	How do readings change across contexts of encounter?

In addition, two supporting concepts are used to describe how objects open up interpretive possibilities and within which wider sign field recipients orient themselves. *Affordance* denotes the interpretive possibilities an object offers by virtue of its material constitution without determining them (Huber, 2021). *Semiosphere* denotes the culturally structured sign field within which recipients orient themselves (Lotman, 2005). The analytical value of this lens lies in three respects: it allows elementary operations such as naming to be described as constitutive achievements rather than deficits, it distinguishes systematically between what an objectivation offers and what recipients make of it, and it conceptualises the research setting itself as a context of recontextualisation.

1.3 Data collection settings as semiotic contexts

If meaning arises relationally, the research setting is not external to the phenomenon studied. The medium, the temporal order, the prompt wording and discursive frame all contribute to the semiosis they are intended to observe. This conclusion follows from the semiotic premises outlined in Section 1.2. It is compatible with, but not identical to, the widely shared insight that elicitation contexts influence results: whereas that insight usually leads to controlling or modelling contextual influences, the semiotic perspective suggests analysing them substantively as part of the phenomenon. The field already disposes of a considerable repertoire of elicitation procedures whose yields and blind spots have been discussed: think-aloud and document-based tasks for reconstructing historical thinking (Wineburg, 1991); group discussions for accessing collectively shared, partly implicit orientations (Kölbl, 2004; Martens, 2010; Vogl, 2019); image-based elicitation, which shows that first and second glances yield markedly different interpretive depths (Bernhardt, 2007); and triangulating designs aimed at compensating the blind spots of single procedures (Dörner et al., 2019).

What is largely missing is a systematic comparison of settings within one substantive question. The present study does not yet provide such a comparison; it prepares it. It varies the conditions of elicitation iteratively and treats the resulting differences as data. Its claim is not that settings *cause* interpretations, but that a deliberate, though not controlled, variation makes the situatedness of students' interpretive action observable and generates hypotheses for a subsequent systematic comparison.

1.4 Methodological approach and design decisions

The data are based on small group discussions with three to five participants, interpreted according to the documentary method unlike Bohnsack (2014), who uses the documentary method primarily to reconstruct habitus and milieu, the present study follows Nohl (2017) in focusing on the way in which something is narrated and interpreted. Comparative analysis serves to sharpen the contours of orientations through contrast rather than to establish generalisable causal relationships. This approach, developed by Ralf Bohnsack building on Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, distinguishes between two analytical phases. The *formulating interpretation* reconstructs the thematic content of what is said – the explicit, denotative meaning. The *reflecting interpretation* shifts focus to how something is articulated, reconstructing the implicit orientations and underlying frameworks of reference that structure participants' communicative practices. Group discussions offer the advantage that participants, through the group dynamics developing during the discussion, also articulate latent ideas that would otherwise not come to light (see Vogl, 2019), and that both communicative and conjunctive knowledge (Mannheim, 1980) may become visible. *Communicative knowledge* refers to explicit, generalised knowledge that can be verbalised and that is shared beyond specific groups, for instance knowledge about historical events or norms of commemoration. Conjunctive knowledge, by contrast, is the implicit, practical knowledge that emerges from shared experience and structures action without being explicitly available to the actors themselves (Mannheim, 1980; Bohnsack, 2014).

The combination of a cultural-semiotic framework with the documentary method requires justification, since the two derive from different traditions. They converge at a decisive point: both conceive of meaning as generated in practice, and both distinguish between what is explicitly said and the implicit frameworks that structure what it is being said. The concept of conjunctive knowledge introduced above can be read in semiotic terms as the sedimented layer of reference concepts on which recipients draw without being able to account for it. The categories described above (Table 1) are therefore employed as *sensitising concepts*: they direct analytical

attention and inform the theoretical interpretation of findings, but they are not a coding scheme to which utterances are subsumed. Where they are invoked, this is marked explicitly, so that reconstructive and theorising steps remain distinguishable.

Four design decisions follow from the framework. *(1) Group discussions rather than individual interviews,* because meaning is produced collectively and conjunctive knowledge becomes accessible where it is enacted rather than reported. *(2) Heterogeneous objectivations in Setting 1,* because varying object types should elicit correspondingly different operations; presenting them in immediate succession makes these differences observable within one group. *(3) Visual icons in Setting 2,* because their conventionalised readings are particularly firmly established, which allows examination of whether students take up or contest interpretive offerings. *(4) Deliberate variation of presentation and prompt,* because recontextualisation shifts meaning; these variations are therefore not procedural details, but conditions whose effects are treated as data (Table 2).

The data stem from an ongoing project in which 12 group discussions with 54 students were conducted in four schools of different types in North Rhine-Westphalia between July 2025 and February 2026. Ten discussions (46 students) followed Setting 1, two (8 students) Setting 2. All discussions were transcribed; six have so far been analysed in full, the remainder at the level of formulating interpretation. Participants gave informed consent; for minors, parental consent was additionally obtained in accordance with German research ethics requirements. Throughout the article, *setting* denotes an elicitation arrangement (objects, mode of presentation, prompts and conditions), *variant* denotes the two modified realisations of Setting 2, and *group* denotes the individual discussion analysed as a case. Groups are referred to by grade and school type, followed by their ID in parentheses. Table 2 gives an overview.

Table 2: Overview of the two data collection settings

Dimensions	Setting 1: “Monument, sculpture and TikTok”	Setting 2: “Ten visual icons” (pilot)
Objects	three heterogeneous objectivations (Table 3)	ten photographic icons (Table 4)
Presentation	photographs, presented sequentially in fixed order	printed photographs, presented simultaneously; additional materials in later steps
Prompts	one everyday-scenario prompt per object; two standardised follow-up prompts	sequence of steps: open impulse – wildcard – reasoned selection with headline task – Instagram comments (variant B only) – medial framing (variant A only)
Groups analysed	Grade 10, intermediate secondary school (IS10.0-4); Grade 12, vocational college (VC12.2-2)	Variant A: Grade 13, comprehensive school (CSUSL13.0-3); Variant B: Grade 12, academic high school (AHC12.2-3)
Conditions	during regular history lessons	voluntary participation, outside lessons, no teacher present
Function in this article	case comparison under constant conditions (Section 2.1)	development of elicitation steps (Section 2.2)

Note. IDs follow the scheme [school type][grade].[number of participants male-female]. IS = intermediate secondary school [Realschule], a lower-secondary track of the German tripartite system; VC = vocational college [Berufskolleg], offering vocational training and pathways to higher education entrance qualifications; CSUSL = upper secondary level of a comprehensive school [Gesamtschule], integrating all tracks and leading to the Abitur [higher education entrance qualification]; AHC = academic high school [Gymnasium].

2 Students interpret historical-cultural objectivations

Section 2 presents the empirical analyses in the order of the two settings. Section 2.1 reconstructs the discussions of two groups in Setting 1, first case by case (Sections 2.1.2 and 2.1.3) and then comparatively (Section 2.1.4). Section 2.2 reports the pilot of Setting 2. In line with its developmental purpose, it is organised by elicitation step rather than by case. Section 3 synthesises the findings regarding students' interpretive action (Section 3.1) and the relation between setting and interpretive action (Section 3.2) and discusses their limitations (Section 3.3).

2.1 Setting 1: "Monument, sculpture and TikTok"

2.1.1 Discussion objects, sample and procedure

In Setting 1, groups discussed three objectivations in a fixed order (Table 3): the Hermannsdenkmal [Hermann Monument], Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture *Him*, and search results for the hashtag "#Geschichte" [#history] on TikTok. All objects were presented as photographs showing perspectives that would also be available during an on-site visit. This holds the mode of presentation constant across heterogeneous objects and allows them to be discussed in direct succession. It also means, however, that the data document the reception of images of objectivations, not of the objectivations themselves.

Table 3: Discussion objects in Setting 1 (in order of presentation)

No.	Objectivation	Medium/ genre	Presentation
1	Hermannsdenkmal [Hermann Monument], Detmold (start of construction 1838. inaugurated 1875)	national monument	Four photographs: overall views from the front and side, a close-up from the front, and an extreme close-up looking upward.
2	Maurizio Cattelan, *Him* (2001)	contemporary sculpture	two photographs (front and back view)
3	Search results for "#Geschichte" [#history] on TikTok	social media platform	screenshot

Note. *Him* depicts Adolf Hitler with the face of an adult on the body of a kneeling, praying boy. Seen from behind, the figure appears as a harmless child; the work deliberately plays with viewers' expectations (see Hendeles, 2009, pp. 10–15).

Two of the ten discussions in Setting 1 were selected for this article after the formulating interpretation of all discussions had been completed. Selection followed the principle of maximal contrast. Among the Setting 1 groups, these two differed most clearly in the extent to which they mobilised historical knowledge and engaged with the objects beyond description; they also differ in school type and age. The contrast serves to sharpen the contours of shared orientations, not to construct group-specific types (see Nohl, 2017). The first group consists of four male students from a Grade 10 class of an intermediate secondary school Realschule. The second consists of two female and two male students from Grade 12 of a vocational college Berufskolleg.

Both discussions took place during regular history lessons. Unlike in Setting 2, where groups were recruited for discussions outside lessons, participation was therefore embedded in compulsory schooling; the consequences of this institutional framing are discussed in Section 3.3. Moderators introduced each object, posed the initial prompt and intervened only when a discussion stalled or when addressed directly. They gave neither content input nor evaluations. To lower the threshold for entering discussion, the three initial prompts were formulated in parallel as fictitious everyday scenarios: "Imagine you are taking a walk through the forest together and come across this monument that catches your interest. You start discussing it …"; "Imagine you are taking a walk through the museum together and come across this sculpture that catches your interest. You start discussing it …"; "Imagine you are sitting together and scrolling through TikTok, and you come across these search results for the hashtag '#Geschichte' that catch your interest.

You start discussing them …". Two standardised follow-up prompts were used: (a) "What else do you notice when you look at it more closely?" and (b) "What do you think – why does something like this exist, and who might have made it for what purpose?" As Section 3.2 shows, the scenario format itself proved consequential: the prompt is part of the semiotic arrangement under study.

The recordings were transcribed with the AI-based software noScribe, corrected manually, and edited according to the transcription rules of the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2014, pp. 253–255). Timestamps in square brackets refer to the position within the discussion of the respective object; pauses are marked (.) and (..), overlapping speech //text//, unintelligible passages ( ). Repetitions and self-corrections are retained.

2.1.2 Group discussion: Grade 10, intermediate secondary school (IS10.0-4)

The discussion about the Hermannsdenkmal opens in the mode of object description [00:00:03–00:02:00]: a statue "holding up a sword with his right hand", appearing "very old", made of copper "now turned green" assessed as "a very significant statue for many people" though the significance remains unclear. A second sequence concerns touristic significance and personal memories of childhood visits [00:02:45–00:03:36]. The third sequence involves speculation about the historical figure: "He fought. He has a sword and a shield", "he fought against the Romans", he "was the leader or so of something" and "saved many people" with "something in the forest" having happened [00:03:22–00:06:08]. The final sequence estimates size and age and drifts to questions like "Would he do bench press?" [00:10:26–00:14:06].

The discussion of Cattelan's *Him* also begins with description [00:00:00–00:01:30]: "a figure of Hitler", "he's sort of kneeling", "has his hands together", "his gaze is directed upward to the left." They interpret: "I think he's praying to, uh, to get into paradise." Unlike with the Hermannsdenkmal, the next sequence activates historical knowledge [00:01:38–00:07:10]: "The war started in 39", "Six million Jews died and a total of 60 million people"; concentration camps, the Autobahn, Hitler's failed career as an artist. The interpretation of the kneeling posture follows [00:07:33–00:08:32]: "He makes himself small. He is smaller than God" and "I think he's praying for forgiveness."

The TikTok sequence analyses the search results [00:00:04–00:03:24]: "history pro tips", "history of the Second World War quickly explained", "animated stories", "stories created with AI." They note: "History is not always history with the past." A critical evaluation follows [00:03:29–00:06:06]: "TikTok is not a reliable source", "a lot of lies" and "fake news"; they recommend Wikipedia or the Tagesschau [German public television news]. A sub-topic *entertainment versus information* concludes the sequence [00:07:42–00:12:03]: "made-up stories attract much more attention"; "I don't go on TikTok to find out some information […], but to be entertained." Particularly "true stories of people" are classified as interesting.

The reflecting interpretation yields several tentative hypotheses, which are presented here by object.

Hermannsdenkmal. First, the monument is perceived as a touristic and superficial experience: "Doesn't matter to me at all" [00:05:31–00:05:38] and "I would just walk past it again" [00:12:10–00:12:14] document a habitual distance from an objectivation experienced as irrelevant to the participants' own lives. Second, fragmentary knowledge is handled as playful guessing [00:03:22–00:06:08]. This practice of collective conjecture makes no claim to factual accuracy, but it keeps the discussion going despite knowledge gaps. Third, digressions such as the question of whether Hermann "would do bench press" [00:13:46–00:14:06] mark an ironic distance from the object.

Cattelan's Him. Fourth, school knowledge is reproduced only in markedly reduced form ("He, he first flew by plane" [00:04:51–00:05:05]). The remark "Mr [teacher's name] would kill you all if you didn't know such things" [00:05:17–00:05:22] points to externally motivated expectation pressure. Fifth, this pressure is countered by emotional distancing through irony: the statement "he's praying to get into paradise" (see above) is immediately marked as a joke.

TikTok. Sixth, the preference for "true stories of people" [00:11:28–00:11:34] over abstract knowledge documents a need for emotional involvement. Seventh, critical media literacy appears as an acquired but not practised competence: the warning about TikTok's unreliability [00:03:32–00:03:52] coexists with fascination for its content. This documents a discrepancy between declarative knowledge and actual media practice.

2.1.3 Group discussion: Grade 12, vocational college (VC12.2-2)

The discussion about the Hermannsdenkmal begins with first impressions and personal connections; several participants have been there on school trips [00:00:00–00:01:30]. Questions of historical classification follow [00:01:30–00:02:30]: the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest as occasion, Otto von Bismarck as the [supposed] initiator who had the monument erected "for morale" and as "motivation" for Prussia-Germany; the monument is characterised as "propagandistic," and Hermann "faces France." Image and impact analysis follows [00:02:30–00:04:50]: the raised sword as symbol of pride but also "aggression" and "war instincts." Finally, legitimacy and preservation are discussed [00:10:11–00:13:00]: "It somehow belongs to Lippe," it is "German history"; one should "not necessarily […] make history disappear," even if one could argue about it.

The discussion of the Hitler sculpture begins with description [00:00:00–00:01:30]: a wax figure depicting Hitler as "small," "childlike," kneeling; the posture is "devout," "innocent," praying – "as if he had done nothing" [00:01:30–00:03:00]. Explicit criticism of the depiction as trivialising follows [00:03:00–00:07:00]: he is depicted incorrectly, as he was "power-obsessed" and "a very intelligent man"; the childlike depiction could evoke sympathy he did not deserve. Satire is then suspected as a possible intention: the artist wants to "drag Hitler through the mud"; the depiction is "completely the contrast to how he really was" [00:13:53–00:18:00]. A controversial problematisation closes the sequence [00:19:25–00:22:00]: some hold that it stimulates thought and that artistic freedom must be granted, others fear trivialisation, especially "with the political situation".

The TikTok discussion starts with criticism of the platform as "not a reliable source"; the mixing of real history with "fake stories" is problematised, and anyone can create an account [00:00:00–00:02:00]. The endangerment of young users follows – "ten-year-olds" cannot distinguish true from false – with "social media from 16" proposed as a solution [00:02:00–00:08:00], then propaganda and political instrumentalisation: TikTok is "full of propaganda," the division between "left and right" is intensified, China as operator could use it for its own ends [00:08:00–00:10:00]. Finally, media literacy support is discussed [00:10:00–00:22:00]: "more clarification" is demanded, one should "question everything a bit"; there are no neutral sources, but some are "more neutral" than others.

The reflecting interpretation reveals different orientations.

Hermannsdenkmal. With the Hermannsdenkmal a pragmatic-integrative attitude dominates: "it somehow belongs to Lippe" [00:11:21–00:11:30], substantiated by personal experience – almost all were there "in fourth grade" [00:00:18–00:00:27]. A shared orientation is the accepting interpretation of problematic historical layers as part of one's own history [00:12:05–00:12:15]. At the same time, approaches to critical analysis appear: the sword is identified as "aggression" and "war instincts" [00:03:00–00:04:01], linked directly to Bismarck: "you can see Bismarck in it again" [00:03:17–00:03:28].

Cattelan's Him. With regard to *Him* the reversal of power symbolism is analysed: "he is depicted as […] almost childlike," which could evoke "sympathy" [00:10:44–00:10:46], interpreted as trivialisation ("he was power-obsessed […] a very intelligent man" [00:13:03–00:13:27]) but also as possible satire.

TikTok. A central collective orientation is concern about societal interpretive authority, articulated with TikTok as fear of losing control: "everyone has the possibility to create an account" [00:01:28–00:01:37]. The group struggles with the tension between freedom of opinion and desire for regulation, which resolves into a demand for education [00:10:44–00:11:01]. It repeatedly constructs hierarchies of credibility: "I would trust Mr [teacher's name]'s TikTok account" [00:06:33–00:06:43], while anonymous users are delegitimised [00:06:55–00:07:09]. This documents a traditional understanding of education placing institutional expertise above participatory knowledge production. Remarkable is the self-ironic reflexive distance: "Not everyone can be as educated as we are" [00:18:33–00:18:45].

2.1.4 Comparative interpretation

From the perspective of a formulating interpretation, the Grade 10 intermediate secondary school group (IS10.0-4) discusses the Hermannsdenkmal on the basis of fragmentary knowledge and touristic experience, mobilises school factual knowledge for the Hitler sculpture, and reads TikTok as a conflict between entertainment needs and historical information. The Grade 12 vocational college group (VC12.2-2) advocates preservation of the monument despite recog-

nising its propagandistic intention, criticises the sculpture as trivialisation while discussing satire as artistic intention, and emphasises the endangerment of young users by misinformation.

From the perspective of a reflecting interpretation, the objects evoke markedly different degrees of engagement; Cattelan's *Him* elicits the most intensive engagement in both groups, although, given the fixed order of presentation in which it always appeared second, object and position effects cannot be separated. Students perceive the objects not only according to individual characteristics or as interpretations of the past, but also regarding their interpretive offerings, inherent in them as a form of visual affordance (Huber, 2021), although these rarely lead to binding meaning attributions.

Using the categories of *sign mode* and *interpretive offering* (see Table 1), both groups engage the objects predominantly in the *iconic* sign mode, reading them as depictions of a represented reality. The *symbolic* mode — the recognition that objects encode conventionalised meanings produced at a particular moment for particular purposes — is reached only intermittently, most clearly by the Grade 12 vocational college group in identifying the sword as a marker of aggression attributable to the monument's presumed initiator. The *interpretive offering* is thus most often accepted as representation and only occasionally addressed as an offering, that is, as authored and hence contestable (*Him* and TikTok).

It is analytically important not to let the contrast between the groups obscure what they share. The intermediate secondary school group approaches the objects primarily through emotions and personal relevance. This points to an underlying orientation in which history figures as a compulsory school subject and objectivations, monuments and artworks in particular, figure as objects of touristic consumption. The group maintains emotional distance through irony and prefers individual life stories perceived as authentic to abstract narratives. The orientations of the vocational college group are divided between the wish to preserve a sense of historical objectivity and critical analysis, between democratic openness and concern about interpretive authority, between trust in established authorities and awareness of their non-neutrality.

Beyond these differences, however, both groups perform the same basic sequence of operations, irrespective of school type, age and object: activation of (prior) knowledge, identification and naming, contextualisation via indicators such as materiality and form, interpretation of individual components as iconic and/or symbolic, and evaluation, usually with a morally grounded claim. Both groups, moreover, respond to knowledge gaps with the same strategy — collective conjecture that keeps the conversation running — and both mark the transition to emotionally charged objects by a shift in register (irony in the intermediate secondary school group, moral indignation in the vocational college group). The contrast therefore does not separate two incommensurable modes of engagement; it differentiates degrees of reflexivity within a shared interpretive grammar. Read semiotically, this shared grammar is the more consequential finding, since it indicates that students dispose of a functioning, if untaught, procedure for orienting themselves in an unfamiliar sign field.

2.2 Setting 2: "Ten visual icons"

2.2.1 Discussion objects, groups and procedure

Setting 2 was conducted as a pilot within the same project. It served both to obtain first substantive insights and to develop elicitation steps for subsequent data collection. The discussion objects were ten photographs that qualify as visual icons of the 20th and 21st centuries (Table 4). Through repeated use in discursive contexts, visual icons have become ciphers for interpretive contexts that extend beyond their original historical situation. From a cultural-semiotic perspective, such images open not only a view *of* something (epistemic value) but always also a view *about* something (cultural value) (see Sauer, 2016). According to Paul (2014), they are characterised by high visual suggestiveness, provocation or a connection to established pathos formulae, and they often evoke collective emotions. Because their conventionalised readings are firmly established, they allow us to examine whether students take up or contest interpretive offerings (see Section 1.4).

Table 4: Visual icons used in Setting 2 (chronological order)

No.	Icon	Date
1	Gatehouse of Auschwitz-Birkenau (photograph by Stanisław Mucha)	February/March 1945
2	Hitler receiving members of the Hitler Youth in the garden of the New Reich Chancellery	20 March 1945
3	Atomic cloud over Hiroshima	6 August 1945
4	"Trümmerfrauen" [rubble women], Berlin	1945
5	Marilyn Monroe	1954
6	Reception of the one-millionth guest worker	1964
7	Apollo 11 moon landing	1969
8	Kim Phúc, Vietnam War	8 June 1972
9	Fall of the Berlin Wall	10 November 1989
10	Attacks on the World Trade Center	11 September 2001

Note. Selection was based on the criterion of iconicity (Paul, 2008, 2009), on the dimensions of historical culture outlined by Rüsen (2013) and on the greatest possible variance between national and international reference.

Setting 2 was realised in two variants with two groups from different state schools in North Rhine-Westphalia. Variant A involved two male students and one female student from Grade 13 of the upper secondary level of a comprehensive school Gesamtschule. Variant B involved five male students from Grade 12 of an academic high school Gymnasium. In contrast to Setting 1, both groups were recruited on a voluntary basis. Discussions took place at the schools outside regular lessons, in separate rooms and without teachers present, in order to mitigate social desirability effects. Based on the experiences with variant A, image presentation, prompts and discourse contexts were modified for variant B (see Table 2).

This iterative procedure has a methodological price that must be stated: because setting variation, school type, age, group size and composition differ simultaneously between the two groups, observed differences cannot be attributed to the setting alone. The comparison in Section 3.2 is therefore not a test of setting effects but a means of generating hypotheses about them. For the same reason, Section 2.2.2 is organised by elicitation step rather than by case. A case-based reconstruction of the orientations of both groups, comparable to Section 2.1, is beyond the scope of this piloting report.

2.2.2 Elicitation steps and initial findings

Simultaneous display of the icons (variants A and B). All icons were distributed on a table around which the young people gathered. The prompt was: "I have brought you these ten pictures. What thoughts come to you when you see the pictures?" The simultaneous presentation was intended to investigate which pictures receive attention for which reasons.

The comprehensive school group (variant A, CSUSL13.0-3) attempts to name the topics linked to the pictures, though not in all cases successfully: "important important historical events" [00:00:54–00:00:57], "devastating (.) events like for example nine eleven" [00:01:08], "Hiroshima bomb" [00:01:16], "moon- uh moon landing" [00:01:28], "reunification of Germany I think that is" [00:01:29–00:01:31], "the thousandth worker ( ) he got a motorcycle as a gift" [00:01:41–00:01:47]. Asked which pictures were unknown, the two male students named the photograph of Marilyn Monroe, whereupon the female classmate responded decisively: "That's Marilyn Monroe ( ) actress" [00:02:11–00:02:13]. The academic high school group (variant B, AHC12.2-3) responds simi-

larly but goes further by attempting to recognise connections between the pictures, classifying them by 'chronological sequence' and 'causal connection': "(yes and) that's sort of the initial stage [...] so that has triggered all this here for example [...] Yes right it started with the Second World War (.) and then came all the other things so" [00:03:03–00:03:14].

The setting does not evoke deeper negotiation activities; both groups use the mode of content-thematic naming. From a cultural-semiotic perspective this is by no means a deficient act; naming fulfils an important ordering function (*naming as ordering operation,* see Table 1), since names are not mere designations but highly condensed cultural texts that create identity, establish order, and assume memory functions (see Pärli & Rudakovskaja, 2002). Read through the concept of the semiosphere, the simultaneous display confronts the groups with a sign field whose boundaries they must first map; naming constitutes its initial coordinates. What appears methodologically as a shortcoming of the setting is therefore substantively informative: it isolates the ordering operation that precedes, and conditions, interpretation.

Wildcard (variants A and B; specified as historical in variant B). If subjective reference concepts matter for the perception of meaning offerings, the presentation of objectivations should be of varying significance for young people. To allow them to introduce subjectively significant topics, a 'wildcard' in the form of a blank sheet was introduced. It is evident that this also brings performative constraints, given that both groups complied without hesitation. The prompt was: "Now you have already talked a lot about these ten pictures. Are there [historical] images/topics that you personally consider important that we should also talk about? You can write that on the white sheet."

The comprehensive school group understands this as a request to sort the pictures, using the categories "violence" [00:04:49] and "successes" [00:04:52]; the latter comprises 'Fall of the Wall', 'moon landing', 'Marilyn Monroe', 'the one millionth guest worker' and the 'rubble women' [00:04:55–00:05:40]. Socially contested topics evoke a dichotomous evaluation pattern. After renewed reference to the prompt, the group named predominantly threatening present-day topics ("Ukraine-Russia war," "Covid 19 pandemic," "AI," "politics (shift to the right...)," "deforestation," "inflation," "sanctions," "conscription"), revealing a clear orientation towards the present. The second group, deliberately asked about historical images or topics, produced a wealth of nominations ("World War I," "Yugoslav War," "independence of colonies," "Russian Revolution," "women's rights," "development of democracy," "Spanish plague," "digitalisation," "healthcare," "invention of the atomic bomb," "construction of the Berlin Wall," "post-war period," "globalisation," "environmental disasters," "Chernobyl") — likewise with a preference for topics of present significance. In the further course, however, both groups do not return to their own topics, although this would have been possible.

Reasoned selection and headline task (variants A and B). Since the previous steps only limitedly encouraged explicit justification, a step provoking selection according to meaning attribution was added: "To what extent are there two pictures that particularly appeal to you, with which we would continue?" The comprehensive school group responds by categorising again as "positive" and "negative" [00:12:35–00:12:37] and agrees on the World Trade Center attacks, justified by prior media exposure: "because I've also watched many documentaries about it" [00:12:38–00:12:42]. Students appear to prefer topics about which they already possess learned cultural conceptions – except for Nazi history: "I have to say for myself that I've now done a lot about this in history class //Hitler?// Hitler //yes// it's been present for us" [00:14:38–00:14:49]. For the second image, the group followed an ideal of balance and chose the Apollo 11 moon landing (1969) as a positive counterpart to the attacks on the World Trade Center. It formulated the headlines "socio-political revolution" for the attacks and "technological revolution" for the moon landing.

The academic high school group chose the Hiroshima image, arguing that customary interpretations were not critical enough and emphasising that not only Germans had committed "war crimes" but also the major powers, while highlighting German commemorative culture as positive: "but here in Germany the war crimes, let's say Auschwitz etc., are at least being addressed and discussed" [00:28:45–00:31:03]. This reveals a critical and distanced evaluation motivated by rejection of a hegemonic US perspective perceived as unjust, and an interpretation of the event as a cautionary example in the sense of exemplary meaning-making (see Rüsen, 1990). The subsequent comparison of victim numbers itself is problematised — "I don't know whether one should always orient oneself so much by numbers [...] I always find it difficult" [00:23:13–00:23:23] — yet an evaluative pattern critical of power remains dominant, as the heading shows: "Through Terror & Fear Respect & Power". As second image the group chose the "Berlin Wall on

10 November 1989," justified by the non-violence of the protests [00:35:26–00:35:33] and headed "Transformation through Peace". The discussion turns to whether one can speak of reunification at all, since it "was actually more a transfer of the GDR into the FRG" [00:35:49–00:35:55], and to visible traces of division: "you still somehow see the cut" [00:36:55–00:37:16]. The ordering pattern reveals both the dichotomous schema established above and an awareness of one's own Western situatedness, that is, of the socially and biographically specific position from which an interpretation is made.

Instagram comments as additional context (variant B only). This modification implements the assumption of unlimited semiosis introduced in Section 1.2: because every interpretation can become the object of a further interpretation, the meaning of an iconic image is inseparable from the discourse conducted about it. Introducing user comments therefore does not add a supplementary stimulus; it shifts the object of discussion from the sign-carrier to its recontextualisation (*recontextualisation*, see Table 1), and thus makes observable whether students perceive conventionalised readings as conventional at all. The setting was expanded to include Instagram comments posted under a contribution by rbb24 of 9 November 2025 showing the iconic photograph under the title "Commemoration throughout the city[.] 36 years ago the Berlin Wall fell".

The post was presented on an iPad with the request to read the comments and to consider how users were commenting. The following were read aloud: "back then the wall was broken, today we're putting up walls, both metaphorically and literally" [00:47:38–00:47:44]; "always reminds me that the first refugees in my 3rd class were called Marcel and Sven [...] shame that many have already forgotten that East Germans themselves once fled for a better life" [00:48:05–00:48:17]; "the wall should have just stayed where it was" [00:48:24–00:48:26]; "The takeover and the NATO eastward expansion" [00:48:33–00:48:35]; "After that it went downhill" [00:48:36–00:48:38]. The students immediately recognise a difference: "so they see this a bit differently than we do I think" [00:48:48–00:49:00]. Asked to assess the comments, they express incomprehension: "I don't really know why [...] I mean it was still, so partly communism in the GDR" [00:49:41–00:49:56]. They attribute the negative view of reunification to the economic situation and appear aware of their West German situatedness. The binary juxtaposition of 'East' and 'West' continues to form an important frame of reference, although they speak out against it: "I have little understanding when people say let's go our separate ways again [...] I personally find it very sad" [00:53:11–00:53:26].

Medial framing (variant A only). To pursue the thesis that interpretations vary with medial forms of presentation, the icon 'Auschwitz-Birkenau Gatehouse' was presented in various formats.[2] The prompt was: "I have brought you a schoolbook, a magazine and an Instagram post. All three use this image. What do you think, to what extent does it make a difference where you see the image?" The comprehensive school group confirmed a difference, particularly regarding emotions and resulting interest, distinguishing social media clearly from the school context:

"you are, I don't know, you're lying in bed and just scrolling through Instagram, then that's, um, from the emotions completely different than when you see that in a history book at school where you then think, oh I have to do an exercise about it soon" [00:37:06–00:37:30].

An important parameter for different modes of perception of identical images thus seems to be the socio-communicative functional context in which recipients encounter interpretive offerings, although the young people find it difficult to escape the institutional-normative implications of the school context.

3 Results

3.1 Students' historical-cultural interpretive action

Across the four groups analysed, a recurrent pattern can be reconstructed, most fully in the two groups of Setting 1 and in fragmentary form in Setting 2. It is formulated here as a hypothesis for further examination: students regulate their engagement with historical culture communica-

2 The icon was presented in four forms: (1) on the front cover of *ZEIT Geschichte* (2025); (2) as source material in the schoolbook *Geschichte und Geschehen* (Droste et al., 2015); (3) in an Instagram post by the women's organisation Zora marking the liberation of Auschwitz (zoradeutschland, 2024), shown on an iPad; and (4) as the single photograph already used in the opening step of Setting 2.

tively and largely autonomously in the medium of speech. They negotiate interpretations preferentially in the modes of questioning, conjecturing and asserting. They perceive the objects at least implicitly as signs with historical meaning, although less informed learners frequently relieve lacking knowledge through humour, digressions and emotional regulation. To situate objectivations temporally, they use knowledge fragments, external features and present experiences; in terms of Table 1, these are the *reference concepts* mobilised in the absence of secured knowledge. Common to all groups is that they relate their interpretations to questions of naming, recognisability, reception, materiality, production process, change over time and present use. More advanced learners additionally discuss, in part with critical intent, iconographic details, perspectives, compositions, political symbolisms, commemorative function and future use.

Students appear to have little classroom practice in explicating such meanings (see Münch, 2021).[3] Their communicative action nevertheless follows recognisable approaches on three levels. At a basic level a kind of surface concept is operative, focusing on the exterior of the objectivations, which are read either as an entertainment offering or as school learning material and less as carriers of historical meaning; a reflection on intention and interpretation is found only in rudimentary form. A perception going beyond this interprets the offerings as references to historical culture but recognises therein primarily time-unspecific dangers, animating a generalising moral evaluation according to dichotomous schemata (positive–negative, violence–peace, success–failure); such judgement formation is morally overformed and hardly historically differentiated. Some contributions conceptualise the objects as sign-like constructions of their respective time; the insight that conceptions of history represent a time-specific societal-discursive context is, however, seldom found, which corresponds with Levstik & Barton (2018). Nevertheless, sequences can be identified in which the referential function of the object is distinguished from the object as representation, and first approaches to de-construction in the sense of the FUER model (Körber et al., 2007) become visible.

3.2 Setting and interpretive action

The comparison yields indications — not evidence — that the mode of presentation and the design of the prompt pre-structure the interpretive action that becomes observable. Since setting variation is confounded with group characteristics (Section 3.3), the following observations are formulated as hypotheses identifying candidate mechanisms. To make the comparison accountable, the settings are described along six dimensions (see Table 5).

The comparison undertaken here is contrastive in the sense of reconstructive research: it juxtaposes what different arrangements make observable, without attributing differences to single conditions. Dimensions marked "–" were realised in only one variant. The corresponding hypotheses (external discourse context, medial framing) therefore rest on single observations without a contrasting case and are to be read as particularly provisional.

Setting 1 proves suitable for making visible the variability of interpretive action depending on the object: while the Hermannsdenkmal activates touristic-superficial approaches, *Him* appears to provoke more intensive engagement with historical guilt and representational intent. The scenario prompt appears to lower the threshold for entering discussion but seems to favour persistence in everyday frames, although no alternative prompt was used as a point of contrast in the intermediate secondary school group.

Setting 2 produces other dynamics. In both groups simultaneous confrontation induced an ordering behaviour manifesting itself in naming and categorising; more in-depth negotiating activities largely remain absent in this opening phase (see also Bernhardt, 2007). As argued in Section 2.2.2, this is not to be read as a shortcoming of the setting alone: naming constitutes initial orientation points in a sign field perceived as complex and creates the precondition for subsequent meaning negotiations.

The wildcard yields ambivalent results. While The comprehensive school group (CSUSL13.0-3) interprets the prompt as a request to categorise the images already present, the academic high school group (AHC12.2-3) generates an abundance of nominations of their own. Remarkable is that neither group recurs to its self-named topics. This suggests a strong orientation towards the anticipated expectations of the research situation and points to the difficulty of escaping the performative constraints of school communication habits.

3 Münch observes that teachers rather rarely attribute to their students analytical or participatory approaches to historical culture.

Table 5: Varied dimensions of the two settings and resulting hypotheses

Dimension	Setting 1 (Grade 10, intermediate secondary school; Grade 12, vocational college)	Setting 2, variant A (Grade 13, comprehensive school)	Setting 2, variant B (Grade 12, academic high school)	Hypothesis
Number/heterogeneity of objects	3, maximally heterogeneous	10, homogeneous genre	10, homogeneous genre	Heterogeneity elicits genre-related, homogeneity classificatory operations
Temporal mode	sequential	simultaneous	simultaneous	Simultaneity displaces interpretation by orientation
Prompt	everyday scenario	open impulse; wildcard	open impulse; wildcard specified as historical	Scenario prompts lower the threshold but stabilise everyday frames
Reasoned selection	–	ideal of balance; familiar topics	critique of conventionalised readings	Requiring justification is the most productive step for eliciting explicit interpretation
External discourse context	–	–	Instagram comments	Contrary discourse irritates routine readings but may trigger defensiveness
Medial framing	–	schoolbook / magazine / Instagram	–	Reception context governs emotional availability

Among the steps of Setting 2, the step of justified image selection appears to be the most productive methodological approach for eliciting explicit interpretations. Since it followed the other steps in a fixed sequence, however, effects of the step type cannot be distinguished from those of the discussion's progression. The request to agree argumentatively on two images allows the guiding selection criteria and thus different orientation patterns to become visible: CSUSL13.0-3 follows an ideal of balance and prefers topics about which it already possesses medially transmitted conceptions, whereas AHC12.2-3 chooses precisely those icons whose conventionalised interpretations it intends to question.

The expansion to include Instagram comments shifts the object of discussion from the images to the discourses about them. This contextualisation prompted the group in this case to perceive its own situatedness and made visible the contingency of supposedly self-evident interpretive conventions. At the same time, the irritation did not lead to a revision of position but partly to defensive reactions and incomprehension.

The variation of medial forms of representation provides instructive indications of the connection between presentation context and mode of reception. The students clearly differentiate between the demands they associate with the various contexts: the school context evokes expectations of matter-of-fact analytical processing, while the social media context is conceptualised as a space of subjective and emotional reception. These findings underscore the cultural-semiotic view that meaning constructions arise in relation between perceived sign-carriers and the situational reference concepts of recipients. More precisely, the *same* sign-carrier activates different *reference concepts* (see Table 1) depending on the socio-communicative function attributed to the context of encounter. Recontextualisation thus operates not only across discourses but across institutional framings of one and the same image.

3.3 Limitations and scope of the findings

The scope of the findings is limited in four respects.

First, the empirical basis reported here comprises four group discussions. Even within a reconstructive research logic, which aims at typical orientations rather than statistical generalisation, four cases permit the formulation of hypotheses but not the assertion of a typology. The groups function as illustrative cases from a larger corpus (Section 2.1.1); the interpretations are candidate patterns whose range must be tested against the remaining material.

Second, setting variation is confounded with group characteristics. Because the settings were realised with different groups, and because school type, age, group size and composition covary with the setting, no effect can be attributed to the setting alone. A design varying settings within comparable groups, or presenting the same group with several settings in counterbalanced order, would be required to isolate such effects. The comparison presented here identifies plausible candidate mechanisms and thereby prepares such a design.

Third, the iterative modification of the second setting increased its developmental yield at the cost of its comparative rigour: the two groups did not encounter identical procedures. This trade-off is characteristic of piloting phases and is made transparent rather than resolved. Taken together, the two settings are therefore best understood as complementary exploratory sub-studies: the first allows a case comparison under constant conditions, the second documents the iterative development of elicitation steps. Their juxtaposition is heuristic rather than comparative in a strict sense.

Fourth, all discussions took place in institutional settings, in Setting 1 during regular lessons. The data therefore document interpretive action under conditions of anticipated school expectations; the reluctance of both groups of Setting 2 to return to their self-nominated topics is itself an indicator of this framing. Statements about historical-cultural participation outside institutional contexts cannot be derived from these data; ethnographic or media-diary approaches would be needed.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the systematic reflection on elicitation procedures pursued here appears warranted precisely because such procedures are, from a cultural-semiotic point of view, constitutive of the phenomena they record.

4 Conclusion: Do students participate in historical culture?

The findings support the assumption introduced in Section 1.2: meaning does not reside in objectivations but is actualised by sign-users who bring their own reference concepts to bear (see Table 1). The students in this study accordingly do not appear as recipients who merely absorb prefabricated interpretive offerings. They accept, modify, ignore or contest these offerings on the basis of school knowledge, media discourses and personal experience. Their engagement often begins with naming and categorising. Read through the analytical lens set out in Section 1.2, these operations are not preliminary stages to be overcome but achievements of orientation in a sign field experienced as complex. Students order interpretive offerings into schemata anchored in the lifeworld (see Buck, 2012) and thereby constitute initial approaches to cultural meaning production.

The discussions reveal at the same time a deep permeation of juvenile lifeworlds by medially transmitted conceptions of history. Students bring into the discussions not only school knowledge but equally prevalent media discourses and popular-cultural narratives, which they amalgamate — not always reflectedly — in their interpretations. The preference for *true stories of people* over abstract historical knowledge documents a participation pattern that approaches history primarily through emotional involvement and perceived personal relevance (see Peck, 2019; on the constitutive rather than oppositional role of emotion in historical learning see Brauer, 2019; Neumann, 2019). More advanced learners reveal not only a need but also the ability for critical positioning vis-à-vis prevailing interpretive conventions.

Nevertheless, historical-cultural participation depends on certain prerequisites. Where topics are strongly charged with normative expectations, the scope for independent interpretation narrows. Students anticipate institutional expectations and regulate their utterances accordingly, which at times leads to a reproduction of learned interpretation patterns without these being critically examined. The confrontation with contrary perspectives is capable of irritating

ingrained patterns and makes visible the situatedness of one's own views (see von Borries, 1995, p. 192; Wils et al., 2011, p. 227). Such irritations do not necessarily result in a revision of one's own position; they may equally provoke defensiveness. This points to a limit of historical-cultural learning processes: they cannot be steered at will.

For history education research, these findings do not add a further argument against deficit views of students. Such views have largely been abandoned in the international discussion. The findings rather specify what taking students' modes of participation as a starting point can mean analytically. Operations that appear in classroom communication as digression, irony or factual inaccuracy can be described as parts of a functioning interpretive sequence. Didactic intervention can attach to this sequence at identifiable points: where naming fails, where the iconic reading of an objectivation is not yet complemented by a symbolic one, or where moral evaluation forecloses historical contextualisation. The task, then, is less to transmit supposedly correct interpretations than to cultivate the ability to reflect on one's own orientations, to try out alternative perspectives and to see through the contingency of all historical meaning offerings – including one's own.

These considerations have consequences for teacher education as well. Münch (2021) reports that teachers rarely credit their students with analytical or participatory access to historical culture. The findings presented here suggest that this assessment underestimates what students do: even where knowledge is fragmentary, groups deploy a functioning sequence of operations that has evidently not been taught. Teacher education would accordingly need to enable teachers, first, to recognise this sequence — including in utterances that appear digressive, ironic or factually inaccurate — and to treat it as a resource rather than as noise, for instance through diagnostic work with transcripts of student discussions. Second, teachers would need a repertoire of settings, not merely of contents: the variations examined here are equally available as teaching arrangements, and the request for a justified selection, which proved the most productive step, requires no specialised materials. Third, teachers would themselves need opportunities to reflect on their own historical-cultural orientations, since students' reluctance to depart from anticipated school expectations cannot be addressed by methodological technique alone.

Two contributions thus follow from the study. Substantively, it provides a semiotic description of a shared sequence of interpretive operations and thereby specifies, at the level of observable practice, how students participate in historical culture. Methodologically, it does not claim that elicitation settings influence results, which is well established. It proposes to vary settings deliberately and to treat the resulting differences as data rather than as variance to be controlled. On the basis of a heuristic rather than controlled juxtaposition, it offers a provisional catalogue of variation dimensions (Section 3.2, Table 5) that can guide systematic cross-case designs. Future research would need to vary these dimensions within comparable groups, extend the corpus, and include settings outside the institutional frame of the school. In a historical culture characterised by fragmentation and polarisation, the capacity to recognise interpretive offerings as offerings, and to relate one's own readings to those of others, proves to be an indispensable democratic resource. Research can support its development only if it knows how this capacity is enacted in practice and how the arrangements in which it is observed shape what becomes visible.

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Ethical statement

The collection of data via group discussions did not require review by an ethics committee, as these activities do not constitute medical, pharmacological, or psychological-interventionist research; rather, they involve the collection solely of verbal statements within the context of social science-based educational research—a category which, under the relevant state higher education laws, is not subject to mandatory review by an ethics committee. Participation was based on the informed consent of students of legal age, or—in the case of minors—additionally on the consent of their legal guardians; throughout this process, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the option to decline participation without providing any justification were fully guaranteed. The collected data were processed in a fully anonymized or pseudonymized manner, thereby precluding the identification of individual persons and ensuring compliance with the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as well as the respective state data protection laws. This research poses no physical, psychological, or social risks to the participants that would exceed the ordinary stresses associated with everyday classroom discussions, as it involved merely soliciting opinions and interpretations regarding publicly accessible objects of historical culture. The data collection procedures were designed and conducted in accordance with the research ethics guidelines of the German Educational Research Association (DGfE) and the principles of good scientific practice upheld by the participating universities.

The transcription of the audio recordings from the conducted group discussions was carried out using the AI-assisted transcription software noScribe.

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