

**As If History Would Look the Same When Read Backwards:
A Formal Analysis of Contemporary History Production**

By

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the forms of history. In particular, the forms of those historiographical works produced between the 1960s and the present that defy the formal conventions of “European” history production. I will build on four insights about historiographical form: that form interacts with content; that form can be analyzed as a kind of historical evidence; that formal innovation is a response to methodological questions; and that form foregrounds the readers and interpretative communities of history production. In the first part, I will embed formal innovations in the intellectual context of the period between the 1960s–2000s. I will argue that what is often referred to by historians as “postmodernism”, conflates a complex extended discursive triangle of variedly well-defined (and variedly well-understood) ideas of “(post-)modernism”, “(post-)structuralism”, “(post-)narrativism” and the “Linguistic Turn.” I will argue that despite these concepts’ simultaneous emptiness and overdetermination, some ideas can be recovered from the polemics of this period that underlie many of the unconventional formal elements that historians have employed. In the second part, I will analyze four works that employ polyphony. I will look particularly at the position of the author-historian in these works and analyze what methodological questions provoked the introduction of these polyphonic elements. By comparing polyphony with the Rashomon effect, I will further suggest a number of differences between the need for synthesis in history as compared to law. Underlying this thesis is what I conceive of as a need to cultivate a critical historical literacy. Cultivating a critical historical literacy can make both readers and historians more aware of how histories are produced, within what “storehouses of narrative” meaning making takes place, how form and content interact, and how particular orderings of events serve rhetorical purposes. This also has a current political urgency, given the eruption of political falsifications in countries all around the world. A critical historical literacy can carve out a space between historical falsification and methodological and formal orthodoxy, acknowledging that ‘between the Scylla of false omniscience and the Charybdis of “post-truth” relativism lies a whole world of possibilities.’

Prologue

The moment comes when you just can't take the work any further... At this point, my friend Giacometti explains, you can throw your piece of sculpture in the rubbish bin or exhibit it in a gallery. So there it is. You never quite grasp what you set out to achieve. And then suddenly it's a statue or a book. The opposite of what you wanted. If its faults are inscribed methodically in the negative which you present to the public, they at least point to what it might have been. And the spectator becomes the real sculptor, fashioning his model in thin air, or reading the book between the lines.¹

In one of the first courses I took at the Central European University (CEU), in September 2022, my prospective supervisor Balázs Trencsényi suggested us, a group of first and second year graduate students, a way to deal with the pressures that come with pursuing a Master's degree. As I remember it, his reasoning was something along these lines: you will feel overwhelmed and may think sometimes that you do not belong here, you will long for some free time, some vacation (which he had already warned us previously would not happen before our final graduation), but don't forget that you also have a very particular freedom as a Master's student: to make mistakes that you will not get away with ever again in your academic life. To be sure, he was right about the first part and it comes with great relief that I am typing these words at the conclusion of two very intense years. With submitting this thesis, I hope he was equally right about the second.

I have taken Balázs' advice to heart and spent the last two years experimenting with things – far-fetched intellectual connections, experimental documentary films, and a highly questionable set of drawings of Alexander (“the Great”) and Bucephalus – that I will certainly keep to myself for the rest of my life. This thesis is different from these experiments in many respects: it is much more serious in its content and arguments; it is the project of at least 5 years of work; and it is well-researched and built on a substantial footnote apparatus. Yet, I also frequently found myself wandering through the sources, an early career historian (?) in search of a voice amidst a cacophony of differing viewpoints. Sometimes I hid myself behind others, other times I shakily stepped out, a young ice skater still seeking support from a chair (a metaphor rooted in my country, but quickly becoming part of the past), and at again other times I felt comfortable stepping out on my own.

¹ J-P. Sartre, “The Purposes of Writing,” in J-P. Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism* (London: Verso, 1974).

Writing an “I” has not only been a challenge due to my doubts and insecurities, but also because of internal disagreements. Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* argues that Dostoevsky often doubled a character, to allow for different viewpoints to come to the surface. Many times I have envied such a solution, and considered introducing multiple I’s arguing among themselves. Of course the historian can resort to the classic (and somewhat stale) “on the one hand... and on the other”, “some say... while others...”, and this thesis is certainly full of the “however’s”, “moreover’s”, “additionalies” and furthermores” that define the genre, but there seems to me something different about having dialogues and discussions within a text – something I did not dare to experiment with here, but that I remain curious about. Polyphony, to which I will turn in the third part, certainly seems a form that allows for this kind of multiplicity.

I was surprised to find how many people I have already bothered with this research. I am thankful, first of all, to all my fellow students who read parts of this chapter, and especially for the frequent and insightful comments of Cole Ashkenazy, Lawson Pace and Denys Tereshchenko. I am also thankful for the students who participated in Michael Ignatieff’s *History as a Narrative Art* course in 2023/2024, of which I was lucky enough to be allowed to teach two classes. My special gratitude goes to Rana Bayram and Emily Moore for their greatly helpful comments. I am further thankful to Lisa Irene Hau, Michael Ignatieff, István Perczel, Gerald Prince, Ann Laura Stoler and Steven Willemsen, who all commented on parts of this thesis at various stages, and whose advice and suggestions for further research have greatly improved my thinking. Two people have been particularly important throughout the writing of this thesis and in my intellectual development as a whole: I am very grateful and deeply indebted to Antoon de Baets and Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar. My supervisors, Ulrich Meurer, Balázs Trencsényi and David Weberman have been my guiding angles throughout this process, and I consider myself incredible lucky with such academic support. My indebtedness to Leila Shavandi, who had to deal with my outbursts of happiness, complaints and despair yet kept finding ways to love me, is infinite. That Nanne Sjoerd Kingma has been able to bear me for 28 years is an achievement far greater than this thesis. Finally, I want to thank, for their inexhaustible reading and re-reading of drafts, prospectuses and chapters, Judit Minczinger and Robin Bellers, the latter’s memory I dedicate this thesis to.

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In Search of a Beginning

Between the Scylla of false omniscience and the Charybdis of “post-truth” relativism lies a whole world of possibilities.²

A thesis that has among its central concerns the ways in which form interacts with content in the production of histories, is well served by treating its own beginning-middle-end structure with some reflexivity. As Ann Rigney observed in her now classic analysis of 19th century historiography of the French Revolution, *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution* (1991), ‘the defining identity or significance of particular events, as well as the intelligible coherence between different events, are not inherent to historical actuality, but continuously come into existence as a product of the many different representations which are given of it.’³ In other words, the choice of start and end dates is part of the meaning that historians inscribe in a work of history.

Thus, to start this thesis in 1973 with the publication of Hayden White’s *Metahistory* will instantly reimmerge readers into the polemic 1970s, ‘80s and ‘90s, and re-dig the metaphorical trenches from which opponents along the fact/fiction divide fired their arguments across (war metaphors frequently being employed in the process). On the other hand, to start with the 1903 inaugural lecture by J.B. Bury, in which he proclaimed that ‘history is a science, no less and no more,’ and end with Aviezer Tucker’s recent plea to move away from analyses of narrative and language (history’s “superstructure”) to the criteria for falsification and truth (its “infrastructure”) might tempt readers to lay a work with the above title aside and move towards others – not to mention the effects of invoking Lucien Febvre’s eloquent condemnation of historical theory, suggesting that ‘it is not a good thing for the historian to reflect too much upon history. All the time he does so his work is held up.’⁴ Similarly, opening with passages from Richard Evans’ *In Defense of History* will instill in the reader a sense of trust in the community of professional historians, while Keith Jenkins’ work is more likely to make history seem irrelevant altogether. Finally, opening this thesis with references to Joan Scott and Dipesh Chakrabarty will foreground how

² Y. Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 285.

³ A. Rigney, *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 12.

⁴ As cited in E. Breisach, *On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and Its Aftermath* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 6-7; Similarly, albeit less articulate, Geoffrey Elton once argued that ‘a philosophic concern with such problems as the reality of historical knowledge or the nature of historical thought only hinders the practice of history.’ G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (New York, N.Y.: Fontana Books, 1967), vii.

much of these discussions have been dominated by white, “European”⁵ men – and the extent to which this list of names itself participates in a questionable process of canonization and creates an implied interpretative community.⁶

The shaping power of beginnings and endings – as Peter Brooks once wrote ‘only the end can finally determine meaning’⁷ – has mostly been addressed and played with by novelists. The literary scholar Brian Richardson in his book on “Unnatural Narratology” invokes as examples Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, which opens with the narrator’s desire ‘to write a book that is only an incipit, that maintains for its whole duration the potentiality of the beginning.’⁸ Samuel Becket’s *Endgame*, on the other hand, starts with the sentence: ‘Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be finished.’⁹ In the discipline of history, a noteworthy example is John Demos’ *The Unredeemed Captive* (1999), which contains three different endings, reminiscent of Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (again something I will return to later). And in *Policing America’s Empire: The United States, The Philippines and the Rise of the Surveillance State* (2009), Alfred McCoy writing a connected history of 19th century imperialism and present-day surveillance in the United States and the Philippines, bridges the temporal difference by beginning his work with two almost identical passages:

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Commodore George Dewey of the U.S. Navy arrayed his squadron of steel-hulled warships at the edge of Asia. Steaming across Manila Bay at first light on May 1, 1898, his rapid fire guns sank the aging Spanish fleet and cleared the way for an attack on Manila. After transports arrived three months later, U.S. Army troops stormed Manila’s massive battlements and seized a city Spain had ruled for 350 years. At the cost of just 121 casualties in a single day of sporadic fighting, the United States had become, for the first time in its history, an imperial power

⁵ This notion of “European” refers to Chakrabarty’s, in his *Provincializing Europe*. A variety of concepts have been coined that aim to describe this space of knowledge production that tried to make itself seem universal by making itself invisible (others are the Occident, the West, sometimes the First World or Developed World). As important as this project is, it has also frequently been criticized for homogenizing a space that is far from homogeneous – a problem that has been especially present in the positing of a “Europe” that does not take into account the differences between its (North-)Western, Southern (Mediterranean), and East Central and Southeastern parts, and that has led in recent years to a very productive intellectual conversation between East Central and Southeastern European and postcolonial scholars. At points, the first chapter will address this difficulty more in-depth, but here it is important to clarify that I attempt to specify the spaces of knowledge production where necessary, and that all undefined spatial references refer to a space that can be roughly equated with the traditional understanding of the “West”, meaning the Anglophone countries (US, UK, Australia) and Northwestern Europe (France, Germany, the Benelux), that can be considered the historical centers of this “making invisible” at least since the 17th century.

⁶ I am grateful to Ulrich Meurer for making this important point.

⁷ P. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 22.

⁸ As cited in B. Richardson, *Unnatural Narrative: Theory, History, Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015), 62.

⁹ *Idem*, 61-62.

...

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Chief Superintendent Florencio Fianza of the Philippine National Police (PNP) arrayed his squads of helmeted riot police before the gates of Manila's presidential palace. Fighting desperately from first light on May 1, 2001, police armed with shotguns and water cannons scattered a mob of fifty thousand urban poor, their bodies marked with gang tattoos and fortified with drugs. At the cost of just 117 civilian casualties in six hours of hand-to-hand fighting, Philippine police had saved the presidency of Gloria Arroyo.¹⁰

Despite Demos' and McCoy's examples, few historians have experimented with beginnings and endings in the way novelists have. More often, historians have turned to self-reflexivity to make clear their structuring influences ("positionality") in the histories they present. Thus Ivan Jablonka, in *Histoire des grands-parents que je n'ai pas eus* (2012), and Daniel Mendelsohn, in *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (2006) foreground themselves in their histories of the Shoah. Similarly, Saidiya Hartman, in her history of the Transatlantic slave trade *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2008), opens with her arrival in Elmina, Ghana; a passage that might be read as simultaneously establishing her as a subject *and* as a historian, constituted by a temporal asynchronicity towards the past as that "foreign country":

As I disembarked from the bus in Elmina, I heard it. It was sharp and clear, as it rang in the air, and clattered in my ear making me recoil. *Obruni*. A stranger. A foreigner from across the sea... My appearance confirmed it: I was the proverbial outsider... My customs belonged to another country.¹¹

Narrative in History, History of Narrative

Authorial position and the relations between beginnings, middle and endings point to the problematic notion of narrative. Narrative is one of the most-invoked, supposedly "common-sense" notions in "our"¹² present discourse. Attesting to its omnipresence, various scholars have

¹⁰ A.W. McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 15.

¹¹ S. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: MacMillan Publishers, 2008), 3.

¹² See note 4.

talked about a “narrative turn,”¹³ a “storytelling boom,”¹⁴ or a *nouvel ordre narratif*.¹⁵ Literary theorist Peter Brooks, in his recent *Seduced by Story* (2022), reflects on his package of cookies that promises to share “Our Story,” and expresses surprise (and frustration) over ‘this mindless valorization of storytelling.’¹⁶ Maria Mäkelä and Hanna Meretoja, in their writing on the “storytelling boom” invoke Jonah Sachs, a marketing guru and author of *Winning the Story Wars: Why Those Who Tell – and Live – the Best Stories Will Rule the Future* – a title that doesn’t need much further comment.¹⁷

In the humanities, the term “narrative” has seen a similar blossoming. Already in 1986, literary critic Thomas Pavel referenced a conference at the Paris School of Semiotics in the 1970s, which concluded that narrative is ‘the organizing principle in any discourse.’¹⁸ Historian and literary scholar Philippe Carrard draws on a 1990s seminar at the Maison des sciences de l’homme, which defined narrative as all ‘texts, or parts of texts which use natural language and natural logic.’¹⁹ He further invokes Gerald Prince’s criticism that “narrative” may now be substituted for such terms as “explanation”, “argumentation”, “hypothesis”, “ideology,” “art,” and “message”.²⁰

The (omni)presence of narrative in the discipline of history is complicated. A variety of historians have invoked some definition of narrative as essential to their work. Thus, Hans Kellner writes that ‘full historical treatment of the past, as defined for two centuries, is fundamentally narrative, dependent upon, and embedded within, a story that is always understood,’²¹ and Nancy Partner states that ‘History is narrative in form, virtually by definition, because narrative is what brings the seriatim stream of time under control for intelligible, meaningful comprehension.’²² In 2013, William Cronon in his Presidential Address for the American Historical Association (AHA), spoke of “storytelling” (not incidentally the title of his address), as ‘the most ancient and most essential of the historian’s tasks.’²³ The 2018 “Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct”

¹³ M. Kreiswirth, “Narrative Turn in the Humanities,” in D. Herman, M. Jahn & M-L. Ryan, *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁴ See e.g., M. Mäkelä & S. Björninén, “My Story, Your Narrative: Scholarly Terms and Popular Usage,” in P. Dawson & M. Mäkelä (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory* (New York/London: Routledge, 2023).

¹⁵ C. Salmon, *Storytelling: La machine à fabriquer les histoires et à formater les esprits* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007).

¹⁶ P. Brooks, *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2022), 5, 9.

¹⁷ M. Mäkelä & H. Meretoja, “Critical Approaches to the Storytelling Boom,” *Poetics Today* 43, no. 2 (June 2022): 194-195. Nancy Partner has argued that ‘a cultural map more systematically surveyed would cover nearly all areas of private and public life that have produced self-conscious explication.’ N. Partner, “Narrative Persistence: The Post-Postmodern Life of Narrative Theory,” in F. Ankersmit, E. Domańska & H. Kellner, *Re-Figuring Hayden White* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2009), 91.

¹⁸ As cited in P. Carrard, “History and Narrative: An Overview,” *Narrative Works: Issues, Investigations & Interventions* 5, no. 1 (2015), 187.

¹⁹ Idem, 185-186.

²⁰ As cited in idem, 185.

²¹ H. Kellner, “The Return of Rhetoric,” in N. Partner & S. Foot (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory* (Thousand Oaks, Ca.: SAGE Publications, 2013), 151.

²² N. Partner, “Foundations: Theoretical Frameworks for Knowledge of the Past,” in N. Partner & S. Foot (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory* (Thousand Oaks, Ca.: SAGE Publications, 2013), 2.

²³ As cited in P. Carrard, “Historical Discourse and Narrativity,” *Poetics Today* 42, no.2 (2021), 383.

of the AHA confidently asserted that ‘we all interpret and narrate the past... It is among our most fundamental tools for understanding ourselves and the world around us’ which, among other things (but ‘not least’), ‘define the professional practice of history.’²⁴

Others have expressed more hesitance, but still consider narrative the dominant form of history production. Thus, David Weberman calls narrative ‘probably the primary form used to “capture” the past... Stories... allowing us to access and ordered conception of events that are no longer observable.’²⁵ And Herman Paul claims that ‘story forms, or more technically narrative templates’ are used by historians to ‘create order and coherence in the jumble of historical events.’²⁶ Verónica Tozzi has been among those who have historicized the role of narrative in history production. She traces the use of the term “narrativism” to an article of Wilhelm Dray, to describe a group of analytical philosophers of history who were studying the language of history.²⁷ Recently, Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen has been more critical, making clear that he ‘fully accept[s] and build[s] on the narrativist insight,’ but that since the narrative paradigm has ‘become almost global in the humanities and certainly goes much beyond the theory and philosophy of historiography’ he proposes to use it only to ‘exemplif[y] historiographical reasoning for theses of history.’²⁸

The tradition of analytical philosophy of history will be discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, yet a few elements should be mentioned here. References to narrative have been frequent in the analytical tradition. In 1956 Arthur Danto had argued that ‘stories play an important cognitive role in historical inquiry.’²⁹ Seven years later, he coined the still central notion of “narrative sentences,” describing sentences ‘that refer to at least two time-separated events though they only *describe* (are only *about*) the earliest event to which they refer.’³⁰ For Louis Mink narrative was part of what he called the “configurational comprehension,” a mode of comprehension typical for history. What characterizes narrative in history production, according to Mink, is that it configures a series of events into a whole, in a way that makes past events ‘emerge as elements of

²⁴ American Historical Association, *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct* (2018; updated 2023), via <https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/statements-standards-and-guidelines-of-the-discipline/statement-on-standards-of-professional-conduct>.

²⁵ D. Weberman “On the Compatibility of Competing Narratives,” *Balkan Journal of Philosophy* 13, no.1 (2021), 5.

²⁶ As cited in Carrard, “Historical Discourse,” 383.

²⁷ V. Tozzi Thompson, “Narrativism,” in C. Van den Akker (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Historical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2021), 113. Rigney has traced the importance of “narration” to 19th century French historians. See Rigney, “Rhetoric of Historical Representation,” 3-4. In England these debates mostly took place through an opposition between “history as a science” (the oft-hated “German model”) and “history as an art.” See e.g. R. Vann, “Turning Linguistic: History and Theory and History, 1960–1975,” in F. Ankersmit & H. Kellner (eds.), *A New Philosophy of History* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1995), 41-42.

²⁸ J-M. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 6-8, 198.

²⁹ As cited in Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist*, 43.

³⁰ A. Danto, “The Decline and Fall of the Analytical Philosophy of History,” in F. Ankersmit & H. Kellner (ed.), *A New Philosophy of History* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1995), 143.

a single complex of concrete relationships.³¹ One characteristic was essential here for Mink: the stories that history produces are “not lived, but told.”

To understand this proposition about the “storiedness” of the past, it is best to compare it to those on the other side of the argument. For Paul Ricoeur, life itself could not be separated from narrative, since ‘the meaning of human existence is itself narrative.’³² In linking this to history, he built on the work of Walter Gallie, another analytical philosopher, who had argued that history-as-narrative shares the same “story-shape” as the past itself.³³ The task of the historians, and this was the point most effectively put forward by David Carr, was not to tell *a* story, but uncover *the* story of the past. Carr went so far as criticizing Ricoeur’s position, since, as David Weberman has put it, in it ‘narrative appears merely as a description or ordering of our experience rather than as the structure of our experience itself.’³⁴

Both the “analytical” and the “phenomenological” philosophy of history are part of what Frank Ankersmit has called ‘a primarily philosophical analysis of the (epistemological) relationship between the historian’s language and the past recounted in it.’³⁵ In other words, they take “narrative” – albeit often only analyzed on the level of small groups of sentences³⁶ – as a condition of history’s possibility. In Kantian terms, both analytical and phenomenological philosophies of history analyze narrative as an *a priori* of history production.³⁷ Mink’s “configurational comprehension” and Ricoeur’s *synthèse de l’hétérogène* continue to be used by many historians writing about narrative – either implicit or explicit, as in the definitions listed above.

Analytical and phenomenological narrativism has been criticized from various quarters. What Ankersmit has called the “rhetorical approach to narrative,” practiced most famously by Hayden White, challenged the *a priori* status of narrative and instead tried to historicize and implicate its form in particular ideological formations.³⁸ Thus, White in his 1980 essay “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” argued that narrative arose as the dominant form

³¹ Tozzi Thompson, 115-116.

³² As cited in E.A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 91.

³³ I take the term “story-shape” from A. Munslow, *The Routledge Companion to Historical Studies* (London: Routledge, 2005), 172.

³⁴ D. Weberman, “Phenomenology,” In A. Tucker (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 514.

³⁵ F. Ankersmit, “Narrative and Interpretation,” in A. Tucker (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 201.

³⁶ Vann, “Turning Linguistic,” 43.

³⁷ See e.g. Ankersmit, “Narrative and Interpretation,” 205-207; D. Fulda, “Historiographic Narration,” in P. Hühn et al. (eds.), *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2014).

³⁸ Ankersmit, “Narrative and Interpretation,” 201. The linkage between narrative and ideology was in turn criticized by many, including Mink, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, the latter of which argued, in my view convincingly, that storytelling can be used both ‘to reflect reality or to supplement it, to reinforce ruling ideologies or to subvert them, to console us for our mortality or to give us intimations of our immortality.’ As cited in Clark, 105.

of history production alongside the rise of the nation state in Europe, and served as an important means of organizing a chaotic past into a coherent, linear narrative that justified the existence of the nation and its claims to sovereignty.³⁹ Paul Veyne criticized exactly the synthesizing or configurational effect of narrative that Ricoeur and Mink had argued for, and instead proposed to foreground “the incomplete nature of history”.⁴⁰ Similarly, Sande Cohen in his *History out of Joint* argued against the homogenization achieved through narrative, and instead opted to lay bare the “cognitive dissonance” between different sources talking about the past, and between the past and the present.⁴¹

Probably the best-known opponents of narrative were members of the *Annales* school. Their understanding of narrative was often linked to what they called *histoire evenementielle* (history of events), which they associated with so-called Rankean history mostly concerned with political and military events. This often overlapped with an interest in “structures” instead of “events”, a dichotomization that Peter Burke, among others, has been keen on problematizing.⁴² These debates produced their own polemics - like Francois Furet’s sneering remark that narrative is ‘a somewhat lazy mode of historical writing’⁴³ – but did not do much to clarify the positions of those who deemed narrative irrelevant for (academic) historians, and other, like Ricoeur, Veyne and Kellner, who found the *Annalistes* to continue writing narrative histories, albeit sometimes of a different kind.⁴⁴

I would argue that the most important critique of viewing history production as narrative has come from the historian and literary analyst Philippe Carrard. Carrard starts his work with two definitions of narrative frequently used in literary analysis⁴⁵: as ‘somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened’⁴⁶; and as a ‘logically consistent representation of at least two asynchronous events that do not presuppose or imply one

³⁹ H. White “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in H. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, MD.: John Hopkins University Press, 1987); Cf. Clark, 98; A. Rigney, “History as Text: Narrative Theory and History,” in N. Partner & S. Foot (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory* (Thousand Oaks, Ca.: SAGE Publications, 2013), 191-192.

⁴⁰ As cited in A. Megill & D.N. McCloskey, “The Rhetoric of History,” in J.S. Nelson, A. Megill & D.N. McCloskey (eds.), *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 225-226.

⁴¹ As cited in Carrard, “History and Narrative,” 178-179.

⁴² See e.g. P. Burke, “History of Events and the Revival of Narrative,” in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 287-288.

⁴³ Clark, 88.

⁴⁴ See e.g. P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 11; Clark, 88-89; Munslow, *Companion*, 171; Rigney, “History as Text,” 187; Kellner, “The Return of Rhetoric,” 155; Carrard, “History and Narrative,” 179-180.

⁴⁵ Although it should be acknowledged that within narratology and literary studies there is also no agreement over a definition of narrative, or even the need of one.

⁴⁶ J. Phelan, *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 18. This comes very close to Munslow’s definition in Munslow, *Companion*, 169.

another.⁴⁷ Using these definitions he has argued for at least five distinct forms of history production: a tableau; an analysis; an anthropological description; a linear narrative; and a stage narrative.⁴⁸ Of these five, the first three – which he characterizes as “synchronic cross-sections” – ‘may include brief stories... [b]ut those stories, again, do not add up to produce a well-formed narrative.’⁴⁹ Of the other two, called “diachronic development”, only linear narratives are fully narrative, while stage narratives have “narrativehood” (‘distinguishing it from non-narratives’), but little “narrativeness” (‘a set of optional features that make narratives more prototypically narrative-like’).⁵⁰

I want to raise three points that relate Carrard’s argument to those outlined above. The first is one of relevance. Setting aside those who think that theorizing only takes away time from “doing history”, it might be argued that whether or not history production is considered a narrative, or exists on a scale of “narrativeness”, does not meaningfully contribute to analysis. I see at least two arguments to counter this position. One is the need to develop a conceptual methodology for being able to analyze forms of history production, a need for which I argue below. Secondly, and more important here, is the argument of terminological clarity. In his now famous article “Concepts of Causation in A. J. P. Taylor's Account of the Origins of the Second World War” (1978), Wilhelm Dray set to analyze different understandings of “intention”, particularly in a debate between Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper over Hitler’s “intent” to start war. Dray argued that the driving force of the debate’s continuity was the unclarity over what the terms “intention” and “war” meant. In a similar vein, as I mentioned above, Peter Burke has argued that much of the disagreement between “narrativists” and “Annalists” has circled around the meaning of and difference between “structure” and “event.” To clarify what is meant by “narrative,” albeit with an acknowledgement of the temporality and border fluidity of any definition,⁵¹ can clarify many of the debates held in this field.

⁴⁷ G. Prince, “Narrativehood, Narrativeness, Narrativity, Narratability,” in J. Pier & J. A. García Landa (eds.), *Theorizing Narrativity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 19.

⁴⁸ Defined, respectively, as ‘the comprehensive account of the political, social and economic structures of a specific area during a specific period’; ‘studies that focus on a theme or a problem, dealing not with the changes that theme or problem may have undergone, but with its various aspects at a specific time and place’; descriptions of ‘a certain place at a certain time... “from the periphery to the center, from the visual to the less visual, from the objective to the subjective, from the material condition of a culture to its expression of meaning”’; ‘the narrative that proceeds from sequence to sequence on a temporal axis’; and ‘narratives that do not proceed from event to event, but from state to state, or from situation to situation.’ Carrard, “History and Narrative,” 181-184. Also P. Carrard, “Historiographic Discourse and Narratology: A Footnote to Fludernik’s Work on Factual Narrative,” in J. Alber & G. Olson (eds.), *How to Do Things with Narrative: Cognitive and Diachronic Perspectives* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 133-134, 136-138; Carrard, “Historical Discourse,” 388, 393.

⁴⁹ Carrard, “History and Narrative,” 183.

⁵⁰ Carrard, “Historiographic Discourse,” 133-134; Carrard, “Historical Discourse,” 388.

⁵¹ Rigney, “History as Text,” 184.

A second point is related to the unique characteristics of history, as compared to literature. I do not want to get into discussions over differences and similarities, their possible relevance, constructedness, or implications in ideological formations. What I want to do, is raise the implications of the abovementioned analytical and phenomenological approaches to history for the understanding of narrativism. To begin with the latter: if the “story-form” of the past is narrative, and the task of the historian is to represent that narrative as truthfully as possible, it is hard to see how that representation could be anything but a narrative, as long as the term is understood as being linked to the “structure of the past.” On the other hand, Frank Ankersmit – a decidedly analytical historian in this regard – has argued that even “cross-sectional” histories ‘try to show how some historical periods differ from what went before or came after them.’⁵² Furthermore, if one takes Danto’s “narrative sentence” – and Mink’s, Ankersmit’s and others’ elaboration on it – as a characteristic of at least a “historical” narrative, it is clear that all histories must, at least in some way, be “narrative.”⁵³

This leads me to the third point, that has also been raised by Carrard. This is whether an understanding of narrative as developed in narratology can (and should) be incorporated unadjusted into the discipline of history. Carrard has suggested that ‘narratology... cannot describe [historical texts] adequately, and must give way to a different, larger framework.’ Instead, he proposes a “poetics”, ‘by which I mean the study of the codes, rules, and conventions that shape any discourse, whether narrative or not.’⁵⁴ Similarly, although involving a notion of “narrative”, Peter Burke has argued, echoing the notion of “narrativeness”, ‘to make distinctions between what one might call degrees of narrativity in the historical writings of our time, or indeed any other period.’⁵⁵ Daniel Fulda has argued that ‘developing a specific historiographical narratology... a task that is as urgently required as it is exceptionally difficult.’⁵⁶ Interestingly, narratologists have also recently turned their attention to “factual” (as opposed to fictional) narrative. Under the influence

⁵² F. Ankersmit, “Danto’s Philosophy of History in Retrospective,” in A.C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2007), 379.

⁵³ See e.g. Idem.

⁵⁴ Carrard, “Historiographic Discourse,” 136-138. Kellner has been critical of the notion of poetics, and has instead opted for a rhetoric of history, of which poetics can be a part. See also Megill & McCloskey; N.S. Struever, “Topics in History,” *History and Theory* 19, no. 4 (1980): 66-79. This argument deserves further attention, as does a differentiation between form, style and media. Finally, Rigney, Fulda and others have argued that new understandings of “historical narrative” need to be developed for the analysis of history production on new media, reiterating Lev Manovich’s oft-cited observation that ‘in the world of new media, the word narrative is often used... to cover up the fact that we have not yet developed a language to describe these new strange objects.’ L. Manovich, “Database as Symbolic Form,” *Convergence* 5, no.2 (1999): 80-99.

⁵⁵ Burke, “History of Events,” 283-284. He later evokes Mark Philips’ suggestion to ‘think of the varieties of narrative and non-narrative modes as existing along a continuum.’ As cited in idem, 287-288. See also Rigney, “History as Text,” 188.

⁵⁶ Fulda.

of Monika Fludernik's 2013 article "The Missing Narratological Paradigm", this has in particular led to a flourishing of narratological scholarship in legal studies.⁵⁷

A final note. Debates on the relation between narrative and history have been, as can be glanced from the above discussion, limited to particular spaces in the world. Claude Levi-Strauss already warned that the translation of the past into a narrative, and its influences on how history is conceived, is part of a "Western culture." Similarly, authors writing about a "storytelling boom" or "narrative turn" have linked their research to the "West", and in the former case especially "Western capitalism". Similarly, the "crisis of narratives" that Jean-Francois Lyotard found a fundamental characteristic of the "Postmodern Condition" needs to be "provincialized." In many parts of the world, and this should by now be a commonplace, histories are produced in songs, epics, inscriptions, dances, and many other forms that all need to be incorporated in a poetics of history. The applicability of an "unnatural narrative" approach, that I will advocate for in this thesis, to these forms is all but a given.

Thesis Outline

Having established some of the core terminology, it now becomes possible to specify the subject of this thesis. This thesis will deal with the formal characteristics of "*historical* narratives": how form interacts with content; how formal innovations lay bare methodological complexities; how historical "narratives" interact with readers; and how, in the words of Katie Trumpener, "form itself becomes legible as a particularly rich and significant kind of historical evidence."⁵⁸ I had to limit myself in several ways. First, my core interest in this thesis is how historical form foregrounds and interacts with methodological complexities of history production. To that end, I have chosen not to analyze a corpus of texts addressing a particular subject (as in Rigney) or a national tradition (as in Carrard), but to look at a particular historical form: the juxtaposition of different historical voices to bring to the fore the "polyphony" of history. Moreover, I will not analyze, other than in passing, the historical works in their separate historiographical contexts, historicize the formal choices, or examine the effects on readers and interpretative communities. Perhaps most importantly, I will not comment on the truthfulness of these historical works, unless it is absolutely evident – as in one example in the final chapter.

⁵⁷ M. Fludernik, "Factual Narrative: A Missing Narratological Paradigm," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatschrift* 63, no.1 (2013): 117-134. For scholarship of legal narratives, see e.g. G. Olson, *From Law and Literature to Legality and Affect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Brooks, *Seduced by Story*, esp. 122-152.

⁵⁸ K. Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), xv.

The thesis consists of three parts. In the first part, I will analyze existing scholarship on form, roughly since the 1960s, and predominantly produced by scholars from Anglo-Saxon countries and Northwestern Europe. This particular “discursive space” represents the space constructed by participants through citations, annotations and responses (its intellectual con-text), and by what Umberto Eco has called the texts’ “Encyclopedia,” that is, the knowledge that is assumed to be shared and does not need elaboration.⁵⁹ At the same time, this supposedly “closed space” needs problematization, not in the least for the ways in which it produces authority through the attempts to naturalize its own closedness.⁶⁰ In terms of content, this scholarship can be divided into three phases of writing on form, understood not as separate temporal unities, but as interacting debates of which the beginnings and endings are fluid and that variously “haunt” each other⁶¹: the analytical philosophy of history sometimes dubbed “narrativism”; the rise of “poststructuralism”, “postmodernism” and the “Linguistic Turn”; and formal innovations in the 21st century, to which I will return shortly. My main focus will be on the second phase, for the simple reason that this saw the most writings on form, including the (in)famous coinage of *The Content of the Form*. My intention is not to simply recount these debates. Instead, I want to untangle the question of form from the complex discursive triangle of “postmodernism”, “poststructuralism” and the “Linguistic Turn” in which it got caught between the 1960s and 2000s, and to show how form retained its importance for many historians that (re)turned to the archive.

In the second part, I will present an analysis of a small corpus of history texts in the third part. I will look at four books that employ, what Mikhail Bakhtin has called “polyphony,” that is a ‘plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses.’⁶² These four books are Iris Chang’s *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, Svetlana Alexievich’s *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Yair Mintzker’s *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew*, and Richard Price’s *Alabi’s World*. These four books are consciously chosen, as they exist on, what one might call, a “polyphonic scale.” Although all these works define themselves or have been defined as polyphonic or multivocal, they do not all fit Bakhtin’s description of ‘a plurality of voices, with equal rights and each with its own world.’⁶³ By

⁵⁹ U. Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press, 1979), 19.

⁶⁰ See e.g. D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 28, 40-41.

⁶¹ The notion of “hauntology” in the context of history is most well-developed by Ethan Kleinberg. For a comprehensive summary, see E. Kleinberg, “Postmodern Theory with Historical Intent: A Deconstructive Approach to the Past,” in J.-M. Kuukkanen (ed.), *Philosophy of History: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). Kleinberg is inspired by Derrida’s notion of spectrality, which also comes to take up an important role in queer history. Cf. C. Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁶² M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6.

⁶³ Idem.

showing how they differ from each other, I aim to shed light on the position of the historian in these texts, and touch upon some of the methodological problems that gave rise to these different “polyphonic” histories. Finally, by reflecting on criticisms of Chang’s *The Rape of Nanking*, I want to suggest a potential weakness of the so-called “Rashomon effect”.

Towards a Critical Historical Literacy

Peter Burke, Ann Rigney, Paul Carrard, Hayden White and Linda Orr have been among those who have analyzed “historical narrative” for their formal structure. However, overall these studies are limited and, as Ankersmit has noted, they often take 19th century (French) historiography as their object of analysis.⁶⁴ As a result of the scarcity of analyses, some scholars, like Ernst Breisach and Jerzy Topolski, have argued that formal innovations were limited to “postmodern theorists”⁶⁵ and did not have ‘any marked practical importance for professional historians.’⁶⁶ On the other hand, Ann Curthoys and John Docker, among others, have stated that ‘by the late twentieth century... Historians were becoming increasingly interested in finding new ways of writing – especially micro-narratives, multiple points of view, and also fragmentation, montage, and genre-crossing.’⁶⁷ And Richard Vann has observed that ‘historians are certainly more adventurous than they were in 1966... and they have broken sufficiently from the model of the nineteenth-century realistic novel to produce histories without characters or plots.’⁶⁸ How can these opposing views be reconciled?

As Peter Burke has argued, from the 1960s onwards, a debate developed on the margins of academia in the United States over the question of what kind of narrative historians should write. He quotes film historian Siegfried Kracauer as the first to draw attention to the ‘decomposition of temporal continuity’ in modernist fiction and its potential interest for historians.⁶⁹ Formal innovation continued in the 1970s, most notably with the rise of micro-history, and had its exponents in the 1980s and 1990s, sometimes under the self-pronounced influence of

⁶⁴ F. Ankersmit, “The Origins of Postmodernist Historiography,” in J. Topolski (ed.), *Historiography between Modernism and Postmodernism: Contributions to the Methodology of the Historical Research* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 115. Burke and Carrard’s studies are an exception to this.

⁶⁵ As cited in J. Zammito, “Historians and Philosophy of Historiography,” in A. Tucker (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 71.

⁶⁶ As cited in C. Lorenz, S. Berger & N. Brauch, “Narrativity and Historical Writing: Introductory Remarks,” in S. Berger, N. Brauch & C. Lorenz (eds.), *Analysing Historical Narratives: On Academic, Popular and Educational Framings of the Past* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021), 12. See also Clark, 161.

⁶⁷ A. Curthoys & J. Docker, *Is History Fiction?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 201-202.

⁶⁸ R. Vann, “Hayden White and Non-Non-Histories,” in R. Darnton (ed.), *Philosophy of History after Hayden White* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 183.

⁶⁹ Burke, “History of Events,” 288-289. Cf. Rigney, “History as Text,” 185.

“postmodern” insights. It was around the turn of the millennium that the formal innovation that was being practiced, supposedly, suddenly came to an end.

The late 1990s saw a great production of works from historians fashioning themselves as “anti-postmodernists.” These included Richard Evans’ *In Defense of History*, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob’s *Telling the Truth about History*, Ludmilla Jordanova’s *History in Practice*, and the somewhat less subtly-titled *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past* by Keith Windshuttle. In dialogue with these, Curthoys and Docker have argued, historical controversies found a broader audience in various countries, among other things under the influence of the trial of Holocaust denier David Irving against the historian Deborah Lipstadt. Some of these authors suggested, in the words of Richard Evans, that the ‘increase in scope and intensity of the Holocaust deniers’ activities since the mid-1970s... [reflects a] postmodernist intellectual climate.’⁷⁰

I hold, together with many others, that these charges are exaggerated and reflect the polemical atmosphere of the decades before the turn of the century. Instead, I want to suggest that formal innovation, far from having died down after the 1990s, is in fact flourishing. Dan Stone and Zoltán Simon, echoing similar debates in literary studies, have been among those arguing that environmental history is a field of study that necessitates formal innovations – for one because many of its subjects cannot speak.⁷¹ In gender and queer history, as well as in postcolonial history, scholars have developed creative ways of representing archival silences – including Clare Hemmings’ *Considering Emma Goldman: Feminist Political Ambivalence and the Imaginative Archive*, which consists of a partially fictive correspondence with the anarchist thinker Emma Goldman. In the history of emotions, Walter Andres and Mehmet Kalpakli interweave fictitious passages featuring references to experientiality in their historical subjects. Finally, Nancy Partner and Anton Weiss-Wendt have been among those drawing attention to ‘narrative experiments’ in high school history textbooks in Israel and Palestine, and Estonia respectively.⁷²

The observation that formal innovation is being practiced by historians in a variety of field leads me to the justification of this thesis. I consider there to be at least four. First, to study the interplay between content and form. Hayden White repeatedly urged that the structure of historical representation is not decided after historical research, but interacts with research throughout

⁷⁰ As cited in A. Curthoys & J. Docker, “The Boundaries of History and Fiction,” in N. Partner & S. Foot (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2013), 214-215. See also Curthoys & Docker, *Is History Fiction?*, 233.

⁷¹ Z.S. Simon, “The Limits of Anthropocene Narratives,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 23, no.2 (2018): 184-199.

⁷² Partner, “Narrative Persistence,” 98; cf. A. Weiss-Wendt, “Victim of History: Perceptions of the Holocaust in Estonia,” in J-P. Himka & J.B. Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

(including through what he called “prefiguration”).⁷³ Alan Munslow later criticized historians ‘priority of content over form’, which he called a content/form fallacy, an argument that was recently reiterated and elaborated on by Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen.⁷⁴ For scholars of literature, arguing for the analysis of the interplay of form and content needs much less justification. Nevertheless, also a literary scholar like Wayne Booth has exclaimed: ‘I have often scoffed about modes of criticism that care so little about formal construction that they would be unaffected if the works discussed had been written backward.’⁷⁵ I already invoked above historians such as Paul Veyne, Hans Kellner and Sande Cohen who have argued that conventional forms of history production create an artificial homogeneity and continuity out of discontinuous and heterogeneous sources. Whereas Cohen argued that the incoherence of the sources should be maintained to create “cognitive dissonances,” a similar standpoint can be grasped from the title of Kellner’s book *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* and Veyne’s plea to represent the “incomplete nature of history.”⁷⁶ All these can be read as arguments to take serious the influence that forms has on the production of content.

Secondly, this form/content interaction can itself be analyzed historically. As Katie Trumpener has suggested, form is complexly embedded in time and space and can be analyzed as historical evidence of cultural productions – an approach known among narratologists as diachronic narratology.⁷⁷ Peter Burke, in this context, has invoked research into the “cultural

⁷³ See e.g. “Hayden White,” in E. Domańska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 22. White’s argument went against J.H. Hexter’s eloquent suggestion that “style” is merely ‘what goes on between the time an historian says to himself: “well, I guess I understand this matter about as well as I ever will, so I may as well start writing,” and the time he lays down his pen ruefully beside a stack of scrawled pages and says: “Well, it’s a damned bad job, but it’s about as good as I can do, so that’s that.”’ As cited in Vann, “Turning Linguistic,” 52. White’s understanding of formal content, in particular his linkage between modes, tropes and ideology has been extensively, and to my mind rightfully, criticized. For example, Louis Mink has questioned the assumption that narratives necessarily “moralize.” See L.O. Mink, “Everyman His or Her Own Annalist,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no.4 (1981), 778. See also Clark, 105. A critique of his structuralist assumptions is outlined in chapter 1.

⁷⁴ A. Munslow, “Introduction: Theory and Practice,” in A. Munslow & R. Rosenstone (eds.), *Experiments in Rethinking History* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8; Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist*, 6-7.

⁷⁵ W. Booth, “Introduction,” in M.M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxv. James Goodman once mirrored this exclamation for historian in the most restraint manner, when referring to ‘history written by writers who, whether composing the most complex theory or the simplest narrative, are attentive, in one way or other, to one degree or another, to the ways that form and style shape substance, content, and meaning.’ J. Goodman, “Editorial: History as Creative Writing,” *Rethinking History* 14, no.1 (2010), 1.

⁷⁶ P. Veyne, *Writing History: Essays on Epistemology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); S. Bann, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); S. Cohen, *History Out of Joint: Essays on the Use and Abuse of History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2005). Some of this developed into an interest in history as the “uncanny.” See e.g. “Frank Ankersmit, in E. Domańska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 82.

⁷⁷ Trumpener, xv; M. Fludernik, “The Diachronization of Narratology: Dedicated to F. K. Stanzel on His 80th Birthday,” *Narrative* 11, no. 3 (2003): 331-348. Fludernik’s article in turn led to an outburst of research, some of it captured in P. Hühn, J. Pier & W. Schmid, *Handbook of Diachronic Narratology* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023).

narratives” of a time, that shape how scholars approach their own narrative structuring.⁷⁸ In the context of environmental history, Zoltan Simon has recently warned that the historicization of nature along the lines of human history – a development traced back to 19th century “European” intellectual history by Maurice Mandelbaum, among others – has made it impossible to narrativize the environmental disaster, as it ‘def[ies] our familiar ways of sense-making.’⁷⁹ Although I disagree with Simon’s conclusions, his argument points to the great influence of the existing “narrative storehouses” on how we make sense of the past in our present.

Thirdly, as Peter Burke has argued, and I have tried to suggest throughout this introduction, formal innovation reflects ‘the awareness that the old forms are inadequate for one’s purposes.’⁸⁰ I already invoked environmental history, queer and gender history, postcolonial history and the history of emotions, as fields in which formal innovations can be a response to methodological complexities. Allan Megill and Donald McCloskey have added to this point that ‘the old ways are not obsolete, but would be more persuasive if they were self-conscious.’⁸¹

Finally, analyzing different kinds of historical form foregrounds questions of reader responses. The notion of a “truth pact” between historians and readers, discussed below, is only one example of historians’ imagined reception of their work.⁸² However, various scholars have pointed out that although ‘it is important to understand the nature of the historical audience... this is an area that has received relatively little attention.’⁸³ Additionally, Appleby, Hunt & Jacob have drawn attention to the ‘important fact that people living at the same time construct their own

⁷⁸ Burke, “History of Events,” 284-285. On the meaning that can be grasped from the dominant narratological paradigms of a time, Rigney has invoked scholars who see ‘the rejection of traditional narrative [from the 1970s onward]... as a reflection of a nascent ability on the part of more recent generations, the “children of chaos”, to live without the imagined coherence... or as evidence of a new openness to seeing multiple points of view and multiple possible subjects in history.’ Brooks is more forceful when he proposes that the ‘mindless valorization of storytelling speaks to crucial facts in contemporary culture that need more analysis.’ Rigney, “Rhetoric of Historical Representation,” 8; Rigney, “History as Text,” 193; Brooks, 9. See also, R. Rosenstone, “Introduction: Practice and Theory,” in A. Munslow & R. Rosenstone (eds.), *Experiments in Rethinking History* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1-2; Munslow, “Introduction,” 17.

⁷⁹ Simon, esp. 192-195.

⁸⁰ Burke, “History of Events,” 289. See for this point also B. Southgate, “Postmodernism,” in A. Tucker (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 546.

⁸¹ Megill & McCloskey, 226-227. Cf. Curthoys & Docker, *Is History Fiction*, 6; D. Graham Burnett, J. Dolven, C.L. Hansen & J.E.H. Smith, “Metafiction and the Study of History: Makerly Knowledge in the Archive,” *Rethinking History* 27, no.3 (2023), 545.

⁸² By way of another example, Richard Evans has argued that ‘in practice, surely, no reader comes to a history book naively willing to believe everything it says.’ R. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 72. Others refer to a “factuality pact”, see e.g. Lorenz, et al., 9-10. Or a “contract” between writer and reader, see e.g. L.O. Mink, “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument,” in G. Roberts (ed.), *The History and Narrative Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 2001), 212; Fulda; Carrard, “Historiographic Discourse,” 125-126.

⁸³ Kellner, “The Return of Rhetoric,” 150. Cf. M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), esp. ch.1; Domańska, “Frank Ankersmit,” 79-80; Clark, 8; Rigney, “History as Text,” 196; Lorenz, et al., 16. Daniel Fulda has reiterated a call from cognitive narratologists, that I hope will get more attention in the analysis of the interactions between content and form: ‘One of the first tasks of cultural analysts should be to study empirically how people “consume” history and to examine which cognitive frames of meaning-making they apply in order to come to an understanding of how the past is (re)created in collective memory.’ Fulda.

lexicons... Far from exercising individual idiosyncrasies in reading, a community of readers will build up a strong consensus on meaning.⁸⁴ That historical reading communities themselves need to be historicized has been teased out by Graham Burnett, et al.'s observation that reading strategies have radically changed since the introduction of the internet, towards what they call an "epistemology of the search".⁸⁵

Connecting all these four arguments for the relevance of this research is my personal conviction that the study of form has the potential to cultivate a "critical historical literacy." The idea of critical historical literacy builds on scholarship in narratology that posits the importance of a "critical narrative literacy" or what Liesbeth Korthals Altes has called "narrative savviness."⁸⁶ With the proliferation of narrative in contemporary societies, what I referred to above as the "storytelling boom", these scholars argue for the important of a better and more critical awareness of how stories are constructed and how they "work". This works on two levels simultaneously: it makes readers more aware of how to construct stories and in what forms; and it makes readers more resistant against, to refer back to Peter Brooks 2022 book, the "seduction" of story.

I think of critical historical literacy in much the same way, albeit with the addition that it effects not only the reader, but also cultivates a more critical and self-reflexive approach to form and storytelling from the side of the historian. Thus, on one level critical historical literacy makes historians and readers more aware of how to construct histories and in what forms (and by extension, how form and content interact), on the other level, it makes historians and readers more aware of the workings of historiographical narrative, including the "storehouse of narratives" that historians and readers alike use to make sense of the past.

Cultivating a critical historical literacy seems to me to be of the utmost important in our current time. The politicization of history in authoritarian regimes and "backsliding" democracies, including its use in the legitimization of war, is increasing around the world and historical falsification, often in the context of colonial and other past crimes against humanity, has been a shared characteristic of many political leaders elected in recent years, including in the 2024 "year of elections."⁸⁷ Moreover, the introduction of Artificial Intelligence has changed the ways in which history is produced and transmitted, raising questions about the role of the historian, but also increasing the importance of being able to recognize how narratives work when they are produced

⁸⁴ J. Appleby, L. Hunt & M. Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 268.

⁸⁵ Graham Burnett, et al., 548.

⁸⁶ L. Korthals Altes, *Ethos And Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation Of Values in Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014); S. Dillion & C. Craig, *Storylistening: Narrative Evidence and Public Reasoning* (London/New York: Routledge, 2022).

⁸⁷ See e.g. Network of Concerned Historians, *Annual Reports 2024* (forthcoming); See also the forthcoming R. Zeeman (ed.), *Censorship and Self-Censorship in History Education: A Comparative Approach to Backsliding Democracies* (Budapest: CEUPress, [2026]).

by supposedly neutral (but of course far from neutral) systems. Additionally, as many environmental scholars have argued, the climate disaster requires people to think differently about time and perceive of human history as only one temporal level, something that as Zoltan Simon has argued cited above, requires a move away from traditional ways of making sense of history. Finally, and this brings me back to the beginning of this introduction, critical historical literacy fosters a more self-conscious attitude towards the structuring of histories. History, whether narrative or otherwise, does not, and should not come in one single form. In the words of Yair Mintzker, that act as the motto of this thesis, ‘between the Scylla of false omniscience and the Charybdis of “post-truth” relativism lies a whole world of possibilities.’⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Mintzker, 285.

Three Ideas in Search of an Intellectual History

*We can write the history of that process only if we recognize that... [they] are at once empty and overflowing categories. Empty because they have no ultimate, transcendent meaning. Overflowing because even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions*⁸⁹

It is a well-known and frequently uttered truism that postmodernism is difficult to define. It is a less recognized truism that this acknowledgement has not stopped many commentators from defining it anyway. To give just one example, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* opens its otherwise excellent entry on “Postmodernism” by acknowledging that the observation ‘that postmodernism is indefinable is a truism. However...’ It goes on to define a group of two Italian (Perniola, Vattimo) and five French (Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze, Baudrillard) thinkers who are ‘most commonly cited in discussions of philosophical postmodernism’, even though the author recognizes simultaneously that ‘individually they may resist common affiliation’ and that ‘the French... are often called “poststructuralist”’ – a concept that did not secure itself its own Stanford page.⁹⁰

That the *Stanford Encyclopedia* is far from an exception is one of the things I aim to show in this part. Focusing on history production, I will outline how over time a complex discursive triangle developed in which three concepts – “(post-)modernism,” “(post-)structuralism,” and the “Linguistic Turn” – serving as placeholders for variedly well-defined (and variedly well-understood) sets of ideas, became conflated to the point where their analytical value has almost disappeared. Additionally, as I will try to show, some of the ideas associated with this discursive triangle could be traced (albeit contestably) to an approach in the analytical philosophy of history often called “(post-)narrativism” – an approach that has been surprisingly successful in shielding itself from conceptual inflation, despite its core term’s omnipresence in the humanities.

My intentions for this chapter are far from antiquarian. As Peter Burke has outlined, ‘experiments with scale and experiments with narrative... are often taken to be features of the cultural movement known as “postmodernism”.’⁹¹ Moreover, Ann Curthoys and John Docker

⁸⁹ J.W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” in J.W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 49.

⁹⁰ G. Aylesworth, “Postmodernism,” in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/postmodernism/>.

⁹¹ P. Burke, “Overture. The New History: Its Past and its Future,” in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 19. See also Southgate, 546.

have suggested that a series of Anglophone publications they dub “anti-postmodernist” (to which I will return below) and a number of historical controversies that gained public attention – including the so-called “Enola Gay Controversy” over a scheduled 1995 exhibition at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington commemorating the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – had ‘an intimidating effect on experimentation with literary form.’⁹² Personally, I have often received questions about postmodernism when presenting parts of this thesis (even when I wouldn’t mention the concept myself), including one enigmatic response by a professor who only proclaimed that ‘postmodernism died at 9/11.’⁹³ My interest, in short, is not to recount the debates that were held over notions of “postmodernism”, but to untangle the question of form from this discursive extended triangle.⁹⁴

I have kept the temporal reference (“over time”) purposefully vague, as it runs into a different set of definitional problems. It is to these problems that I turn first.

The Geometry of “Postmodernism”

As mentioned in the introduction, the term “narrativism” has been relatively comfortably traced back to William Dray, Richard Ely & Rolf Gruener’s article “Mandelbaum on Historical Narrative: A Discussion” (1969).⁹⁵ The authors referred to a group of analytical philosophers of history, who had moved away from the theoretical dominance of Carl Hempel’s covering-law model.⁹⁶

⁹² Curthoys & Docker, *Is History Fiction*, esp. 205-220, 233. In a later article they made this point more explicitly: ‘the attention to literary form, and the open recognition of the difficulty of knowing what really happened in the past, that characterized the linguistic turn and the almost carnivalesque experimentalism of late twentieth-century historical writing, becomes subdued in these political and legal contexts.’ Curthoys & Docker, “History and Fiction,” 215-217. I cite their observations approvingly, even though I contest their claim that there was or has been a clear break in formal experimentation in historiography, at least on the level of books published.

⁹³ This was, of course, a statement more frequently heard at the time. See e.g. J. Bagini, “Death of an Idea,” *Prospect* (19 September 2002).

⁹⁴ The image of the extended triangle is suitable as it brings to mind the space (the inside of the triangle) in which ideas move around, floating freely between the poles of “postmodernism,” “poststructuralism” and “Linguistic Turn”. The extended line going beyond the triangle, in turn, ends in the fourth point (“(post-)narrativism), of which the relation with the triangle is complex, and of which many ideas exist in a space beyond the inner triangle (this is a particularly pressing point). However, the extended triangle has the downside that only two of the three points of the triangle exist on a continuum with “(post-)narrativism” and I would be hard pressed indicating what concept connects to what point.

⁹⁵ W. Dray, R. Ely & R. Gruener, “Mandelbaum on Historical Narrative: A Discussion,” *History & Theory* 8, no.2 (1969); Tozzi Thompson, 113.

⁹⁶ C.G. Hempel, “The Function of General Laws in History,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 39, no.2 (1942): 35-38; Danto, “Decline and Fall,” 75-76; G. Roberts, “Introduction: The History and Narrative Debate, 1960–2000,” in G. Roberts (ed.), *The History and Narrative Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), 2-3; Carrard, “History and Narrative,” 176-177; P.A. Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 4-5. Arthur Danto, explicitly inspired by Thomas Kuhn’s theory of paradigm shifts, referred to the dominance of the covering-law model as “the World according to Hempel.” For a more nuanced discussion of the different strands of thought at this time, see Vann, “Turning Linguistic,” esp. 40-43.

Although already in the mid-1950s some authors, including Dray and Danto, had commented on the relevance of “story” for historians, the real thrust towards narrative came in the early 1960s with the publication of Danto’s “Narrative Sentences” (1962), Walter Gallie’s “The Historical Understanding” (1964) and Louis Mink’s “The Autonomy of Historical Understanding” (1966), among others.⁹⁷ Although, as Richard Vann has argued, there was very little direct interaction between the two, despite their shared interest in the functioning of language, the analytical philosopher of history Jack Hexter inspired one of the members of the “Cambridge School” John Pocock.⁹⁸

I mention the Cambridge School as a step up to the second concept, the “Linguistic Turn”. The Linguistic Turn can be far less comfortably traced back to a certain time or a set of ideas. In philosophy, it was coined by the Vienna Circle member Gustav Bergman and is often associated with the early work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, in particular his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (1921). At the heart of this Linguistic Turn lied a repositioning of the role of philosophy away from metaphysics towards language, and of the role of philosophers to resolve contradictions that had arisen out of previously misguided understandings of language.⁹⁹ In his posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Wittgenstein, however, moved away from the attempt to construct an “ideal language” freed from the confusions that arose out of its undisciplined usage. Instead, he introduced the notions of “language games”, to refer to the different rules by which words get their meaning in ordinary usage, and, arguably most famously, that of “family resemblance”. Using the word “game” as an example, he traced the difficulty of defining precisely what a game is, instead suggesting many different characteristics that variously applied to different games, arguing that ‘we can... see how similarities crop up and disappear... a complicated network of similarities

⁹⁷ A.C. Danto, “Narrative Sentences,” in A.C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); L.O. Mink, *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); W.B. Gallie, “Narrative and Historical Understanding,” in G. Roberts (ed.), *The History and Narrative Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 2001). Geoffrey Roberts has pointed out the paradox of Lawrence Stone’s 1979 article “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History”, given that in the Analytical Philosophy of History narrative was at the research core precisely between the early 1960s and the early 1970s (this is the proposed temporality of Frank Ankersmit, who argues that with White’s *Metahistory* the interest in narrative shifted from an analytical to a rhetorical interest). Roberts traces Stone’s argument for a revival in the later 1970s back to Paul Ricoeur’s proclamation of the “eclipse of narrative” under the influence of the *Annales* school, among others. These coinciding developments point again to the underrecognized entanglements of these discursive spaces. One can add to this that a dialogue with narratology never truly came to develop. Roberts, 2-3; F. Ankersmit, “A Narrativist Revival?,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 15 (2021), 216. See also Clark, 87-88. Ankersmit’s temporalization seems to me at least partially exaggerated given, for example, the publication of Louis Mink’s “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument” in 1978. For the absent dialogue with narratology, cf. Tozzi Thompson, 116; Lorenz, et al., 2.

⁹⁸ Vann, “Turning Linguistic,” 51-55.

⁹⁹ H-J. Glock & J. Kalhat, “Linguistic Turn,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018), 10.4324/0123456789-DD3600-1. Frank Ankersmit instead traces the Linguistic Turn in philosophy to W.V.O. Quine’s 1951 essay “Two Dogma’s of Empiricism. W.V.O. Quine, “Two Dogma’s of Empiricism,” *Philosophical Review* 60, no. 1 (1951): 20-43; F. Ankersmit, “Narrative and Interpretation,” in A. Tucker (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 77-78.

overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”.¹⁰⁰

This brief summary of Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle is not intended to shed any new light on research in this area, nor have I acknowledged any of the complexities and nuances of Wittgenstein’s work or the different views within the Vienna circle. My point of this short outline is only to show how the term Linguistic Turn developed in philosophy. Especially its later usage by Wittgenstein shows resemblance to approaches of the Cambridge School and what is known as *Begriffsgeschichte*, where both expressed an astute sensitivity to the contextual dimension of meaning and tried to trace different meanings of words in or through time.¹⁰¹ Additionally, to the extent that Richard Vann defined the turn toward narrative in the Analytical Philosophy of History from the late 1950s and early 1960s onward as ‘a paradigmatic shift’ in which the ‘historians’ language, not explanation or causality, would be *the* topic around which most reflections on history would center,’ the approach we above defined as “narrativism” could be considered part of the Linguistic Turn as well.¹⁰²

Most historians, however, have developed a different temporality for the Linguistic Turn in history. Various scholars have traced its beginnings to White’s publication of *Metahistory* (1973) or around the time of Roland Barthes’ “Le Discourse de l’Histoire” (1967).¹⁰³ This temporalization comes with a different understanding of what the Linguistic Turn is (or was). I will return more extensively to this below, but a few different positions will give an impression of the scope of possible interpretations. Some have evaluated its influence as distinctly positive. Thus Elizabeth Clark approvingly cites Rey Chow’s description as ‘the paradigm shift introduced by post-structuralism [note the linkage], whereby the study of language, literature, and cultural forms becomes irrevocably obliged to attend to the semiotic operations involved in the production of meanings’ leading to the ‘systematic unsettling of the stability of meaning, [and an] interruption of

¹⁰⁰ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1953), §66-67; A. Biletzki & A. Matar, “Ludwig Wittgenstein,” in E.N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/wittgenstein/>.

¹⁰¹ To align Cambridge School scholars with the Linguistic Turn is a contested claim though. Some scholars have instead opted for calling it part of a “Contextualist Turn”. Cf. M. Bevir, “The Errors of Linguistic Contextualism,” *History and Theory* 31, no. 3 (1992): 276-98; Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); R. Lamb, “Quentin Skinner’s Revised Historical Contextualism: A Critique,” *History of the Human Sciences* 22, no. 3 (2009): 51-73. Others have aligned the two, see e.g. H. Rosa, “Ideengeschichte und Gesellschaftstheorie: Der Beitrag der ‘Cambridge School’ zur Metatheorie,” *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 35, no.2 (1994): 197-223.

¹⁰² Vann, “Turning Linguistic,” 69. Curthoys & Docker also refer to Hexter as one of the important drivers of the Linguistic Turn. That their positions are, however, not always consistent, will hopefully become clear throughout this chapter. Curthoys & Docker, *Is History Fiction*, 141-143.

¹⁰³ See e.g. Ankersmit, “Narrative Introduction,” 77-78; M.I. La Greca, “The Other Side of the Linguistic Turn: Theory of History and the Negotiation of Humanity,” *Rethinking History* 27, no.1 (2023), 3-4; Curthoys & Docker, “History and Fiction,” 205-206. Like Curthoys & Docker, Ankersmit also recognizes the influence of Barthes, as well as Lionel Gossman.

referentiality.¹⁰⁴ Challenges to the evidentiary nature of historical documents and a greater sensitivity to textual interpretation are also among the things that Nancy Partner cites as the lasting impact of the Linguistic Turn. She further points to scholars in Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance scholarship, who have explicitly embraced tools of literary studies for analyzing historical texts.¹⁰⁵

At the same time, Partner has been critical of the conflation of references to the “Linguistic Turn” and references to “Postmodernism.”¹⁰⁶ Comparably, Kathleen Canning has outlined how ‘in popular academic usage... “the linguistic turn” (like the term postmodernism) has become a catch-all phrase for divergent critiques of established historical paradigms, narratives and chronologies.’¹⁰⁷ Hans Kellner has further criticized proponents of the “Linguistic Turn” for invoking approaches like discourse analysis or rhetoric, without sufficiently specifying their meaning or abiding by established methodologies.¹⁰⁸

Although conceptual conflation is common among many historians, it seems to increase in frequency among those critical of the increased attention paid to language. Thus, Ernst Breisach writing about the rise of “postmodernists” in the 1960s, describes ‘participation in the so-called Linguistic Turn’ as their ‘key instrument for revolutionary changes in history’s epistemology... [where] truth would have neither permanence nor stable foundations and hence no privileged authority.’¹⁰⁹ John Zammito, building on Frank Ankersmit’s distinction between Analytical Philosophy and post-*Metahistory* theory of history, argued that ‘the challenge that sent historiography into acute crisis at the end of the twentieth century was clearly grounded in the second of these two “linguistic turns,” the one emanating out of literary “theory” from poststructuralism. This is what has come to be taken as the postmodern [*bingo!*] moment.’¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ Clark, x.

¹⁰⁵ Partner, “Narrative Persistence,” 85; N. Partner, “Postmodernism: The ‘Crisis of Narratives’ and the Historical Discipline,” in C. Van den Akker (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Historical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2021), 343-344.

¹⁰⁶ Partner, “Narrative Persistence,” 82.

¹⁰⁷ K. Canning, “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience,” *Signs* 19, no.2 (1994), 369.

¹⁰⁸ Kellner, “Return of Rhetoric,” 148.

¹⁰⁹ Breisach, 24. Cf. N.J. Wilson, *History in Crisis? Recent Directions in Historiography* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, inc., 1999), 111. Breisach further adds that, under the influence of the Linguistic Turn (or postmodernism, or both), ‘Language changed from being the neutral medium between consciousness and the outside reality to being itself the only accessible reality.’ It seems to me that Breisach is here imagining a “pre-Linguistic Turn” position as if language was ever perceived as an unproblematic neutral medium between consciousness and outside reality, apart from the problematizations of outside reality as independent from or independently knowable by consciousness. To this point, Nancy Partner has argued that ‘the idea that language is primary and constitutive, not a transparent vessel of objective fact... is grounded in the classical philosophic tradition in the earliest dissection of mimetic activity.’ N. Partner, “The Fundamental Things Apply: Aristotle’s Narrative Theory and the Classical Origins of Postmodern History,” in N. Partner & S. Foot (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2013), 495-496. See also Southgate, 544.

¹¹⁰ Zammito, 68. That scholars critical of the Linguistic Turn are not the only ones who conflate terminology is evidenced by Curthoys & Docker. In their 2005 *Is History Fiction?*, in discussing opponents of “postmodernism,” they “cluster” Linguistic Turn and postmodernism. In a 2013 essay, they in turn refer to French poststructuralism in the late 1960s as ‘producing an assemblage of perspectives that became known as the “linguistic turn.’ They do,

Apart from the conflation of terms and ideas, there is a further problem with tracing the term's appearance among historians. As Canning has argued, when the Linguistic Turn is understood as the centralization of language as a constitutive, instead of a reflective, force, it has been part of a much longer tradition of feminist historical scholarship writing on 'the power of discourses to construct socially sexual difference and to anchor difference in social practices and institutions.'¹¹¹ What this observation points to is another layer of meaning that is involved in the different temporalizations that I have outlined here. Judith Butler and Joan Scott have formulated this point in two questions they find defining for *poststructuralism*: 'what are the political operations that constrain and constitute the *field* within which positions emerge?' And '[w]hat *exclusions* effectively constitute and naturalize that field?'¹¹²

Poststructuralism is the first post- on the list, giving an important hint about its development, but also drawing attention to the contested nature of the "post—" as either a "coming after" in time, or in content, or not as a "coming after" at all. In the case of poststructuralism, the "coming afterness" is arguably less contested than it is in postmodernism, and particularly postcolonialism.¹¹³ Nevertheless, the boundaries between structuralism and poststructuralism are not necessarily clear cut. In philosophy, poststructuralism is usually defined as a move away from the structuralist linguistics formulated by Ferdinand de Saussure in his posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). De Saussure, as is well-known, had argued among other things that the sign consists of a signifier and a signified between which there is no logical relation, and that meaning in language is produced through difference. Saussure subsequently argued that people's speech (*parole*) was structured by an internalized system of symbolic rules (*langue*) that pre-existed individuals' use of it.¹¹⁴ Structuralism gained important followers in anthropology (Claude Lévi-Strauss), psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan) and literary theory (Roland Barthes) in France. This popularity of structuralism in France lasted somewhere until the 1960s (often 1968 is mentioned to reference the influence of student protests in Western Europe and North America and the culmination of the intellectual turn away from Marxism after the suppression of the 1968 Prague

however, subsequently acknowledge that, although postmodernism and poststructuralism are loosely used by historians, they refer to different position in literary and cultural theory. Cf. Curthoy & Docker, *Is History Fiction*, 207-208; Curthoys & Docker, "History and Fiction," 204-205. I take the term "clustering" from Afsaneh Najmabadi, who critically interrogated the advantages and drawbacks of the (naturalized) clustering of gender and sexuality. A. Najmabadi, "Beyond the Americas: Are Gender and Sexuality Useful Categories of Historical Analysis?," *Journal of Women's History* 18, no.1 (2006), 13.

¹¹¹ Canning, 370. Cf. S. Sarkar, "Post-modernism and the Writing of History," *Studies in History* 15, no.2 (1999), 312; La Greca, 3-4.

¹¹² J. Butler & J.W. Scott, "Introduction," in J. Butler & J.W. Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York/London: Routledge, 1992), xiv.

¹¹³ A thought-provoking if contested exploration of the nature of the "post-" is S. Hall, "Where Was 'the Post-Colonial'? Thinking at the Limit," *Reading the Periphery* (1996), <http://readingtheperiphery.org/hall/>.

¹¹⁴ F. De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

Spring), when it came under pressure from some of its former adherents, and the demise of its popularity has been linked to Jacques Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966) and Barthes' *S/Z* (1970), among others.¹¹⁵

For historians, at least two works have often been mentioned as examples of poststructuralism and a third stands as a peculiar example of theoretical development among historians. The first work is teased out by Clark's description of history productions that 'learning from both structuralism and post-structuralism... look less to historical continuity... than to discontinuity, noting both breaks in the larger historical order and the gaps, absences, aporias, and contradictions in texts.'¹¹⁶ In addition to Michel Foucault's "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1973), which advocated for research into these discontinuities of history, Joan Scott's "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" (1986) explicitly self-fashioned as a historical work inspired by poststructuralist literary theory.¹¹⁷ In her earlier "Women in History: The Modern Period" (1983), Scott had praised work in women's history for having uncovered the lives of women in the past ("her-stories"), for having challenged received interpretations and periodizations of historical events, and for 'altering some of the standards of historical significance.' At the same time, she was also critical of what she perceived as research that took male/female binaries for granted and that was insufficiently concerned with analyzing how these binaries came into being, could be sustained and had been challenged over time.¹¹⁸ In her 1986 article, she formulated her research program thus:

We need a refusal of the fixed and permanent quality of the binary opposition, a genuine historicization and deconstruction of the terms of sexual difference. We must become more self-conscious about distinguishing between our analytic vocabulary and the material we want to analyze. We must find ways... continually to subject our categories to criticism, our analyses to self-criticism.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ The literature on (post-)structuralism is very extensive and highly diverse. As an introductory work and accessible overview, I have been very satisfied with C. Belsey, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹¹⁶ Clark, 7-8.

¹¹⁷ See e.g. J.W. Scott, "Introduction," in J.W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 4, 6-7.

¹¹⁸ Scott (1988), "Women's History," in J.W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 18-21, 27.

¹¹⁹ Scott, "A Useful Category," 40-41. Scott has herself been criticized for maintaining a male/female binary. See e.g. J. Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis," *Gender & History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 558-583. Furthermore, many have questioned the applicability of Scott's conceptualization of gender in different times and spaces. See e.g. Najmabadi.

In this formulation, we can recognize one prominent definition of poststructuralism. In the introduction to their *Feminists Theorize the Political* (1992), Judith Butler and Scott argue against the idea that poststructuralism is a theory, ‘rather, “post-structuralism” indicates a field of critical practices that cannot be totalized... [an] interrogation [that] does not take for granted the meanings of any terms or analytic categories, including its own... a critical operation by which “positions” are established.’¹²⁰ And here we also recognize the place of the questions cited above: ‘what are the political operations that constrain and constitute the *field* within which positions emerge?’ And ‘[w]hat *exclusions* effectively constitute and naturalize that field?’

A strange occurrence in the development of historical theory, at least from a temporal perspective, was the publication of *Metahistory* (1973). Where for Ankersmit and others the book signified the introduction of the “Linguistic Turn” into history, its content introduced insights from structuralist linguistics into the discipline. Building on Northrop Frye’s research into archetypes, White argued that historians “emplotted” their histories based on four available types: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire. These four types of emplotment he linked to four types of tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony) that indicated the ideological positions of the author (anarchist, radical, conservative or liberal).¹²¹ As late as 1998, White described his *Metahistory* as “structuralist” and referred to himself as a ‘modernist... formalist and a structuralist’¹²²; a characterization that was shared by his former student Hans Kellner, who characterized ‘White’s obsessive mapping and charting’ as ‘reflect[ing] the goal of high modernist structuralism to establish clearly a sense of where one stands in the world of predictably carried formations.’¹²³ Curthoys and Docker have further drawn attention to the fact that Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) had already fallen out of favor among most literary scholars by the time of White’s adaptation.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Butler & Scott, xiii-xiv. Frank Ankersmit has pointed out that a similar awareness of the irreducibility of positionality can be read in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Ankersmit argues that if one thinks through Gadamer’s observation that ‘Ein wirklich historisches Denken... die eigene Geschichtlichkeit [muss] mitdenken... [das d]er wahre historische Gegenstand kein Gegenstand [ist], sondern die Einheit dieses Einen und Anderen, ein Verhältnis, in dem die Wirklichkeit der Geschichte ebenso wie die Wirklichkeit des geschichtlichen Verstehens besteht’, the conclusion can only be that this historicization is an endless ‘movement.’ Ankersmit, “Postmodernist Historiography,” 99-101.

¹²¹ H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1973). The importance of the number four for Hayden White, and its roots in Immanuel Kant’s *Kritiken*, is touched upon by Michael Roth in the preface to the 40th anniversary edition and was criticized by Ankersmit as transcendentalism without a transcendental deduction. M.S. Roth, “‘All You’ve Got Is History,’” in H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 2014); Ankersmit, “Narrative and Interpretation,” 205-207. See also F. Ankersmit, “White’s New ‘Neo-Kantianism’: Aesthetics, Ethics and Politics,” in F. Ankersmit, E. Domańska & H. Kellner, *Re-Figuring Hayden White* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹²² Domańska, “Hayden White,” 19, 26-27.

¹²³ H. Kellner, “Introduction: Describing Redescriptions,” in F. Ankersmit & H. Kellner, *A New Philosophy of History* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1995), 11-12, 16.

¹²⁴ Curthoys & Docker, *Is History Fiction*, 193; Curthoys & Docker, “History and Fiction,” 209.

Having laid out some of the peculiar routes of historical theory's terminologies, I want to take a moment for a brief intermezzo. Richard Evans has made the important observation that 'very few historians in practice have possessed the necessary expertise to discuss the theory of history at a level that a trained philosopher would consider acceptable.'¹²⁵ This observation was, in turn, picked up by John Zammito, who, like Evans, has been critical of letting theory be developed without historians, since 'it is not clear that their interests are shared or, second, that philosophers really have a clue what it is that historians do.'¹²⁶ This duality captures a different problem for the temporalization of my discursive extended triangle, one that is almost perfectly captured in the notion of the "historical discipline."

The historical discipline, understood as a "community of historians", has been frequently cited as the core argument that allows for maintaining a notion of historical "truth".¹²⁷ Historians build on each other's works, can correct and challenge each other based on elaborate systems of footnotes, and understand the conventions *and* the shortcomings of the profession. This is the first layer of discipline. The second layer is what Louis Mink has referred to as "disciplined imagination", Saidiya Hartman as "critical fabulation" and Natalie Zemon Davis as invention "held tightly in check by the voices of the past."¹²⁸ Most historians are keenly aware that the sources do not speak for themselves, that archives are more a mirror of past and present political interests than of the past itself, and that there is something about the historian's own being in the present that influences their research. However, historians also acknowledge that the sources do maintain some kind of "veto" and that the possibility is always open that a "fact" will force the assumptions with which the historian started their research to change.

But on a third layer, and this juxtaposes Evans and Zammito's point with that of Butler and Scott, the historical discipline is also a *disciplining* force, whose gatekeepers require its aspiring members to abide by its methods. This, I imagine, is why White referred to the community of historians as a "guild."¹²⁹ Already in the introduction I invoked Umberto Eco's notion of the

¹²⁵ Evans, 9.

¹²⁶ Zammito, 71. Clark has described a similar struggle among practicing historians, coming to realize that much of theoretical developments had happened without their influence. Clark, 5-6.

¹²⁷ M. Jay, "Of Plots, Witnesses and Judgements," in S. Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 105; Appleby, Hunt & Jacob, 254-256; M. Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2002); P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1-2. Evans has been critical of this argument. See Evans, 77-78.

¹²⁸ Mink, "Narrative Form," 130; S. Hartman, "Venus in two acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14; N. Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 5.

¹²⁹ See e.g. E. Domańska, "A Conversation with Hayden White," *Rethinking History* 12, no.1 (2008), 17. Elizabeth Clark traces similar arguments in Peter Novick and Joan Scott. Clark, 20-21. Kellner has made this point a little stronger, claiming that 'historians operate on the basis of "tacit knowledge" that they rarely make explicit to themselves, and that they pass along to their students in the form of transmitted anxieties. In my opinion, what professionalization means... is to imprint a specific set of anxieties on the professionalizing student... a particular set of tacit anxieties

“Encyclopedia” to refer to knowledge that is shared and needs no further elaboration, perhaps comparable to what Ann Stoler in the context of colonial archives described as the “unwritten” because it could go without saying.¹³⁰ If we read some of the works referenced above as an “archive” and follow Stoler’s suggestion to look for the authors’ “common sense”, it is striking to see how strictly demarcated the field of historical theory has been for these authors.¹³¹ As Lynn Hunt has observed, in Ewa Domańska’s collection of interviews with ten of, according to the paratext, ‘the most original and important theorists and philosophers of history,’ except for the interviewee all are men.¹³² She continued: ‘Although they offer richly provocative accounts of themselves and their crafts, they do not address one of the great realms of the unexpected today: the history being inscribed by those previously excluded from the making of historical knowledge.’¹³³ Moreover, and arguably even more telling, in the bibliography, bibliographical essay and footnote apparatuses, the four books do not feature a single (!) reference to a work outside of “Europe”,¹³⁴ except for a few references to Japanese sources in one essay by Harry Harootunian.¹³⁵

These blind spots do not necessarily make all historical theory developed in this tradition obsolete, because partial. I already referred in the introduction to Chakrabarty’s plea to problematize the “making invisible” that is involved in attempting to naturalize discursive spaces that are artificially closed off from others. Yet, Chakrabarty is hopeful of what can remain, stating that ‘the point is not to reject social science categories but to release into the space occupied by particular European histories sedimented in them other normative and theoretical thought enshrined in other existing life practices and their archives. For it is only in this way that we can create plural normative horizons specific to our existence and relevant to the examination of our lives and their possibilities.’¹³⁶

that shape the boundaries of what may or may not be done.’ “Hans Kellner,” in E. Domańska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 41.

¹³⁰ A.L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 3. In narratology this has been termed the “subnarratable” by Robyn Warhol-Down. R. Warhol-Down, “‘What Might Have Been Is Not What Is’: Dickens’s Narrative Refusals,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 41 (2010), 48.

¹³¹ My argument is built on these four books: F. Ankersmit & H. Kellner, *A New Philosophy of History* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1995); E. Domańska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998); F.R. Ankersmit, E. Domańska & H. Kellner (eds.), *Re-Figuring Hayden White* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); R. Darnton (ed.), *Philosophy of History after Hayden White* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹³² Lynn Hunt, “Postscript,” in E. Domańska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 270.

¹³³ Hunt, 275.

¹³⁴ Understood here more broadly to also include East-Central and Southeastern Europe.

¹³⁵ In responding to Herman Paul’s “A Loosely Knit Network: Philosophy of History after Hayden White” (2019), María Inés La Greca has made a similar, albeit in my view overly restrained, point that ‘I think there is a slightly narrow assessment regarding who are the significant present scholars working in theory and history... Paul only mentions scholars in the U.S.A. and Europe when White’s work had, and still has, a broader global impact. Domańska herself has repeatedly made similar arguments, including in their shared work E. Domańska, et al. “Globalizing Hayden White,” *Rethinking History* 23, no. 4 (2019): 533-581. La Greca, n.1.

¹³⁶ Chakrabarty, 20. See also Sarkar, esp. 317.

In short, my own project is more than just a recapitulation about what had been said about a hard-to-define topic at a hard-to-define time, but also a critique of what was not acknowledged about this topic in this period by scholars who presented their research as universally applicable. Taking all of this together, I have resorted to two formal choices: one temporal, and one logical. To begin with the latter, I do not think that it makes sense to strive for coherence and non-contradiction, since it has never existed and does not seem to fit the discursive space I am interested in. This is the weakness of the extended triangle metaphor: seen from the inside, ideas may move around in a space between three concepts, but the concepts are neither static nor can their positions be clearly demarcated; seen from the outside, “Linguistic Turn”, “poststructuralism” and “postmodernism”, in so far as they are used by scholars who are not actively involved in formulating theory, are flee-floating signifiers variously applied to a broad spectrum of differing signifieds – a dynamic Magritte painting without the conventions that make recognition possible.

Instead of constructing an artificial coherence, I thus prefer to let conflicting ideas exist alongside each other, let them clash or move in different directions, and leave open the spaces in which these ideas can develop beyond my descriptions, which come with their individual intentions and blind spots (by now, I am sure, my own sympathies in this debate do no longer have to be made explicit). This translates to my choice of temporality. I do not think that the history of anxieties over postmodernism and formal innovation can be traced linearly. The best that I think can be done is to point to ideas that caught attention, how they were adapted and changed, and by tracing their various genealogies. For the remainder of this chapter, I will look particularly at two of these ideas: the perspectivism of the historian; and the “inventedness” of histories. But before I turn there, it is necessary to trace the temporality of the final concept: “postmodernism”.

Postmodernism is many things at the same time. In literature, art and architecture, it developed as a response to (high) modernism and has been extensively theorized.¹³⁷ In philosophy, it is often coupled to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) and his proclamation of the ‘crisis of metanarratives’ or the turn away from *grands* to *petits récits*.¹³⁸ Frank Ankersmit has been among those pointing out that if postmodernism is understood as the dissolution of metanarratives, it has historical precedents well before the 1970s. Ankersmit cites the works of Maurice Mandelbaum, Friedrich von Hayek and Karl Popper (the latter two loosely aligned to the

¹³⁷ See e.g. I. Hasan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1971); C. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (London: Academy, 1977); B. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London/New York: Methuen, 1987); L. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London/New York: Routledge, 1988); F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); P. Brooker, *Modernism/Postmodernism* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹³⁸ J-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

Vienna Circle in the 1920s and '30s), who were all critical of speculative philosophies of history like those of Hegel and Marx.¹³⁹ However, more importantly, he unfolds the example of 19th century historicism. For Ranke, there had been two ways of making sense of human affairs: through the general and the abstract, or through the particular and the concrete. It was the task of the historian, as opposed to the philosopher to observe the latter. In a passage that would fit well on any website trying to persuade young people to study history, he wrote that at the core of the historian's job lies

a feeling for and a joy in the particular in and by itself. The general is only derivative, for the historian will not have preconceived ideas as does the philosopher, but rather while he observed the particular, the course which the development of the word has taken in general will be revealed to him... He will try to comprehend all... without any purpose other than joy in individual life, as one takes joy in flowers without thinking to which of Linnaeus' classes or of Oken's families they belong: briefly put, without thinking how the whole appears in the particular.¹⁴⁰

In addition to Ankersmit's argument for the non-uniqueness of refuting metanarratives, Nancy Partner has questioned whether the discipline of history ever developed a modernism, that postmodernism could challenge. Whereas postmodernism in literature, art and architecture went against the conventions of (high) modernism, scholars like Roland Barthes, Lionel Gossman and Hayden White instead criticized historians' adherence to the forms of "19th century realism" (more on that in the next chapter).¹⁴¹ It is telling that they called on historians to experiment with history writing along the lines of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Franz Kafka.¹⁴² At the same time, Partner has argued that Lyotard's publication did effect the discipline of history, as 'it brought the subject of narrative itself out to the unaccustomed foreground of attention', a claim that coexists unconformably with the development of narrativism in Analytical Philosophy and the critiques of narrative by *Annalistes* historians.¹⁴³

A different argument has been made by Ernst Breisach. For Breisach, postmodernism in history was not a rejection of modernism (as understood in art and literature), but by modernity,

¹³⁹ Ankersmit, "Postmodernist Historiography," 89. See also Sarkar, 304; Partner, "Postmodernism," 342-343; J.M. Banner jr., *The Ever-Changing Past: Why All History is Revisionist History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

¹⁴⁰ As cited in Ankersmit, "Postmodernist Historiography," 90-91.

¹⁴¹ Partner, "Postmodernism," 336-337.

¹⁴² "Jorn Rüsen" in E. Domańska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 147.

¹⁴³ Partner, "Postmodernism," 337. See also P. Zagorin, "Historiography and Postmodernism: Reconsiderations," *History & Theory* 29, no.3 (1990): 263-274. Cf. n.89.

which he defines as ‘the modernist view of history as progress and the whole modernist complex of truth finding’ (a definition that fits uncomfortably alongside Ankersmit’s argument).¹⁴⁴ But he also rightfully points out that postmodernism, when defined as a critique of modernity, is only one among many. What distinguished postmodern historians, in Breisach’s view, is their temporal proclamation of a “posthistory”; a time in which history is no longer a relevant mode for understanding and explaining human life.¹⁴⁵ Breisach’s definitions lead him to group together an eclectic collection of authors, including Francis Fukuyama and Michel Foucault. Breisach’s work is certainly thought-provoking, but his understanding of postmodernism seems to me to be untenable. First, to consider Fukuyama a postmodernist fits poorly in Lyotard’s stressing of a refutation of metanarratives. Further, Breisach’s understanding of modernity and its strong notion of truth would make almost everyone at least a modernist critic. Finally, and most importantly, it is unclear how Breisach’s archetypal postmodern historians (Derrida, White, Barthes, Foucault) fit within his linkage of postmodernism with posthistory. It is quite fascinating that arguably the most famous self-proclaimed postmodernist historian, Keith Jenkins, who did proclaim that history as a mode of explaining human life had at least lost some of its value, is described by Breisach as a soft version of postmodernism.¹⁴⁶

Defining the temporalities of certain intellectual currents is always a historian’s construct and one that is by definition contestable. What is peculiar about the terms above, with the exception of “narrativism”, is how entangled they are, how the same authors feature as core thinkers under different conceptual headers, and how unproblematically concepts are conflated and thrown around as if self-evident. Joan Scott’s description of the terms “man” and “woman”, cited at the opening of this chapter, seems to me to apply equally well to “poststructuralism”, “postmodernism” and the “linguistic turn” as used among historians. Apart from the seldom cases in which the terms are defined, as by Butler and Scott, they are both empty of content – free-floating signifiers without a signified – and overflowing with signification – crisis, relativism, genocide-denial. For the remainder of this chapter, I want to look at two cases of this signifying spillage, that have a particularly pressing relation to formal innovation. These are the perspectivism of the historian and the “inventedness” of histories.

¹⁴⁴ Breisach, 4.

¹⁴⁵ Breisach, 10-11.

¹⁴⁶ Idem.

A Mountain, a Railway Engine and a Fried Egg

In the Autumn of 1996, historian Deborah Lipstadt and publisher *Penguin Books* were sued for libel and defamation by David Irving, over Lipstadt's description of Irving in her 1993 book *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* as a Holocaust denier. On 10 April 2000, the judge in the case ruled, based on evidence submitted by historians including Robert Jan van Pelt and Richard Evans, that Irving was 'an active Holocaust denier,' who 'for his own ideological reasons persistently and deliberately misrepresented and manipulated historical evidence' and 'treated the historical evidence in a manner which fell far short of the standard to be expected of a conscientious historian.'¹⁴⁷

After the trial, Richard Evans published a book describing his experience and reflecting on the impact of the legal case on the discipline of history. In it, he presented a metaphor:

Supposing we think of historians like figurative painters sitting at various points around a mountain. They will paint it in different styles, using different techniques and different materials, they will see it in a different light or from a different distance according to where they are, and they will view it from different angles. They may even disagree about some aspects of its appearance, or some of its features. But they will all be painting the mountain. If one of them paints a fried egg, or a railway engine, we are entitled to say that they are wrong; whatever it is that the artist had painted, it is not the mountain. The possibilities of legitimate disagreement and variation are limited by the evidence in front of their eyes. An objective historian is simply one who works within these limits. They are limits that allow a wide latitude for differing interpretations of the same documents or source, but they are limits all the same.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Network of Concerned Historians, *Annual Report 2000* (<https://www.concernedhistorians.org/ar/00.pdf>). See also e.g. D. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993) esp. 8, 111, 161–62, 179–81, 234; D. Hooper, *Reputations under Fire: Winners and Losers in the Libel Business* (London: Sphere, 2000), 456; M. Shermer & A. Grobman, *Denying History: Who Says the Holocaust Never Happened and Why Do They Say It?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), esp. xv, 48–58, 258–59; D. Lipstadt, "Perspectives from a British Courtroom: My Struggle with Deception, Lies and David Irving," in J.K. Roth & Maxwell (eds.), *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocides* (Houndmills, Basingstoke 2001); C.R. Browning, "Historians and Holocaust Denial in the Courtroom," in J. K. Roth & E. Maxwell (eds.), *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocides* (Houndmills, Basingstoke 2001); D.D. Guttenplan, *The Holocaust on Trial* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), esp. 273–86, 307–16; R. Evans, "History, Memory, and the Law: The Historian as Expert Witness," *History and Theory* 41, no.3 (2002): 326–45; R. Evans, *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial* (London: Verso, 2002), esp. 1–39.

¹⁴⁸ Evans, *Lying about Hitler*, 250.

I present these two events, because they seem to me to be symbolic for two avenues of criticism of “postmodernism” (here referring to the whole extended triangle, to which I will return below) that developed somewhere in the late 1980s and 1990s, particularly among Anglo-Saxon historians. I want to begin with the latter, which to me exemplifies critique of “postmodernists” problematizing of the positionality of the historian. Evans’ metaphor is fascinating, because it brings insights from Husserlian phenomenology into the discipline of history, but then reduces the complexity of the question to an almost surreal conclusion.

Simply put, whereas René Descartes had posited the *cogito* as the foundation for the possibility of certain knowledge, he did not solve the relation between the *cogito* and the intelligible world exterior to the I (the problem of solipsism). For Kant, the link between the I and the intelligible world could be established through a transcendental (as opposed to an empirical) deduction establishing the conditions of possibility for experience – introducing the famous separation between the *Ding-an-Sich*, objects about which nothing can be known but that ground external “reality” and the *Ding-für-Mich*, the objects of experience that constitute the intelligible world. Edmund Husserl took matters one step further. Descartes and Kant’s projects of grounding the possibility for the I to have knowledge about the external world had, according to Husserl, insufficiently analyzed the structure of subjective consciousness itself. Husserl’s interest, at least in his early works, was with the structure and intentionality of consciousness, with ‘the relationship... between the subjectivity of knowing and the objectivity of the content known’ or what he referred to as the ‘object-constituting subjectivity.’¹⁴⁹ An important aspect of the object-constituting subjectivity has to do with Evans’ metaphor of the mountain. Although it is impossible for a subject to see more than one side of an object at once, it is possible to construct simultaneously the other sides of the object through memory and deduction.

This brief summary should not be taken as anything more than a lead-up to the argument I want to turn to now. In their highly-praised *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (1982), Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow describe Foucault’s rejection of what he called the ‘analytic of finitude’, an approach that is no longer interested in Man’s place in the world, but in the world as Man’s place. In the words of Dreyfus and Rabinow, ‘instead of an *analysis* of representations one now finds an *analytic*. From Kant on, an analytic is an attempt to show on what grounds representation and analysis of representations are possible and to what extent they are legitimate.’¹⁵⁰ The analytic of finitude creates a series of “doubles” that are untenable, according to Foucault: Man becomes both the subject and the object of study; it is the ‘source of all

¹⁴⁹ As cited in D. West, *Continental Philosophy: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 98.

¹⁵⁰ H.L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 28.

intelligibility’, but surrounded by unintelligibilities (the “unthought”); and it is ‘the product of a long history whose beginning he can never reach and yet, paradoxically, [lies] as the source of that very history.’¹⁵¹

A similar rejection of the “doubles” that underlied the transcendental philosophical project since Kant can be found in Ankersmit’s comparison of historicism and “postmodernism”. As I referred to above, Ankersmit saw in historicism an important movement against metanarratives that far preceded Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition*, but with an important difference to “postmodern” thinkers. The historicization of historicism ended with the historian himself, ‘situated on a secure hill-top high above the flow of the river in time in a position that is itself carefully kept outside the regime of difference.’¹⁵² This lack of historicizing the historian, a form of transcendentalization, was already criticized by Hans-Georg Gadamer, but Ankersmit traces its ultimate rejection to the works of Foucault, Derrida and Richard Rorty.¹⁵³

In tandem with the rejection of a de-historicized position of the historian, came challenges to the authority of the historian as a predominantly white, “European”, male. As Scott formulated succinctly: ‘The proliferation of Others’ histories has not so much “politicized” the discipline (a charge usually leveled by the defenders of orthodoxy) as it has exposed the politics by which one particular viewpoint established its predominance.’¹⁵⁴ The historian’s position thus became challenged from two sides: having lost its position outside of history, its ability to study the past as something other than an infinite process of self-study was being challenged; and having lost *his* position as the authoritative view on history, he saw differing views multiply all around.

In response to this double fragmentation of the historian, various writing strategies have been suggested and are being pursued by historians. Some have taken the plea for self-

¹⁵¹ Dreyfus & Rabinow, 31. In the end, they conclude that Foucault’s own method of archaeology as formulated in the *Order of Things* cannot fully escape these doubles either.

¹⁵² Ankersmit, “Postmodernist Historiography,” 98-99.

¹⁵³ Ankersmit, “Postmodernist Historiography,” 100-102. See also Munslow, “Introduction,” 10; Southgate, 547-548. For Gadamer, see n. 121. In a passage that strikes me as reminiscent of Foucault’s archaeology, Ankersmit argues that ‘the postmodernist de-epistemologization of history (and historiography) does not necessarily rob historiography of its *raison d’être*... The crucial question we shall have to answer in this context... is the question whether de-epistemologized postmodernist historiography could possibly escape the threat of a coalescence of the writing of history and historiography... evidently, such a demarcation can be achieved if (the new) historiography carefully brackets all claims to adequately represent the past that are made in historical writing. The transition from the past itself to the text of the historian, ought to be carefully excluded from all consideration in historiography and all attention of the historiographer must be devoted to the historical text and to what happens between the text and its reader(s). Hence, for reasons of (historiographical) methodology we must deal with the text as if we could not see through it to a past lying behind or below it and thus be able to comment on the adequacy of the account of the past presented in it... we may observe in de-epistemologized, postmodernist historiography the rebirth of a *new* form of historical epistemology. The crucial difference between *this* form of epistemology and the traditional, rejected form of epistemology is that postmodernist epistemology is aposteriorist rather apriorist.’ Ankersmit, “Postmodernist Historiography,” 109-110.

¹⁵⁴ J.W. Scott, “History in Crisis? The Others’ Side of the Story,” *American Historical Review* 94 (1989), 690. Cf. Sarkar, esp. 297; Southgate, 542.

historicization seriously and explore their own histories within the histories they write. Other historians have written polyphonic histories (to which I will return below), “decentered” histories, or have suggested juxtaposition as a way of writing.¹⁵⁵ The de-transcendentalization of the subject has simultaneously effected how historians analyze historical subjects. Gayatri Spivak has argued that instead of a subject, historians are better served by speaking about subject-effects, recognizing that a subject is a site of multiple inscriptions that include ‘politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language.’¹⁵⁶ In her analysis of histories of “subaltern consciousness” this has led her to conclude that ‘the texts of counter-insurgency [that] locate... a “will” as the sovereign cause when it is no more than an effect of the subaltern subject-effect... warrant a reading of the project to retrieve the subaltern consciousness as the attempt to undo a massive historiographic metalepsis and “situate” the effect of the subject as subaltern. I would read it, then, as a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.’¹⁵⁷

The double fragmentation of the historian has brought to the forefront an important assumption that Louis Mink described as the Idea of Universal History. The Idea holds that the past being singular, can only be re-presented in a singular way, meaning that different perspectives on the past (different histories) are different parts of one Great Story, to use the words of Robert Berkhofer.¹⁵⁸ In other words, the idea that different histories can be synthesized into one single representation, if not practically than at least theoretically underpinning the historical enterprise, is one that Mink rejects as an unsubstantiated assumption grounded in the idea (the second, and even more vital assumption) that the past is an “untold story, waiting to be told.”¹⁵⁹ Recently, Ethan Kleinberg has criticized historians who have tried to hold on to the idea that history is ‘mimetic

¹⁵⁵ The notion of “decentered” history is suggested by Peter Burke to refer to ‘history with a place for other kinds of people, the oppressed, subordinate or “subaltern” groups and their points of view,’ including ‘the need to experiment with multiple-viewpoint narratives.’ He further cites micro-histories as an example. See Burke (1992a), 19-21. Stephan Bann has been referred to as someone proposing Juxtaposition. This is also close to what Chakrabarty has described as the maintaining of “incommensurabilities”, an example of which is Martin Dusenberre’s, “Japan, Global History and the Great Silence” (2017) to which I will also return below. Dusenberre also employs a notion of “juxtaposition” See Kellner, “Describing Rediscriptions,” 8; Chakrabarty, 18.

¹⁵⁶ G. Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in G. Spivak, *In Other Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 281. See also G. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in P. Williams & L. Chrisman, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Coloniality: A Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁵⁷ Spivak, “Subaltern Studies,” 281.

¹⁵⁸ R.F. Berkhofer, jr. *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹⁵⁹ Mink, “Narrative Form.” See also C. Van den Akker, “Mink’s Riddle of Narrative Truth,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 7, no.3 (2013): 346-370; Roth; Ankersmit, “Narrative Revival.” The question whether the past is an untold story is an ongoing debate between “realists” and “anti-realists” (and “irrealist”). See also N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978); B. Mitrovic, *Materialist Philosophy of History: A Realist Antidote to Postmodernism* (London: Lexington Books, 2020); T.E. Følrand & B. Mitrovic (eds.), *The Poverty of Anti-realism: Critical Perspectives on Postmodernist Philosophy of History* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023). Robert Berkhofer put it astutely, when highlighting that ‘because normal historians try to reconcile variant interpretations by *reference* to facts rather than by arguments over the nature of narratives as such, they must presume in practice that factuality possesses some sort of coercive reality in their expositions of the partial past and their understanding of the Great Past.’ R.F. Berkhofer, jr., “The Challenge of Poetics to (Normal) Historical Practice,” *Poetics Today* 9, no.2 (1988), 443.

representation of the past as it really happened’ and have tried to square it with a notion of (multi-)perspectivity. For Kleinberg, ‘this perspectivalism has provided cover for the pick-your-own-truth culture, exemplified by Donald Trump... These “post-truthers” operate in decidedly bad faith and do their scholarship poorly in regard to the rules of the guild, but the one-to-one correlation they assert between the evidence they present and the facts or truths they claim is the same as that of many conventional scholars: alternative but equivalent.’¹⁶⁰

By invoking the image of a mountain, surrounded on all sides by figurative painters who paint their own perspectives, Evans is teasing out a series of important questions that have been at the center of many philosophers and historical theorists. By taking from that metaphor that there is a difference between various perspectives of the mountain and... fried eggs and railway engines, it seems to me his contribution to these important questions is limited. But an important thing that can be glanced from Evans’ metaphor, is his assumption that the object (the mountain, read: the past) is the same for all figurative painters (read: historians). In this metaphor, when all the paintings are put together, there will arise an incredibly diverse (and no doubt beautiful) assemblage of representations of the mountain – hopefully including one or two surrealism-inspired paintings of fried eggs draped over a railway engine. But what the metaphor does not address is twofold: first, the historian can never “see” the past, as Michael Oakeshott once put it: history is not a representation of ‘what really happened,’ but of ‘what the evidence obliges us to believe’¹⁶¹; second, and this brings me to the first event described above, it is not at all clear that historians, like figurative paintings, are concerned with re-presenting that what we call “the past.”

Between Invention and Investigation

I opened the previous paragraph by recapitulating the *David Irving v. Penguin Books and Deborah Lipstadt* legal case. In the lead up and aftermath of the case, various authors implied that a surge in Holocaust denial ‘reflected the postmodernist intellectual climate.’¹⁶² Lipstadt herself observed in 1993 that ‘a sentiment had been generated in society—not just on campus—that made it difficult

¹⁶⁰ Kleinberg, 87. Beverley Southgate, invoking the oft-mentioned formulation of the “loss of an Archimidean point” has concluded that in the absence of a ‘single privileged center... [t]he choice between contending narratives, which may be equally valid empirically, becomes... a matter of aesthetics and/or morality.’ Recently, David Weberman has expressed less certainty about the status of what he calls “incompatible narratives”. Cf. Southgate, 541; Weberman, “Compatibility.” Elizabeth Clark has invoked a position common among historians that, in the words of Geoffrey Elton, ‘a philosophic concern with such problems as the reality of historical knowledge or the nature of historical thought only hinders the practice of history.’ Clark, 17.

¹⁶¹ As cited in Clark, 19. See also Clark, 18-19. Historical metaphors often seem to run in this same issue, see also e.g. C. Ginzburg, “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,” *History Workshop* 9 (1980): 5-36.

¹⁶² Evans, 208.

to say: “This has nothing to do with ideas. This is bigotry.” She referred to this sentiment as ‘deconstructionist history at its worst’ and added that

Holocaust denial is part of this phenomenon. It is not an assault on the history of one particular group. Though denial of the Holocaust may be an attack on the history of the annihilation of the Jews, at its core it poses a threat to all who believe that knowledge and memory are among the keystones of our civilization . . . [and] to all who believe in the ultimate power of reason.¹⁶³

Appleby, Hunt & Jacob in the opening passages of their *Telling the Truth about History* described how ‘reaction to . . . the genocidal policies of the Nazi regime temporarily forestalled the progress of skepticism and relativism. The killing of Jews seemed to show that absolute moral standards were necessary, that cultural relativism had reached its limits in the death camps.’¹⁶⁴ This fascinating temporalization did not only falsely dated Europe’s coming-to-terms with the Shoah immediately after World War II, it was also sharply criticized by Dan Stone, who countered: ‘This is an astonishing assertion. Surely the opposite is the case? Nazism was anything but a form of cultural relativism. The horror that it still inspires derives from the fact that it had very definite notions of who was and who was not fit to inhabit the globe . . . Nazism showed exactly how far the desire to impute on absolute meaning to History can go.’¹⁶⁵

The seeds for these biting charges had been sown well before the 1990s. When White presented his tropology and argued that it was the historian’s choice in which mode to emplot events, he was hard-pressed on whether he deemed it possible to write a history of the Shoah as a comedy.¹⁶⁶ Additionally, some theorists seemingly equated history and fiction, playing on an ambiguity of the word “fiction”, and foregrounded the rhetorical elements of historical text. Finally, Georg Iggers cited White’s charge against historian’s alleged reluctance to acknowledge that histories ‘are more *invented* than *found*,’ as the effective ‘negation of the way in which historians have done historical research since Classical antiquity.’¹⁶⁷

As I alluded to in the introduction, many of these debates took place in a highly charged and polemical atmosphere. It is refreshing, as Nancy Partner has observed, to analyze these debates

¹⁶³ Lipstadt. As cited in Evans, 208-209.

¹⁶⁴ Appleby, Hunt & Jacob, 3.

¹⁶⁵ D. Stone, *Constructing the Holocaust: A Study in Historiography* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003), 16. As cited in Curthoys & Docker, “History and Fiction,” 217-218.

¹⁶⁶ See e.g. H. White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” in S. Friedländer (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹⁶⁷ G.G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 10.

‘once the critical instruments are freed from the debunking rhetoric of the culture wars.’¹⁶⁸ To begin with the term fiction: although Korhonen is certainly right in pointing out that at least on the level of events White did not equate history and fiction, by keeping vague the distinction between fiction as rooted in the Latin *finigo* (to shape, to give form to, or in vocabulary closer to these debates to “construct”) and fiction in its common sense understanding of “fictional literature” he did little to comfort other historian’s concern – nor, for that matter, to clarify his own argument.¹⁶⁹ White’s unproblematic application of plot structures from literary theory onto history production added to this ambiguity.¹⁷⁰

Various scholars have argued that White and others’ ambivalence towards the relation between history and literature brought back memories of the centuries-long struggle for historians to carve out a separate space of research for themselves.¹⁷¹ Some have traced this debate back to Aristotle’s argument for the superiority of poetry over history, but more generally this debate is located around the time of history’s entry into the academy in the mid-19th century. The details of the debate do not concern me here, other than that it has often been recognized that the establishment of a *Geschichtswissenschaft* in Germany did not take place uncontested. Already in 1828, Thomas Babington Macaulay scolded historians who ‘miserably neglect the art of narration, the

¹⁶⁸ Partner, “Narrative Persistence,” 85.

¹⁶⁹ Korhonen cites White in “The Fictions of Factual Representation” stating that ‘Historians are concerned with events which can be assigned to specific time-space locations, events which are (or were) in principle observable or perceivable, whereas imaginative writers – poets, novelists, playwrights – are concerned with both these kinds of events and imagined, hypothetical, or invented ones.’ H. White, “The Fictions of Factual Representations,” in H. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University, 1978), 121. As cited in K. Korhonen, “General Introduction: The History/Literature Debate,” in K. Korhonen (ed.), *Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History/Literature Debate* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2006), 12. Another example is his cautionary note in “Historical Text as Literary Artifact”: ‘This is not to say that we cannot distinguish between good and bad historiography, since we can always fall back on such criteria as responsibility to the rules of evidence, the relative fullness of narrative detail, logical consistency, and the like to determine this issue.’ H. White, “Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in H. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University, 1978), 97. The ambiguity of the term “fiction” is frequently commented upon, see e.g. Korhonen, 16; Ankersmit, “Narrative and Interpretation,” 205; Rigney, “History as Text,” 195-196. Rigney describes White’s use of the term as the “red rag to a bull” effect. Yet, it seems to me that White’s maintaining of ambiguity should be understood as more than only a provocation, but also part of a critique of genre. Cf. e.g. Foucault’s doubt over genre differences: ‘We must also question those divisions or groupings with which we have become so familiar. Can one accept, as such, the distinction between the major types of discourse, or that between such forms or genres as science, literature, philosophy, religion, history, fiction, etc., and which tend to create certain great historical individualities? We are not even sure of ourselves when we use these distinctions in our own world of discourse.’ M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And The Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 22. See also R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1977), esp. 80-86. I am grateful to Ann Laura Stoler for this reference.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Burke, “New History,” 21. It seems to me that part of this uncritical application stemmed from the idea that narrative was a literary form and therefore that at least on the level of narrative literary tools could be unproblematically applied for analysis of historiographical texts. See e.g. Tozzi Thompson, 119. The continuity of this premise can be glanced from Partner, “Postmodernism,” 337-338. This assumption has importantly been challenged by narratologists recently, see e.g. M. Fludernik, “Factual Narrative: A Missing Narratological Paradigm,” *Germanisch-Romanische Monatschrift* 63, no.1 (2013): 117-134.

¹⁷¹ Breisach, 7-8; Iggers, 9; Korhonen, 10-11, 14-15; Curthoys & Docker, “History and Fiction,” 203-205, 207-208; Partner, “Postmodernism,” 337-338.

art of interesting the affections and presenting pictures to the imagination.¹⁷² This split between a “German” and “British” way of doing history seemed more or less resolved in 1903, when John Bagnell Bury proclaimed that ‘All truths... require the most exact methods; The idea of a scrupulously exact conformity to facts was fixed, refined, and canonized: and the critical method was one of the means to secure it.’¹⁷³ But far from it, given the critiques of Herbert Butterfield in his *Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) and George Macaulay Trevelyan in “Clio, a Muse” (1913), the latter of whom explicitly criticized British historians’ taking over of German methods.¹⁷⁴

In this brief and incomplete overview, we can recognize some of the debates among *Annalists* historians rejecting “narrative”, and others approaching narrative as a cognitive mode of comprehension. As a final example, I again allude to Jack Hexter. In his “The Rhetoric of History” (1967). Hexter refers to ‘instances in which, in order to transmit an increment of knowledge and meaning, the very rules of historiography demanded a rhetoric which sacrificed generality, precision, control, and exactness to evocative force and scope - a choice entirely out of bounds according to the rules of scientific statements.’¹⁷⁵ This might sound neutral enough, but only two pages later, he concludes that ‘we can say that our science-oriented notions of meaning, knowing, understanding, and truth and especially of the lines of access to them need a thorough overhauling. This would indeed be a revolution, and one in which I think I would enjoy taking a place at the barricades.’¹⁷⁶ And I sense some similar sentiments, albeit with less revolutionary fervor, in Evans’ acknowledgement that ‘postmodernism in its more constructive modes... has shifted the emphasis in historical writing... back from social-scientific to literary models and, in so doing, has begun to make it more accessible to the public outside the universities (and indeed to students within them).’¹⁷⁷

In addition to the ambiguous of fiction, a second layer, already teased out by the title of Hexter’s article, concerned the role of rhetoric in history production. Hans Kellner summarized the debate into what for him made up the central question: ‘does historical discourse essentially report or argue?’¹⁷⁸ Tucked in between debates over scientific and literary language, and contestations over the “storiedness” of the past, this question also confronted ordinary language assumptions of what rhetoric is; as Megill and McCloskey acutely pointed out, ‘in the popular sense rhetoric comes from the mouths of bad politicians... or from our enemies.’¹⁷⁹ For White, with the

¹⁷² As cited in Curthoys & Docker, “History and Fiction,” 204.

¹⁷³ As cited in Partner, “Postmodernism,” 337-338.

¹⁷⁴ Curthoys & Docker, “History and Fiction,” 204-205.

¹⁷⁵ J.H. Hexter, “The Rhetoric of History,” *History & Theory* 6, no.1 (1967), 11.

¹⁷⁶ Hexter, 13.

¹⁷⁷ Evans, 216.

¹⁷⁸ Kellner, “Return of Rhetoric,” 151.

¹⁷⁹ Megill & McCloskey, 222-223.

rejection of metaphysical and transcendental assumptions, came the necessity to develop ‘a theory of how meaning is produced, of how meaning is constructed, not how meaning is found’, inspiration for which he found in the works of Giambattista Vico and the Ancient Greek philosophers Giorgias and Protagoras.¹⁸⁰ In *A New Philosophy of History* (1995), Kellner answered his own question, arguing that ‘history can be redescribed as a discourse that is fundamentally rhetorical, and that representing the past takes place through the creation of powerful, persuasive images.’¹⁸¹

In his balanced discussion of “postmodernism” (including a footnote that acknowledges the suggestion to distinguish “postmodernism” from “poststructuralism”) Sumit Sarkar has suggested to differentiate the use of ‘rhetorical elements’ (as opposed to rhetoric, a distinction I will return to in the next chapter) within different domains. Citing Jürgen Habermas’ remark that in various academic disciplines ‘rhetorical elements, which are by no means expunged, are tamed, as it were, and enlisted for special purposes of problem-solving,’ Sarkar proposes to study rhetorical elements as existing on ‘a continuum, but with significant distinctions, with rhetoric playing different rules in specific contexts of communicative action.’¹⁸² Not only do I think that Sarkar’s proposition for a “rhetorical scale” makes sense for different disciplines (as well as, and perhaps more importantly, for different works within a discipline), it also points to a fascinating feature of many of the abovementioned debates among historians: for an intellectual movement that claims to build on (or be opposed to) the works of Foucault, Derrida, and others, the frequency with which historians continued to unproblematically employ dichotomies (science/literature, fact/fiction, rhetoric/logic), that core Saussurian element of meaning-making that was central to “postmodern” criticism, is quite remarkable – and, I would suggest, another reason to turn attention away from these scholars towards feminist, queer and postcolonial historians, many of whom had a much greater sensitivity to this point.

Underlying both the debates about the “fictionality” of history and the role that rhetoric plays in history productions, is the question of the “constructed” nature of history. There is various terminology on this topic: for example, Alan Munslow distinguishes “reconstructionist”, “constructionist” and “deconstructionist” histories¹⁸³; while in *Analytic Philosophy of History*, many of these debates are held employing the terms “realism”, “anti-realism” and “irrealism”, as well as “constructivism” as coined by Leon Goldstein in his *Historical Knowing* (1976).¹⁸⁴ These are

¹⁸⁰ Domańska, “Hayden White,” 29.

¹⁸¹ Kellner, “Describing Redescriptions,” 2. Cf. Megill & McCloskey, 221; Partner, “Foundations,” 5; Kellner, “Return of Rhetoric,” 154-155.

¹⁸² Sarkar, 301.

¹⁸³ Munslow, “Introduction,” 6-8.

¹⁸⁴ See for a discussion of these positions, e.g. Ankersmit, “Narrativist Revival.”

continuous controversies, the details and nuances of which go far beyond my interest here. What is important, however, is that the abovementioned critique by Iggers of the idea that historical narratives are more *invented* than *found*, is neither “postmodern” (I repeat here, that I am using “postmodern” as a label for the discursive triangle of “Linguistic Turn”, “poststructuralism” and “postmodernism), nor unique for (or even coined by) Hayden White. This requires me to briefly return to the history of “narrativism.”

In his “Narrative Sentences”, Arthur Danto introduced by way of thought experiment the Ideal Chronicler. This Ideal Chronicler knows the ‘*full description*’ – meaning ‘a set of sentences which, taken together, state absolutely everything that happened’ – of all events in the past – meaning events that are ‘fixed, *fait accompli*, and dead.’¹⁸⁵ This Ideal Chronicler might be expected to take the historian out of business, but not so Danto argued. The Ideal Chronicler, rooted in the time in which the events took place,¹⁸⁶ can give a complete description of all events, ‘but complete in the way in which a witness might describe it, even an Ideal Witness.’¹⁸⁷ Danto continues, in a passage that I think is worth quoting in full,

But this is not enough. For there is a class of descriptions of any event under which the event cannot be witnessed, and these descriptions are necessarily and systematically excluded from the I.C. [Ideal Chronicler]. The whole truth concerning an event can only be known after, and sometimes only *long* after the event itself has taken place, and this part of the story historians alone can tell... What we deliberately neglected to equip the Ideal Chronicler with was knowledge of the future.¹⁸⁸

The difference between the Ideal Chronicler and the historian is one that is constituted by their different temporal position vis-à-vis the events. Danto’s brilliant concept for this temporal difference is the notion of the “narrative sentence”, a ‘class of descriptions... [that] refer to two distinct and time-separated events, E-1 and E-2,’ which he explains through the example of the Thirty Years War: the sentence “The Thirty Years War began in 1618” is a narrative sentence, Danto argues, because it can only be pronounced from the temporal position of E-2, E-2 being any time after 1648 (questions of the coinage of historical terminology, like periodization, do not

¹⁸⁵ Danto, “Narrative Sentences,” 148-149. The kind of archive Danto refers to as the ‘historian’s heaven.’

¹⁸⁶ This is an important point: Danto’s Ideal Chronicler, like the ordinary chronicler, is bound by the time in which events take place; however, the core of the argument doesn’t seem to change as long as the Ideal Chronicler is not understood as immortal.

¹⁸⁷ Danto, “Narrative Sentences,” 151.

¹⁸⁸ *Idem*.

concern us here).¹⁸⁹ What thus differentiates the historian from the Ideal Chronicler, and what makes the historian's work important even if the Ideal Chronicler would have existed, is that the historian re-describes past events from the perspective of the future.

Danto's argument has immense implications for the work that historians do. Chiel van den Akker has recently listed two of these. First of all, description depends on the understanding of a particular time. He quotes Ian Hacking's observation that 'if a description did not exist, or was not available, at an earlier time, then at that time one could not act intentionally under the description. Only later did it become true that, at that time, one performed an action under that description.'¹⁹⁰ Secondly, and arguably most importantly, descriptions change due to different ascriptions of signification at different times, both with regards to the meaning that "events" have within a "narrative", as with regards to the relation they have to other events. Van den Akker has reiterated Paul Roth's recent statement that, due to the historian's 'retroactive re-descriptions' (Roth's term), the relation between history and the past is 'indeterminate.'¹⁹¹

Another important implication of Danto's work regards the question whether, in the words of Mink, history is a story found or told. If the historian constructs, instead of *re*-constructs, the past from their own temporal position, the question becomes whether there is a limit to the possible re-descriptions of the past and what the relation between the different re-descriptions is. It is important to note here that Danto himself resisted the directions in which White and others took his insight. In a 1998 interview, he explained: 'White's views got to be philosophically important because he inferred from the fact that there is no objective reason for choosing one trope over another that how we organize the past is wholly up to us, and from that the inference was drawn that there is no objective way the past is ordered. Narratives are just ways among other ways. I think there really are objective organizations of events in history, that there are realities to which narratives correspond.'¹⁹² This brings us back, with an additional layer of importance, to the question how different perspectives of the past relate to each other, and to a final "turn" that interacts with formal innovation.

¹⁸⁹ Danto, "Narrative Sentence," 152.

¹⁹⁰ Van den Akker, 14-15.

¹⁹¹ Ankersmit, "Narrativist Revival," 228-230.

¹⁹² "Arthur Danto" in E. Domańska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 177. In a similar tone, Van den Akker has recently criticized Paul Roth: 'It does not follow, or not for the reason suggested by Paul Roth, that "we choose, in some important respects, our history as well. For what sense can be made of our past also depends on our stock of descriptions for describing it." We are less free than Roth suggests, because the stock of descriptions that is available, and with that, the sense we can make of our past, is itself historically conditioned and therefore not a matter of choice.' Van den Akker, 16.

The (Re)Turn to the Archive

*The sources don't tell you the significance and meaning of the information they present to you. But, on the other hand, you cannot make the meaning and the significance just "out of your stomach." There is a very complex relationship between the information in the source material and the procedures of interpretation that bring about meaning.*¹⁹³

“Anti-postmodern” historians have, in my view, rightfully voiced a number of criticisms. For example, the polemical and sometimes condescending approach of many “postmodern” historians, that fueled conflict and proportionally decreased analytical value. This includes the creation of strawmen, of which Sarkar has listed at least four: Positivism, Reason, Enlightenment and Progress (capitalized to draw attention to ways in which these have often been homogenized to further an argument).¹⁹⁴ You could say that “anti-postmodernists” have returned the favor by not (meaningfully) distinguishing between ideas they variously classified as “poststructuralism”, “postmodernism” and the result of the “linguistic turn” – and without recognizing that the core of some of these ideas lie in “(post-)narrativism”. In my view, this polemical back-and-forth led many not to notice the important questions that were raised, and failed to draw attention to the important place that “postmodern” theorists rarely turned their attention to; the archive and the role of the sources.

Those who did, however, have produced an incredibly productive dialogue between “postmodernist” insights and those from postcolonial history, feminist history, queer history, the history of emotions, environmental history, and others. Works like Michael-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past* (1995) and Ann Stoler’s *Reading along the Grain* (2009) have analyzed with great depth the dynamics that lead to the construction, destruction and absence of archives. Historians have read archives “against the grain”, to approach, in the words of Marshall, Murphy & Tortorici in the context of queer history, the archive ‘as a space where one collects or cobbles together historical understandings of sexuality and gender through an appraisal of presences and absences.’¹⁹⁵ At the same time, Stoler has pleaded caution and has called for ‘a commitment to a

¹⁹³ Domańska, “Jorn Rüsen,” 154.

¹⁹⁴ Sarkar, 298.

¹⁹⁵ D. Marshall, K.P. Murphy & Z. Tortorici, “Queering Archives: Historical Unravelings,” in D. Marshall & Z. Tortorici (eds.), *Turning Archival: The Life of the Historical in Queer Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 9. Carla Freccero speaks, building on Derrida, of “Queer spectrality”, ‘a mode of historical attentiveness that the living might have to what is not present but somehow appears as a figure or voice, a “non-living present in the living present” that is no longer or not yet with us.’ Freccero, 14.

less assured and perhaps more humble stance – to explore the grain with care and read along it first,’ a plea subsequently picked up by queer historians like Regina Kunzel.¹⁹⁶ What these historians share, and where they diverge from many of the “postmodern” historians I mentioned above, is that they take serious the complex interaction between invention and investigation, bringing to mind Hartman’s method of ‘critical fabulation’ and Zemon Davis’ invention ‘guided by the voices of the past.’

I mention Hartman and Zemon Davis to return to innovative forms of history production. Even the most forceful critics of “postmodernism”, like Richard Evans, have praised historians like Zemon Davis for their new approaches to writing history. In fact, Evans lists in a long passage a number of “experimental historiographies”, including Greg Dening and David Farber’s polyphonic *Chicago ’68*.¹⁹⁷ Moreover, in the realm of Holocaust history, that subject that seemed so resistant against formal innovation, Saul Friedländer has urged historians to ‘the simultaneous acceptance of two contradictory moves: the search for ever closer historical linkages and the avoidance of a naïve historical positivism leading to simplistic and self-assured historical narration and closures,’ something he himself has tried to do in *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (2007).¹⁹⁸

With all this said, it makes in my view little sense to say that critiques of “postmodernism” have halted experimentation with form, the claim with which I began this chapter. For one, because it is an impossible hypothesis to analyze given the term’s status between emptiness and overdetermination. But most importantly, because it seems to me that many experimentations with form¹⁹⁹ have been driven by exactly the same questions that were raised within the extended discursive triangle I explored above: they have taken serious the historicization and de-transcendentalization of the historian; the fragmentation of the white, male, “European” historian’s authority; the temporal asymmetry between the historian and the Ideal Chronicler; the rhetorical elements used in history production; and the historian’s craft between invention and investigation, in partial archives with fragmented traces, between the “voices of the past”, the “voices of the present” and the “voices of the (community of) historian(s).”

¹⁹⁶ A. Arondekas, et al., “Queering Archives: A Roundtable Discussion,” *Radical History Review* 122 (2015), 214. Many queer historians, additionally, recognize the important of constructing archives as future historical evidence. See e.g. D. Marshall, K.P. Murphy & Z.Tortorici (eds.), “Queering Archives: Intimate Tracings,” *Radical History Review* 122 (2015): 1–246.

¹⁹⁷ Evans, 215-216.

¹⁹⁸ S. Friedländer, “Trauma, Transference, and ‘Working Through’ in Writing the History of the Shoah,” *History and Memory* 4, no.1 (1992), 52-53.

¹⁹⁹ I want to make a cautionary note here. Although I use notions like “experimental historiographies” and “innovative works” as seemingly classificatory categories here, I do not think of them as a particular genre, the works of which can be analyzed as a whole. These are highly diverse works that employ a great variety of narrative strategies for completely different purposes. I return to this in the next chapter.

None of these works is less open to criticism than other works of history production, and certainly some imaginative leaps have caused discomfort for other historians. Equally certain, however, is that these works can help historians recognize the ways in which form and content interact and make historians more aware of their often uncritical application of conventional formal choices. Finally, they might effect readers in how they understand and analyze the complexities of history production between the past and the present, the historian and the archive. It is to an example of formal analysis that I turn now.

The Twilight of History

*Our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English,
Germans and Dutch alike.*²⁰⁰

In a 2001 talk entitled “Practices of Historical Narrative,” Richard Price recounts an anecdote that speaks to me, partially because it involves my country of birth. Living with his wife Sally Price on the Caribbean Island of Martinique, one day he is approached by a Dutch journalist called Anil Ramdas. This journalist, in the words of Richard Price, ‘had formed the rather bizarre idea that our own books [i.e. Richard and Sally Price’s], laid end to end, could be used as a metonym for the trajectory of the social sciences during the past thirty years.’ And, importantly, ‘he didn’t find it a pretty sight.’²⁰¹ After spending two days on the island of Martinique, the journalist returned to the Netherlands with an article preliminarily titled, again according to Price, “het avondrood van de antropologie” [The Twilight of Anthropology].

Ramdas’ interpretation of the career of Richard and Sally Price, and supposedly the field of anthropology at large, is one of decline. Originating in the 1960s, their early work is an exponent of ‘modernist scientific certainties’ organized in the form of a monograph. However, from that point onwards, ‘post-modernist confusion and disillusionment’ slowly spreads through their body of work. In *First-Time*, an anthropological account of the Surinamese Maroon Saramakas, linear temporality is disrupted and a coherent exposition of “Western rationality” is replaced with diverse worldviews co-existing alongside each other. In *Alabi’s World* (to which I will return below) the authoritative “I” of the historian fragments into multiple, independently existing voices. Fragmentation further spreads throughout their oeuvre, culminating in their co-authored *Equatoria* (1992) which includes drawings (!). The inevitable, tragic finale is, naturally, fiction...

Most readers will hopefully recognize in Ramdas’ tale elements similar to those I outlined in the first chapter of this thesis. It is not too far of a stretch to say that, just as Marx wanted to turn Hegel upside down, I aim to do the same with Ramdas (the impact, I admit, might be more minute). In the first chapter, I attempted to disentangle questions about the forms of history production from the polemical debates centered around often conflated and poorly-defined understandings of “poststructuralism”, “postmodernism” and the “Linguistic Turn.” By highlighting how form plays an important role in historical theory ranging from analytical philosophy of history, theories of history concerned with problems of representation, and post-

²⁰⁰ J.E.E. Acton, “Letter to the Contributors to the Cambridge Modern History,” in F. Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History from Voltaire to the Present* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 249.

²⁰¹ R. Price, “Practices of Historical Narrative,” *Rethinking History* 5, no. 3 (2001), 359-360.

“archival turn” history production, I intend to pave the way for more research into how content (research as well as writing) and form interact. For this chapter I will analyze how some historians have employed polyphonic elements and why they are important to analyze.

Polyphony

In historiography, voice can be understood in at least two separate ways: as the voice(s) that tell a story or from whose perspective(s) a story is told (also commonly referred to as “point of view”²⁰²); and as the arrangement of voice(s) within a story, whether it is told monophonic (in a singular voice) or polyphonic (in multiple voices). Examples of voice as “unnatural narrative element” can be found in both cases: in the former, the most famous are probably microhistories like *Montaillou* and *The Cheese and the Worms* and recent examples of environmental history, such as Douglas Booth’s *Bondi Beach* and Graham Burnett’s *The Sounding of the Whale*; examples of the latter are what I want to look into in this chapter.

Analyzing polyphony in historiographical texts has a number of motivations. First, there are a sufficient number of examples employing polyphonic elements, but not so many that it has become naturalized (as some have argued has become the case with microhistory). Additionally, polyphony has been well-theorized in narratology and literary studies, and has occasionally been addressed by historians, albeit, as I will outline below, not always consistently and persuasively. Finally, as I will try to show in this chapter, historians employing polyphonic elements, or works that proclaim to be polyphonic, offer notable insights into the content/form interplay.²⁰³

The origin of the concept of polyphony is usually located in music. It was introduced into literature by the Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin in his study of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* (1929). Bakhtin accredits Dostoyevsky with inventing the polyphonic novel, which he defines as a novel build up out of a ‘plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses... with equal rights and each with its own world.’²⁰⁴ For Bakhtin, this type of novel differs fundamentally from what he calls the “European novel,” which always merges different voices into the authoritative voice or argument of the author. Bakhtin conceives of the polyphonic novel as a unity created through a multiplicity

²⁰² A great study of point of view in ancient historiography (especially Thucydides) is Emily Greenwood’s *Thucydides and the Shaping of History*, including a clear explanation of the difference between focalization and point of view, and why the latter is a more suited analytical tool for historians.

²⁰³ As with everything, there is also a notable downside, namely that polyphony usually does apply to narratives as a whole, and needs less to be distinguished as a narrative element.

²⁰⁴ Bakhtin, *Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, 6-7.

of voices, in which there is simply no space for a ‘nonparticipating “third person.”’²⁰⁵ Nor do the different voices create a Hegelian synthesis that then represents the author’s position. Instead, the polyphonic novel mirrors society as a space in which different ideas and worldviews co-exist and clash, but are never definitively resolved.²⁰⁶

Additionally, the polyphonic novel understands personhood in a different way than the monological novel does. Whereas the characters in the monologic novel are controlled by the author, and do not have an existence outside of the role that the author has designed for them in the service of furthering their [i.e. the authors] own voice, in a polyphonic novel characters always have a surplus that goes beyond the control of the author. The subjects of Dostoevsky’s novels are never fully grasped, or *reified*, a finality that Bakhtin associates only with death.²⁰⁷ In the much more poetic elaboration of Bakhtin: ‘In a human being there is always something that only he himself can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing secondhand definition... As long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word.’²⁰⁸

Bakhtin’s exemplification of polyphony can be considered part of a broader project, sometimes designated as philosophy of dialogue or the philosophy of the Other, and comes close to that of Martin Buber.²⁰⁹ The connection to Buber is important to understand the position of the author amidst this multiplicity of voices. The author can only relate to the novel’s characters through an acknowledgment of their individuality and existence beyond its [the author’s] own grasp. Just as Buber distinguishes between the self-centered I-It and the reciprocal I-Thou relation, Bakhtin differentiates between the objectivized (reified) and the dialogical relation: ‘the consciousnesses of other people cannot be perceived, analyzed, defined as objects or as things – one [i.e. the author] can only relate to them dialogically. To think about them means to talk with

²⁰⁵ This point of the unity of polyphony is important to stress. Bakhtin argues that the hegemony of the monological model, linked to “European rationalism”, is rooted in the superimposition of consciousness over existence (reminiscent of Cartesian solipsism) and posits the unity of conscience (the “I”) as equal to the structure of experience. The effect is an understanding of society as coherent, unified and non-contradictory, one that Bakhtin considers untenable. See e.g. 81-82. For reference to the non-participating third person, see 18. Wayne Booth has, in my view rightly, added that the unity of conscience also needs to be qualified, as our being-in-the-world is always characterized by a thrownness, to use a Heideggerian vocabulary. The example of Booth, as that of Foucault and others, is that we always already speak a language and exist in a system of signification that is not our “own” (whatever that would mean, but that we learn to use. Booth recalls here Coleridge reference to “multeity in unity.” Booth, xxi-xxii. Cf. also Emerson, “Editor’s Preface,” in M.M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxxi-xxxii.

²⁰⁶ Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 26-27.

²⁰⁷ A similar argument as that made by Emmanuel Levinas, see E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

²⁰⁸ Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 47, 49-50, 58-59, 62. Cf. e.g. 83-84.

²⁰⁹ See e.g. Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 63; N. Perlina, “Bakhtin and Buber: Problems of Dialogic Imagination.” *Studies in 20th Century Literature* 9, no. 1 (1984): 12-28.

them; otherwise, they immediately turn to us their objectivized side: they fall silent, close up, and congeal into finished, objectivized images.²¹⁰

Bakhtin concludes his work with two observations that resonate with some of the arguments outlined in this thesis. First, Bakhtin opposes an artistic and philosophical insistence to monology to 20th century science. Similar to what some historians have argued, Bakhtin draws attention to physicists' and mathematician's acceptance of indefiniteness and unknowability (think of Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle and Gödel's incompleteness theorem), at least since Einstein's theory of relativity and the birth of quantum mechanics.²¹¹ Whereas scientists are no longer 'confused by any "indefinite quantities" but know how to calculate them and take them into account,' artists (and I feel comfortable extending this argument to historians) 'sometimes continue to demand a very crude and very primitive definitiveness, one that quite obviously could not be true.'²¹²

Secondly, although Bakhtin praises the polyphonic novel for its superior understanding of society and men, he does not believe that the polyphonic novel should take the monological's place.²¹³ In a manner reminiscent of Megill and McCloskey's plea to historians to approach form more consciously and self-reflexively, Bakhtin insists that 'each fundamentally and significantly new genre, once it arrives, exerts influence on the entire circle of old genres: the new genre makes the old ones, so to speak, more conscious; it forces them to better perceive their own possibilities and boundaries, that is, to overcome their own *naivete*.'²¹⁴

Polyphony has sporadically found its way into the minds of historians, likely due to Bakhtin's popularity in the humanities at large. The historian who probably most elaborately reflected on the relevance of polyphony in history production has been Peter Burke. In *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (1992), using the famous 1902 letter by Lord Acton ('our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, Germans and Dutch alike') as a starting point, Burke argued that historians had moved away from the ideal of the authoritative historian ('the Voice of

²¹⁰ Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 67-68.

²¹¹ See e.g. Clark, 16-17.

²¹² Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 272.

²¹³ Booth's interpretation is somewhat ambiguous here, as he argues that 'the artist's essential task is... to achieve a view of the world superior to all other views; fiction of the right kind, pursuing the right tasks, is the best instrument of understanding that has ever been devised. It is indeed the only conceptual device we have that can do justice, by achieving a kind of objectivity quite different from that hailed by most western critics, to the essential, irreducible multi-centeredness, or "polyphony," of human life.' He is, however, right in my view that this ambiguity runs through Bakhtin's own work, and that his conclusion that the polyphonic novel only informs and improves other genres but not supersedes them, seems overtly nuanced as compared to the rest of his argument. Booth, xx, xxiv.

²¹⁴ Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 271.

History’) to ‘varied and opposing voices,’ what he characterized as ‘heteroglossia.’²¹⁵ As an example, Burke referenced Richard Price’s *Alabi’s World*.²¹⁶

Eighteen years later, in 2010, Burke published a conference paper entitled “Cultural History as Polyphonic History.” In it, he distinguishes at least three types of polyphony, which he defines as a ‘multiplication of the voices... perspectives or points of view... expressed in texts’ (note the similarity with the earlier definition of heteroglossia) that he finds characteristic for the humanities in the second half of the twentieth century²¹⁷: a multiplication of perspectives that historians represent (he mentions, among others, subaltern studies and feminist histories) connected to a greater sensitivity in textual interpretations; a turn towards interdisciplinarity (multiplication of disciplines); and a diversification of approaches, what Burke had already described in his “History of Events and the Revival of Narrative”.²¹⁸

Although I agree with Burke’s argument that a diversification of voices, methodologies and disciplines has taken place in the humanities since the second half of the twentieth century (I would add: in particular geographies, and probably more precisely since the 1960s), I am not convinced that polyphony is the best concept to describe this development with.²¹⁹ Moreover, I believe he conflates Bakhtin’s notions of polyphony and heteroglossia. In “Discourse in the Novel” (1934), Bakhtin explained the concept of heteroglossia through the example of a peasant, who is confronted with different types of languages by different institutions, and through this confrontation becomes aware of the rules of different types of speeches and their differing worldviews.²²⁰ Heteroglossia here, does not refer to a co-existence of independent voices and consciousnesses, but to the co-existence of different languages, in the words of Bakhtin both ‘linguistic dialects’ and ‘languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, “professional” and “generic” languages, languages of generations and so forth.’²²¹ Burke’s definition of ‘varied and opposing voices’ and his focus on “new perspectives” seems to me closer to Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony than to heteroglossia. That is not to say that heteroglossia cannot be practiced by historians, or that it does not apply to Price’s *Alabi’s World*. In fact, I think *Alabi’s World* would be an excellent case study to analyze historian’s employments of heteroglossia, even though I will limit myself here to studying it through its use of polyphonic elements.

²¹⁵ Burke, “New History,” 2-6.

²¹⁶ Burke, “History of Events,” 289-290.

²¹⁷ P. Burke, “Cultural History as Polyphonic History,” *ARBOR Ciencia, Pensamiento y Cultura* 186, no. 743 (2010), 479.

²¹⁸ Burke, “Cultural History,” 479-481.

²¹⁹ It should be noted that he wrote a conference paper and may have been bound by the terminology and theme of the conference.

²²⁰ M.M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in M. Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 295-296.

²²¹ Bakhtin, “Discourse,” 271-272.

There has been another interesting conflation of the concept of polyphony, and one that turns out to be very relevant for historians: namely, the invocation of the Rashomon effect. The Rashomon effect is rooted in Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon*. Since then, a proliferation of the term has taken place that can only be rivalled by the "storytelling boom" alluded to in the introduction. Aside from literature and film studies, the term has been used in ethnography, anthropology, sociology, history, law, psychology, journalism, education, communication, statistics, biology, and, always a precursor for analytical deflation, management studies.²²² Robert Anderson, professor of communication, has provided a helpful distinction between a laymen understanding of the Rashomon effect, and its more complex employment in the film. Based on empirical research, Anderson outlines that 'people commonly say that the film is about the differences in perspective found in diverse accounts of a single event.'²²³ Understood thus, its occurrence can be found not only in all the abovementioned disciplines, but also in daily life (I would say on a daily basis, but that might reflect some of my own peculiarities).

In contrast, Anderson argues, the movie *Rashomon* produces its enduring fascination through the interplay of three elements. First, there is the fact: the dead body of the Samurai. This fact is not just an ordinary fact, but one with force, with the need for an explanation. Secondly, there is a multiplicity of detailed explanatory narratives both believable and coherent. Finally, the film is made to make it impossible to either falsify any of the explanations, or to choose one as more plausible than the other.²²⁴ The inability to choose between equally plausible explanations is, in the words of Anderson, 'inextricably woven into the certainty of the fact (the man's body, in this case) around which the Rashomon effect usually takes shape... Although the judgement reached may not be logically satisfactory, it must be socially and legally satisfactory. It must be decisive even if it is not beyond reasonable doubt.'²²⁵

²²² K.G. Heider, "The Rashomon Effect: When Ethnographers Disagree," *American Anthropologist* 90, no.1 (1988): 73-81; V. Alia, *Media Ethics and Social Change* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); R. Anderson, "The Rashomon Effect and Communication," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 41, no. 2 (2016): 249-270; R. Anderson, "What Is the Rashomon Effect?," in B. Davis, R. Anderson & J. Walls, *Rashomon Effects: Kurosawa, Rashomon and Their Legacies* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016); N. Yalman, "The Rashomon Effect: Considerations for Existential Anthropology," in B. Davis, R. Anderson & J. Walls, *Rashomon Effects: Kurosawa, Rashomon and Their Legacies* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016); M.G. Nikolaidis & N.V. Margaritelis, "Same Redox Evidence But Different Physiological "Stories": The Rashomon Effect in Biology," *BioEssays* 40, no. 9 (2018).

²²³ Anderson, 66.

²²⁴ Anderson, 68-69, 71. The co-existence of equally plausible accounts without the possibility to falsify any of them, is also at the core of Karl Heider's employment of the Rashomon Effect in ethnography, and seems similarly close to David Weberman's study of incompatibility in historiography. Cf. Heider; Weberman, "Compatibility."

²²⁵ Anderson, 72.

Polyphony and Historiography

There is a fairly substantial amount of English and English-translated historiographical texts from the 1970s to the present, that employ polyphonic elements.²²⁶ For this chapter I will analyze a sample of four: Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Yair Mintzker's *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew* and Richard Price's *Alabi's World*. These four books are consciously chosen, as they exist on, what one might call, a "polyphonic scale", that is following Bakhtin's definition they can be organized as becoming progressively more polyphonic. In analyzing these works, I am particularly concerned with "authorial intention", that controversial, contested and elusive idea. What I mean in this context, and why I think it makes sense to invoke "intention", is to trace the methodological problems that gave rise to the formal innovation of polyphony in these historiographical texts. Compared to scholars of literature, historians have the advantage in trying to lay bare intent, since many authors explicate their methodological considerations in pro- and epilogues.²²⁷ As long as the author/narrator is taken to be reliable,²²⁸ all

²²⁶ Building on Yair Mintzker's list, I can think of at least: S. Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War* (London: Penguin Random House, 1988); S. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2015); S. Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); J. Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (London: Vintage, 1995); K. Jacoby, *Shadows at Dawn: A Borderland Massacre and the Violence of History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008); Y. Mintzker, *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an Eighteenth-Century Court Jew* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); L. Otis, *Müller's Lab* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); J. Piker, *The Four Deaths of Acorn Whistler: Telling Stories in Colonial America* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2013); R. Price, *Alabi's World* (Baltimore, M.D.: John Hopkins University, 1990); N. Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1995). Additionally, there are a number of historical documentaries, such as P. Forgács, dir., *El Perro Negro. Histoires de la guerre civile d'Espagne* (ARTE France & Lumen Films, 2005); D. Gazdag, dir., *Hungarian Chronicles* (1991). The inclusion of Alexievich's work here needs further study, since oral histories might almost by definition be said to include polyphonic elements. In that regard, the "unnaturalness" of oral history's polyphony has likely decreased since its inception as a popular academic pursuit in the US, UK and Western Europe around the late 1960s and early 1970s, similar to that of microhistory which has, according to some, by now become one of the most conventional "genres" of history production. On the other hand, Alexievich's work remains at the forefront of oral history's popularity, and she has consistently reinvented her ways of doing and presenting historical accounts, as I will try to make clear below by briefly touching upon the differences between her *Unwomanly Face of War* and *Second-Hand Time*. Moreover, her work is among the most frequently found results when coupled to "polyphony", which led me to include her work in this list, but tentatively leave out other oral histories.

²²⁷ It should be noted that authors of fiction have played with this convention in their works, as in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Similarly, various "postmodernist" fiction writers have destabilized generic differences by using various historians' conventions. See e.g. Hutcheon. Things become even more complicated when we go further back in time and the understanding of fact(uality) and fiction(ality) becomes more blurred, see e.g. L. Gossmann, *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); M. Fludernik, "The Fiction of the Rise of Fictionality," *Poetics Today* 39, no.1 (2018): 67-92. I am grateful to Judit Minczinger for highlighting this point.

²²⁸ I am thankful to Gerald Prince and Lisa Irene Hau for pressing this point. In history production within the geographical and temporal frame that I employ in this thesis, I can think of at least one example where the narrator is explicitly unreliable, namely R. Rosenstone, *The Man Who Swam into History: The (Mostly) True Story of my Jewish Family* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005). For ancient historiography, Lisa Hau has opened what we together agreed to be a "Pandora's Box" by approaching Diodoros of Sicily's *Bibliothēke* as a work in which the narrator (what she calls the "narratological persona") and author as separate. The second part of the title of her chapter says it all. See L.I. Hau, "Narrator and Narratorial Persona in Diodoros' *Bibliothēke*: (And Their Implications for the Tradition

historians in the works I will analyze here, have explained their reasoning to employ polyphony, explanations that I will take as the starting point of my analysis.

The Rape of Nanking

Between 4 and 12 December 1948, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) read its verdict on war crimes, crimes against peace and crimes against humanity committed by the Empire of Japan between the 1931 invasion of Manchuria and the formal surrender of Japanese forces on 2 September 1945. Its sentences concluded an estimate of the number of people killed and raped in what has become variously known as the Nanjing (Nanking) Massacre, The Rape of Nanjing or the Nanjing Incident. From 13 December 1937 until sometime in late January or early February 1938 (like almost everything, the dates are contested) Japanese forces killed, according to the IMTFE, more than 200,000 Chinese civilians and prisoners of war in the Nanjing area, while approximately 20,000 people were raped. A subsequent ruling of the Nanjing War Crimes Tribunal estimated the death toll to be more than 300,000.²²⁹

In 1997, Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten History of the Holocaust* was published in the United States. It quickly became a bestseller, being featured in the *New York Times*' Best Seller top 100, and received overall good critics, including from prominent historians, among other things because of her inclusion of the contested memories and memory politics that developed after the Massacre.²³⁰ At the same time, she was criticized, among other things, for factual errors and an essentialization of Japanese culture that functioned at least partially as her explanation for why the massacre had taken place.²³¹ Part of these critiques were explained by the fact that Chang was not a trained historian, but held a degree in journalism and creative writing.²³²

of Greek Historiography), in L.I. Hau, A. Meeus & B. Sheridan (eds.), *Diooros of Sicily: Historiographical Theory and Practice in the Bibliotheca* (Peeters: Leuven, 2018).

²²⁹ Yang, "Convergence or Divergence? Recent Historical Writings on the Rape of Nanjing," *The American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999), 844. I take most information regarding the controversies over the Nanjing Massacre from historian Daqing Yang, one of the foremost experts of the history of Nanjing historiography in Anglo-Saxon academia. Cf. Curthoys & Docker, *Is History Fiction*, 224-227. See also the Annual Reports of the Network of Concerned Historians, particularly, but not exclusively, regarding controversies over the Nanjing Massacre in Japanese history textbooks, Network of Concerned Historians, *Compilation of Annual Reports 1995–2023* ([https://concernedhistorians.org/content_files/file/ar/compilation .pdf](https://concernedhistorians.org/content_files/file/ar/compilation.pdf)).

²³⁰ I. Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War Two* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 14-15; "The Rape of Nanking (Book)," *Wikipedia* (last edited: 27 March 2024).

²³¹ Yang, "Convergence or Divergence," 854-855, 862-864; Curthoys & Docker, *Is History Fiction*, 226.

²³² As Yang has argued, it is a common occurrence that writing on the Nanjing Massacre is done by non-academic historians. D. Yang, "The Challenges of the Nanjing Massacre: Reflections on Historical Inquiry," in J. Fogel (ed.), *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 135.

Chang opens her book with a description of ‘two related but discrete atrocities. One is the Rape of Nanking itself... Another is the cover-up.’²³³ For the first part, she claims to be ‘largely influenced by *Rashomon*’ and encourages the reader to ‘pull all the recollections together, to credit or discredit parts or all of each accounts, and through this process to create out of subjective and often self-serving perceptions a more objective picture of what might have occurred.’²³⁴ The accounts are organized in three different perspectives: the Japanese, the Chinese and the people working at the Nanjing Safety Zone, a demilitarized zone within the city of Nanjing in which some 200,000 Chinese found refuge.²³⁵

Although Chang’s introduced structure certainly sounds reminiscent of *Rashomon*, the work itself is far from it. The first complication arises when trying to establish what Chang precisely considers the content which the three testimonies present differently. Praiseworthy, this is not the question whether the massacre took place at all (a not uncommon occurrence in Japan²³⁶), but it remains unclear whether it is the death toll, the quality of Chinese resistance, the explanation(s) for Japanese brutalities (to name just three contested issues), or a combination of these, that Chang encourages the reader to approach from diverse perspectives.²³⁷ In practice, more than with three different perspectives, the reader is confronted with Chang’s own interspersions, that not too subtly nudge the reader into her preferred direction. Thus, passages such as ‘the Japanese... strategy of mass butchery involved several steps’ are so common that they in fact accompany Chang’s introduction of her supposedly *Rashomon*-like structure: just a few sentences previously she describes her aim to convey ‘the story of how the Japanese wiped out hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians’ and immediately after introducing the perspective of the Safety Zone workers, she describes them as ‘heroes. The handful of Westerners on the scene risked their lives to help Chinese civilians during the massacre and to warn the rest of the world about the atrocities being carried out before their very eyes.’²³⁸

To be clear, it is not my intention here to doubt any of Chang’s descriptions beyond those pointed out by others mentioned above. My point is that Chang neither makes clear what the three

²³³ Chang, 14.

²³⁴ Chang, 14-15.

²³⁵ “The Nanjing Safety Zone,” *Facing History & Ourselves* (last updated: 30 November 2018).

²³⁶ For example, Suzuki Akira’s *The Illusion of the “Nanjing Massacre”* (1973). Yang, “Convergence or Divergence,” 844-845.

²³⁷ See Yang, “Convergence or Divergence,” esp. 853-856, 859-860. It might be argued that the massacre itself is the “fact” about which different “narratives” exist. This “fact” would certainly have a great force to be resolved, socially as well as legally. This interpretation further fits the framework within which memory politics and conflicting historical narratives are commonly being analyzed. I contest, however, that this interpretation is an abstraction. The death of the Samurai in *Rashomon* is a specified “event”, meaning that the details of the event constitute the equal plausibility of the divergent explanations. This suggests that for the massacre as well, the details that feature in the differing explanations need to be made explicit, and this is where Chang’s work runs into difficulties.

²³⁸ Chang, 14-15, 42.

perspectives she introduces are supposed to disagree about, nor presents an incompatibility of equally plausible explanations.²³⁹ To the extent that Chang incorporates Japanese testimonies, she often clearly expresses her own position, for example in the ascription of guilt between Commander General Matsui Iwane and Prince Yasuhiko Asaka, a passage that Diqan Yang later criticized for being based on discredited historical work.²⁴⁰ The question thus arises why Chang referred to her work as *Rashomon*-like in the first place?

The reference to the Nanjing massacre as one reminiscent of *Rashomon* was first made by the historian Diqan Yang, in his 1989 graduate thesis at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. In it, he later explained, he introduced the metaphor of *Rashomon* to refer to ‘the multiple, divergent narratives of the same event [that] seemed irreconcilable, [so that] historical truth probably would never be found.’²⁴¹ It is speculative, but based on his later works I imagine that Yang the graduate student considered the contested details of the massacre outlined above (the death toll, the explanation for Japanese brutalities) as constituting the *Rashomon*-like “fact”, and the force of the fact surely foremost the quest for justice. What is important here to note is the legal context in which many of the details, especially the death toll, were first established.

What makes the *Rashomon* case interesting for historians is that although incompatibility of equally plausible explanations is at the core of many historian’s debates, the force to resolve these incompatibilities is often of a decidedly different nature than it is in legal cases. It is interesting here to think back to Carrard’s earlier definition of the speech act that grounds the historical discipline (“I have done my research, believe me, and if you do not believe me, go check my sources”). For Carrard, the historian’s claim does not go beyond the stating of research done, possibly inspired by Oakeshott’s differentiation between “what happened” and “what the sources lead us to believe.” Contrarily, the speech act for the discipline of law might well be formulated along the lines of “based on the available evidence, working from the assumption of innocence, and acknowledging the possibility of later revisions, I hereby declare a judgement on what happened that is valid beyond reasonable doubt.” In the case of the judge, a judgement *needs* to be made, if only because of generic convention, while this necessity is at least not as pressing for historians.²⁴² To go one step further, even the idea that historians need to create unity out of

²³⁹ Cf. Curthoys & Docker, *Is History Fiction*, 226.

²⁴⁰ Yang, “Convergence or Divergence,” 854-855.

²⁴¹ Yang, “Convergence or Divergence,” 859.

²⁴² Peter Brooks has put it more strongly, stating that ‘the purpose of putting [legal adjudication] into narrative form is not simply to say what happened but to decide what to do about what happened: whether and how to assign blame, how to arrive at conviction.’ Brooks, *Seduced by Story*, 123. I am also thinking here of Michel de Montaigne, who in “Of the Lame or Cripple” wrote: ‘Let us accept some form of sentence which says, ‘The court understands nothing of the matter’, more freely and ingenuously than did the Areopagites, who, finding themselves hard pressed by a case that they could not unravel, ordered the parties to come back in a hundred years.’ I am grateful to Michael Ignatieff for bringing this essay to my attention. One of the most famous examples of the type of conditionality

contradicting sources (a kind of synthesizing act that comes arguably closest to legal judgement) is an assumption open to challenge – a challenge that has been mounted by historians, including those employing polyphonic elements.

In the case of the Nanjing Massacre, Yang has argued that part of the disagreements between the “Japanese” and “Chinese” perspective of the massacre could not be resolved at the time due to the non-disclosure of evidence or not-yet-given testimonies.²⁴³ As a sign of ‘convergence’ Yang further cites the willingness of historians on both sides to acknowledge that some details, like the legally established figure of 300,000 casualties estimated by the Nanjing War Crimes Tribunal, cannot be definitively proven, but in the words of Chinese historian Sun Zhaiwei could be ‘somewhat upward or downward.’²⁴⁴ This acknowledgment of uncertainty and unknowability, resonating with the difference between history and law, let Yang to conclude that his metaphor of Nanjing historiography as reminiscent of *Rashomon* was not so poignant after all.²⁴⁵

The Unwomanly Face of War

‘Everything we know about war we know with “a man’s voice.” We are all captives of “men’s” notions and “men’s” sense of war. “Men’s” words. Women are silent... Even those who were at the front say nothing. If they suddenly begin to remember, they don’t talk about the “women’s” war but about the “men’s.” They tune in to the canon.’²⁴⁶

Svetlana Alexievich’s *The Unwomanly Face of War* was my first encounter with polyphony in history production. I was amazed that someone could write history in such a way. It seemed to me, back then when I first read it, that she had found the perfect harmony between what she set out to do – uncover the silenced voices, rewrite a history of war, lay bare ‘the voices of life itself’²⁴⁷ – and how she did it, between the content and the form. Over time I have grown more critical of this work, and many of my memories of its first reading are no doubt tainted by my current vocabulary,

historians can employ is the prologue to Natalie Zemon Davis’ *The Return of Martin Guerre*. In a January 2022 talk, Marina Grishakova linked Davis’ book to the idea of exploratory epistemology (or, what she called building on Agamben and Deleuze, “experiments without truth”) and Liesbeth Korthals Altes’ notion of narrative savviness, mentioned in chapter 2.

²⁴³ Yang, “Reflections,” 141, 148.

²⁴⁴ As quoted in Yang, “Convergence or Divergence,” 853. In a later essay, Yang approvingly quotes Saul Friedlander’s call for ‘the simultaneous acceptance of two contradictory moves: the search for ever closer historical linkage and the avoidance of a naïve historical positivism leading to simplistic and self-assured historical narration and closures.’ Yang, “Reflections,” 147.

²⁴⁵ Yang, “Convergence or Divergence,” 859-860; Curthoys & Docker, *Is History Fiction*, 227.

²⁴⁶ Alexievich, xv-xvi.

²⁴⁷ Alexievich, xv.

but it continues to be one of my formative books, much like how she describes *I am from a Burning Village* and the works of Dostoevsky to have been for her.²⁴⁸

Published in 1983, after having gone through a series of meetings with censors, Alexievich published this oral history of women who fought during World War II, known in the Soviet Union at the time (and still in Russia and Belarus) as the “Great War”. The book contains interviews with hundreds of women, interspersed with descriptions and analyses of the author, varying from husbands that give instructions to talk more about strategic battles to the author’s own observations about what the meaning of her history. Her book builds on the work of Ales Adamovich, including his *I am from a Burning Village*, who had conducted similar interviews about the war, but ones that rarely featured women.

Alexievich’s polyphonic intentions become clear at various points throughout the work. Thus she writes: ‘I came up with a formula: to try to record women of various military professions... It could be supposed that a nurse saw one war, a baker another, a paratrooper a third, a pilot a fourth, the commander of a submachine-gun platoon a fifth... Each of these women had her own radius of visibility, so to speak.’²⁴⁹ And already in the prologue she highlights ‘versions, that each person has her version, and it is from them, from their plurality and their intersections, that the image of the time and the people living in it is born.’²⁵⁰ These versions she tries to uncover are the silenced, previously unheard voices, the ‘women’s voices’ describing the ‘women’s war.’

At the same time, she is more ambitious than only recording unheard voices. She wants to change the history of war, to ‘make war sickening, and the very thought of it repulsive. Insane. So that even the generals would be sickened.’²⁵¹ Moreover, as Aliaksandr Novikau has argued, her work fits within a feminist approach to war time studies that tries to break with the traditionally conceived separation of active (male) and passive (female) participants, and instead highlights the different ways in which women actively participate in war, whether in the military, in the arms industry, or as a symbolic subject of wartime propaganda.²⁵² Thus, she moves away from military strategies and supposedly-heroic accomplishments to the emotions of war, the day-to-day work outside of battle, and the suffering, not only of people, but also of ‘the earth, the bird, the trees.’²⁵³ Moreover, she effectively reformulates the temporality of war, arguing that it is not when the fighting has faded and the peace accords have been signed that war ends, but that for many women

²⁴⁸ Idem.

²⁴⁹ Alexievich, 72.

²⁵⁰ Alexievich, xxi.

²⁵¹ Alexievich, xxiii.

²⁵² A. Novikau, “Women, Wars and Militarism in Svetlana Alexievich’s Documentary Prose,” *Media, War & Conflict* 10, no. 3 (2017), 315.

²⁵³ Alexievich, xvi.

the real suffering only began after the war; when gender expectations were reinstated, and the experiences of war effected how women were perceived.²⁵⁴ As one of her interviewees summarized: ‘Men fight at the war and women fight after the war.’²⁵⁵

This move beyond representing silenced voices, however, also produces a decidedly anti-polyphonic effect. She explicitly makes this point herself:

But I would not like it to be said of my book: her heroes are real, and no more than that. This is just history. Mere history... On the one hand I examine specific human beings, living in a specific time and taking part in specific events, and on the other hand I have to discern the eternally human in them. The tremor of eternity. That which is in human beings at all times.²⁵⁶

Through her own voice, Alexievich foregrounds what she considers the unique characteristics of “women’s war”: women consider their own beauty as ‘the indestructible part of their existence... their nature’²⁵⁷; and whereas ‘men hide behind history... women are caught up with feelings.’²⁵⁸ As Novikau has outlined, although the centralization of feelings into the descriptions of war was one of the prime concerns of the feminist approach to war studies, its main aim was to ‘challenge the rationality/emotion dichotomy,’ not reinforce it in the way Alexievich seems to do here.²⁵⁹ At another time, Alexievich describes how for women it is more difficult to kill, ‘because a woman gives life. Gives it. Bears it in herself for a long time, nurses it’, uncritically reiterating one of the most timeless ascriptions of the Woman-as-Mother.²⁶⁰

To be sure, the themes that Alexievich highlights can be found in her interviews,²⁶¹ but only as part of a wide array of experiences. Ironically, her aim to present the lived experience of

²⁵⁴ An important implicit layer of this different temporality, one that Alexievich once refers to in one of her “conversations with my censor”, is the mass rape of women by all parties, but particular Red Army soldiers, and their lasting effects far beyond the peace accords. Alexievich, xxxvi. See e.g. A. Pető, “Memory and the Narrative of Rape in Budapest and Vienna in 1945,” in R. Bessel & D. Schuman (eds.), *Life after Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003); M. Gebhardt, *Crimes Unspoken: The Rape of German Women at the End of the Second World War* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

²⁵⁵ Alexievich, 86. Cf. Novikau, 322.

²⁵⁶ Alexievich, xxi. Interestingly, in her later *Secondhand Time* – rightfully, in my view, characterized by Angelos Theocharis as polyphonic – she describes a conversation with an interviewee, who is afraid that she will write out the details from her story that she does not agree with, promising that ‘there will be two stories. I want to be a cold-blooded historian, not one who is holding a blazing torch.’ S. Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2015), 121. Cf. A. Theocharis, “Polyphonic Memory and Narratives in Svetlana Alexievich’s *Secondhand Time*,” *Journal of Languages, Texts and Society* 3 (2019): 185-206.

²⁵⁷ Alexievich, 185.

²⁵⁸ Alexievich, xxiii.

²⁵⁹ Novikau, 320.

²⁶⁰ Alexievich, xxxiii.

²⁶¹ For examples of the alleged importance of beauty, see e.g. Alexievich 16-17, 187; for references of motherhood, Alexievich, 162, 250.

women in war through polyphony succeeds if one only reads the interviewees, but it gets disrupted by her own voice drawing the reader's attention to what she considers to be the 'tremor of eternity.'²⁶² In this way she not only challenge the polyphony of her interviewees (remember how Bakhtin differentiated between a multiplicity of voices serving the views of the author, and a multiplicity of voices that the author can only approach as independent voices and consciousnesses), but her own synthesis sometimes comes uncomfortably close to reiterating the dichotomies that feminist approaches to war studies intended to disrupt: Woman/Man, emotional/rational, cyclical/linear time.²⁶³

The Many Deaths of Jew Süß

One of the striking similarities between Alexievich's work and that of Yair Mintzker and Richard Price is the attempt to grapple with the position of the author vis-à-vis the voices of the past. This observation is doubly interesting: one, because in history production the author is usually qualifiedly omniscient; and second, because the position of the author in the polyphonic novel, what Caryl Emerson described as 'a decentered authorial stance,'²⁶⁴ is notoriously complex. In particular Price's struggle can be felt in his writing:

While my decision to present large, unadulterated swathes of observations by eyewitnesses is motivated in part by a wish to decenter the narrative, to fragment the power of the author's inevitable authority, and to draw the reader more directly into the process of interpretation, I would not pretend that the construction of this book is not a careful calculation or that the author is not always present, even when just off-stage.²⁶⁵

This tension might well be inherent to history production's oscillation between the different temporalities of the historian and the historical actors.

²⁶² Helga Lenart-Chang has rightly described this feature of Alexievich's work as 'ethically questionable' as it "not only puts the group before the individual, but it often posits the group as a metaphysical entity that can think and feel, remember and forget... a merging of individual memories into a composite, singular memory." H. Lenart-Chang, "Personal and Collective Memories in the Works of Svetlana Alexievich," *History and Memory* 32, no. 2 (2020), 87, 90.

²⁶³ Cf. Novikau, 320. Here, *The Unwomanly Face of War* can be read as part of its time given much of the similar criticism that has been levelled at "Women's" historians more broadly. See e.g. Scott, "Women's History"; Canning.

²⁶⁴ C. Emerson, "Mikhail Bakhtin," *Filosofia: An Encyclopedia of Russian Thought*, via <https://filosofia.dickinson.edu/encyclopedia/bakhtin-mikhail/>.

²⁶⁵ R. Price, *Alabi's World* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), xvii.

Mintzker's self-fashioning is radically different. His highly eclectic work mixes long quotations only accompanied by sporadic explanatory notes,²⁶⁶ complex passages of biblical textual interpretations,²⁶⁷ and dialogues with an imaginary reader. If Price's aim is to decenter the narrative by making his presence felt as little as possible, Mintzker might be said to take up so many different authorial positions that at times the suspicion arises that one is confronted with different (and potentially unreliable) narrative personae.²⁶⁸ Mintzker's diversity of authorial positions translates to varied interpretations of what his book is about. For Jesse Spohnholz, the work is foremost about the complexities of anti-Semitism in the Holy Roman Empire and (implicitly) the oft-assumed links between anti-Semitism and the development of German nationalism.²⁶⁹ For Jay Geller, the book is both a 'biography of a famous (or infamous) Jew... [and] presents a social history of an era.'²⁷⁰ Finally, Sara Maza's insightful review acknowledges that 'the book has more than one purpose' but draws attention to the increasing frequency with which Joseph Süß Oppenheimer's own subjective experience takes center-stage towards the end of the book.²⁷¹

Let me brief outline some of the details here. Mintzker's book interacts with research into the life and trial of Joseph Süß Oppenheimer, who became "court Jew" at the court of Duke Carl Alexander of Württemberg in 1733, and after the Duke's unexpected death was arrested and sentenced to death by hanging on 4 February 1738. Oppenheimer's story, partially because of its later usage by Joseph Goebbels in a Nazi propaganda film, is considered one of the most famous figures in the history of (European) antisemitism. Mintzker's own work, drawing on a rich variety of archival sources, is wide-ranging. In fact, indications for all the above interpretations can be found in the book. At various points Mintzker refers to attempts at 'deciphering the Jewish side of Oppenheimer's story,'²⁷² 'to assess the relationship between anti-Semitism and Oppenheimer's case,'²⁷³ and, in a longer and complex passage giving credit to Maza's interpretation, he writes:

We are left with a blank or negative space at the very center of the book: with a kind of Godot-like Oppenheimer who never shows up. Or does he? The fact of the matter is that we don't need to observe Oppenheimer directly in order to understand something about his perspective... This is a delicate but important point I urge the reader to spend

²⁶⁶ E.g. Mintzker, 141-163.

²⁶⁷ E.g. Mintzker, 170-173.

²⁶⁸ Cf. e.g. the dialogues with an imaginary reader on p.174 and p.227-228.

²⁶⁹ J. Spohnholz, "A Polyphonic Microhistory: Yair Mintzker and the Opportunities of Historical Scale," *Central European History* 53 (2020), 221, 224, 226.

²⁷⁰ J.H. Geller, "The Many Deaths of Jew Süß: Telling the Story of a Jewish Life," *Central European History* 53 (2020), 206-207.

²⁷¹ S. Maza, "Biography or Microhistory?," *Central European History* 53 (2020), 217-219.

²⁷² Mintzker, 178.

²⁷³ Mintzker, 281.

some time pondering. The book has revealed many important facts about Oppenheimer's case and it has discussed several ways in which contemporaries made sense of it. But it has also viewed and imagined the world partly through Oppenheimer's eyes. That the court Jew hasn't appeared more often in our field of vision is no coincidence. In an important sense, we have stood in Oppenheimer's shoes all along.²⁷⁴

Mintzker's eclecticism also translates to his methodologies. Both he and Jay Geller have compared *The Many Deaths* to the Rashomon-effect. Like in Chang's work, this comparison is peculiar, and seems to me to point more to the omnipresence of *Rashomon* in the humanities, than to their clear similarities. Nevertheless, an analysis of why Mintzker's work is not reminiscent of *Rashomon* does provide some fruitful reflections on his historical project. We can follow the same methodology as we did with Chang, and first look at what the "fact" of *The Many Deaths* could be, that various equally plausible interpretations refer to. Even more than with Chang, this "fact" is decidedly unclear. As pointed out above, Mintzker's work has been interpreted to be about many different things. There is an interesting possible interpretation that would go as follows: in his introduction, Mintzker suggests that the story of Oppenheimer has fascinated historians 'because his story took place right on the verge of the modern period, it became one of the most important allegories for the story of German Jews in modern times.'²⁷⁵

From this point of view, Oppenheimer's trial can be read as part of a "rupture", the turn from pre-modern to modern German Jewry (I use these temporal indications only for the sake of the argument). As Spohnholz has rightly pointed out, this "fact" would certainly have a great force, as it interacts with one of the most pressing questions in contemporary European historiography of how the Shoah could have happened. Had Mintzker analyzed Oppenheimer's story through the lens of this question, what Spohnholz describes as the metanarrative of anti-Semitism and the development of German nationalism, it is imaginable that a Rashomon-like history could have been developed.

However, like in Chang's work, this project would run into significant problems. To begin with, unproblematically reading an 18th century trial as a forebearer of the Shoah would constitute many a historical fallacy. But more importantly, and this ties back to what I argued above, the "force" of the "fact" would be decidedly different than it is in *Rashomon*. The historian has an infinitely bigger spectrum of restraint due to the absence of the necessity to make an authoritative judgement on what has happened. This kind of epistemological pluralism that is impossible in the

²⁷⁴ Mintzker 282-283.

²⁷⁵ Mintzker, 2, 10-11. Note how this passage would give credence to Spohnholz' interpretation.

legal setting of *Rashomon*, but that is incidentally one of the characteristic features of polyphony, is what Mintzker himself frequently refers to as ‘resist[ing] the urge to reduce all of [the sources] to a single narrative.’²⁷⁶

We left Mintzker at the point where he argued that Oppenheimer can be read as the “absent center” of his work.²⁷⁷ I want to suggest an interpretation of Oppenheimer as “absent center” that interacts with Mintzker’s proclaimed polyphonic methodology and builds on the work of Jacques Derrida. In “Structure, Sign, and Play,” Derrida argues that the history of Western thought revolved around a contradiction. At the heart of every philosophical “structure” there was assumed to be a “center”, that both controlled what could be said and thought within that structure (that limited, in Derrida’s words, “play”), but that simultaneously could be analyzed itself as independent of the structure that it structured. As an example, he refers to the notion of νοῦς (Nous; Reason; Intellect), which is the structuring principle of most of Classical Greek philosophy; nothing can be thought that lies outside of the scope of what νοῦς can explain. Yet, at the same time, νοῦς can be analyzed independently from the structures of which it is the center; it can be taken as a separate “entity” as exemplified by many Greek and Arabic interpreters of Aristotle.

For Derrida, this duality of being the center of a structure and being interpretable as separate from that structure points to a contradiction that he characterizes as a “desire”. This desire only gets challenged, in what Derrida refers to as a “rupture”, when the foundation of the center as “desire” and not as presence is realized and thought through. What follows from realizing that the presumed structuring center of every structure is only thought, is ‘the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse... that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.’²⁷⁸

The reason for this very brief and incomplete summary of Derrida’s argument is twofold: one, because Mintzker’s reference to an “absent center” could very well be an intertextual allusion to Derrida’s work; and second, because Derrida’s observation that with the disappearance of the center there appears a space in which play becomes possible beyond the previously established boundaries of the structure, is an argument that I think runs through the whole of this thesis both in theories of “unnatural narrative elements”, where, as I alluded to in the second chapter, (cognitive) play and experimentation are frequently invoked as widening spaces for interpretation and knowledge production, and in polyphony, where Bakhtin’s reference to the “surplus” of

²⁷⁶ Mintzker, 19.

²⁷⁷ Mintzker, 174.

²⁷⁸ J. Derrida, “Structure, Sign, Play,” in J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 354.

meaning beyond the control of the author (and arguably also the subject itself) resonates with the Derridean notion of play.²⁷⁹

On the surface, the fact that the center of Mintzker's history is an absent center could in itself constitute a kind of polyphony, allowing for the different testimonies of the trial to be read as containing surplus by not being kept in check by a referent (in this case, Oppenheimer). However, this interpretation runs into trouble. As Mintzker specifies in the quote above, we should understand the absence of Oppenheimer as us (the reader) standing in his shoes.

This indication that we should read the four descriptions (inscriptions) of Oppenheimer from his own perspective, suggests a recentering of the story. I would argue, however, that Mintzker's indication can also be understood more metaphorically. Although it could make sense to read the four testimonies from Oppenheimer's perspective to get an impression of the social milieu in which he was living (remember the interpretation by Jay Geller that this book is a social history of an era), such an approach seems far too one-dimensional for the eclectic spirit of Mintzker. Instead, I suggest that the reader is invited to stand in Oppenheimer's shoes to experience the sensation of being inscribed with meaning, without having an unmediated voice of one's own.²⁸⁰ Seen from this perspective, the empty shoes of Oppenheimer do not so much constitute a recentering of the story, but a place from which the decentered stories of the testimonies can be experienced. Once the ascriptions of Oppenheimer are freed from their referent they are no longer bound by anything beyond themselves. In other words, polyphony can be said to reside in the testimonies becoming independent voices once they are liberated from the structuring influence of their testimonies' aboutness.

This interpretation might further be linked to a moral incentive for the book. Consider the final and longest dialogue with the imaginary reader:

Author:... I think we often forget that composing or reading a text can also be a simple act of kindness, above and beyond all descriptions and interpretations, praises and condemnations... *Reader*: Surely, then, a book that holds these aspirations cannot be

²⁷⁹ There are of course also important differences here. For a critical comparison, see R.R. Wilson, "Play, Transgression and Carnival: Bakhtin and Derrida on 'Scriptor Ludens'," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 19, no.1 (1986): 73-89. Although not perfectly analogous, the debate between Derrida and Emanuel Levinas is also informative here, cf. Levinas; J. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

²⁸⁰ Illuminating here is the following imagined dialogue: '*Reader*: I just don't see why all the historical reconstruction you undertake with such flair and circumspection in Jager's case can't be applied to Oppenheimer himself... *Author*: This is a crucial question that really brings into focus the methodological stakes here. In reconstructing any historical event, it matters a great deal who is reporting what. Oppenheimer was never allowed to write down his own side of the story. His speech was always mediated and controlled, and by his professed enemies at that.' Mintzker, 100-101. Note here the different purposes that dialogue has in *Waiting for Godot*. I am grateful to Leila Shavandi for making this important point so eloquently.

considered a work of professional history? *Author*: Your question is based on the assumption that the past is dead and buried and that the role of the historian is to keep it that way... The dead are among us, [Thomas] Mann claimed; they direct their gaze at us, and we gaze back at them in return. The clear separation between the living and the dead is consequently both real and fictional. The dead are present in the land of the living, which is another way of saying that we, the living, always and everywhere inevitably also inhabit the land of the dead.²⁸¹

Whereas the reader is encouraged to experience being spoken for, in this passage Mintzker turns the mirror upon the historian. Most historians, the argument could go, in presenting a monologic interpretation of history, are ascribing meaning to the lives of people who are no longer able to speak for themselves. Contrarily, Mintzker urges historians to think of the dead as if they are still among us, and in those cases in which there is not sufficient information to describe them, to refrain from all too forceful conclusions.

What I have tried to show is that *The Many Deaths* can be read as a polyphonic history, and as such reflects extensively on many questions that lie at the core of historical research: how to deal with contradictory sources and silences? How to negotiate voice with those who are only spoken about? And how to think about the historian's moral responsibility to the dead that may or may not still be among us? As fascinating as Mintzker's work is though, I find his claim to be polyphonic not unproblematic. This is primarily due to the authorial position that Mintzker takes up. Throughout the book, Mintzker clearly expresses sympathy with some and antipathy with others. Although as reader we might be invited to experience what it is like to be polyphonically inscribed, given Mintzker's rather explicit moral motivations and the hints of unreliability in his use of imaginary dialogues, it is hard to maintain that the voices of the book are really made to speak for themselves. At the same time, it also needs to be acknowledged that polyphony could mean different things for historians than it does for novelists, given how the historian is bound by source availability, voices and silences represented in the sources and their own asynchronous temporal position towards the past, to name just three.²⁸² Mintzker's work is fascinating because it replaces a polyphonic authorial position by decentering the subject. Price's work, on the other hand, faces the polyphonic authorial complexity head on.

Alabi's World

²⁸¹ Mintzker, 227.

²⁸² Cf. Mintzker's own criticism of other polyphonic histories. Mintzker, 23.

In 1780, Alabi became the chief of the Saramaka, a Maroon people living in what is now Suriname and French Guiana. Alabi converted to a particular branch of Christianity, brought to the Dutch colony of Suriname by a group of Moravian missionaries. Price's history, building on his earlier *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (1983), traces the development of the Saramaka from the self-liberation of enslaved people hiding in the forest and establishing communities there, through to Alabi's reign until 1820. The book's focus lies on the period between 1780–1820, on the negotiation between Alabi's newly Christian worldview and that of the majority of Saramaka people and on the complex exchange of goods and runaway slaves between the Sarama and the Dutch colonial administration.

From the start, Price exhibits great reflexivity in the construction of his book. He sees himself confronted with a variety of questions: how to present temporality; how to express different voices, and more importantly different worldviews and systems of meaning-making, alongside each other without any getting the upper hand; and how to balance the historian's own position within these. With regards to temporality, he is quite clear: given the strong sense of linearity exhibited by the Saramaka maroons (as well as the Dutch colonial government and, at least in earthly manners, the Moravian missionaries coming to what is now Suriname), he opts for a chronological representation.²⁸³ On the other hand, he argues, 'to evoke something of the texture of eighteenth-century life in Saramaka, it seemed especially important to eschew modern Western categories, such as religion, politics, economics, art, or kinship, as organizing principles.'²⁸⁴

Here Price touches upon the complex point that we already encountered in the introduction when discussing Dipesh Chakrabarty's work. For Chakrabarty, building on the work of Gayatri Spivak and others, an act of seemingly unproblematic translation occurring in much "European" scholarship, masks what he called the "incommensurabilities" between different kinds of knowledge and knowledge systems, and the dominating practices taking place within them. For Chakrabarty, translation is neither a way of resolving these unequal relations of power in knowledge production, nor a harmonious synthesis of different belief systems. Instead, it creates (hierarchized) difference. To counter this tendency in "European" scholarship, Chakrabarty proposed 'to write narratives and analyses that produce... translucence – and not transparency - in the relation between non-Western histories and European thought and its analytical

²⁸³ In a later article, Price further commented on the importance of reflecting on temporal presentation. He wrote, "I was particularly attracted to Vargas Llosa's narrative experiments with time... I began to argue that different historical or ethnographic situations lend themselves to different literary forms... searching out or even inventing a literary form that does not come pre-selected or ready-made, in order to effectively evoke that particular society, or that particular historical moment." Price, "Practices," 359.

²⁸⁴ Price, *Alabi's World*, xviii.

categories.²⁸⁵ I read in Price a similar kind of translucence, or incommensurability, that goes much beyond his renunciation of Western categories. In fact, it seems to me that the polyphony he creates is precisely an example of this translucence.²⁸⁶

In *Alabi's World*, four voices exist alongside each other: the voice of the Dutch colonial government, represented in the most traditional state archival sources stored mostly in Dutch archives; the voice of Moravian missionaries, mostly in the form of diaries they kept; the voice of the Saramakas, transmitted orally by contemporary Saramaka people; and the voice of 'a self-styled ethnographic historian.'²⁸⁷ The variety of source material immediately strikes the reader by the font that Price uses to distinguish them: ***Dutch colonial documents are presented in Trump Bold Italics; Moravian diary fragments in Trump Bold; oral accounts of the Saramakas in Trump Italics;*** and the voice of the historian, both his own and citing other scholars, upright. As with the whole book, the fonts are not accidental: the Trump Bold of the Moravian diaries is 'intended by its heaviness to suggest German print,' while in reading the oral accounts of the Saramakas, the reader is encouraged to hear 'the speech cadences of the elderly, dignified Saramaka men.'²⁸⁸

Price specifies his intentions using polyphony as twofold: on the one hand, he hopes to 'evoke a past world rather than simply to represent it.'²⁸⁹ He cites approvingly scholars who define the historian's craft as a recovery of the lived experience of historical subjects. At the same time, he stresses that his multivocal ethnographic-history serves a moral purpose, arguing that the violence inflicted on the Saramakas by the European colonial powers and religious missionaries, 'recorded and etched in their individual minds and collective psyche,' cannot be represented in a knowledge system that originates in (and temporally coincides with) the same spaces from which the violence was exerted.²⁹⁰ I read Price's moral stance as doubled: on a first layer, as he explicitly states, a "European" understanding of history that understands the past as existing in a different temporality than the present would impose upon the Saramakas a historical understanding strange

²⁸⁵ Chakrabarty, 18.

²⁸⁶ On translation, Price writes: 'My similar decision, despite the urging of several colleagues, not to make an index that encourages consultation along such ethnological lines stems from a growing conviction that such categories ultimately play a pernicious, obfuscating role in intercultural understanding.' Price, *Alabi's World*, xviii.

²⁸⁷ Price, *Alabi's World*, xii-xvii.

²⁸⁸ Price, *Alabi's World*, xx.

²⁸⁹ Price, *Alabi's World*, xii.

²⁹⁰ Price, *Alabi's World*, xix. At the end of the book, Price brings up another moral justification for his polyphonic method. Given the ongoing civil war, but the relative quiet at the time of the book's publication, Price concludes his book with: '[d]ribbling some rum on the earth, we might – as on the dedication page – pray that the spiritual descendants of Kwasimukama and Ayako, of Daunitz and Etja, of Brother Kersten and Alabi, now have the courage to take up the enormously delicate task of negotiating an agreement that allows all Surinamers to live together in peace and justice. The period known as First-Time involved raw fighting, but it also involved the more subtle interethnic negotiating skills that were finely honed in Alabi's world. And perhaps it is this repertoire of mediating skills, this capacity to balance between the world of Maroons and that of whitefolks, that constitutes Alabi's ultimate legacy. May all this now be brought to bear once more, and this time forever.' Price, *Alabi's World*, 277-278.

to them; and on a second layer, this imposition would constitute a second act of violence, reducing Saramakas historical understanding to a “mistaken belief,” belonging to a different stage of “development” as compared to that of “Europeans”.²⁹¹

Price’s approach to evoking the multiple lived experiences of the time is a careful balancing act. Simultaneously, he is presenting independent experiences, interacting voices, and his own position as historian who, due to the benefit of time, has access to information that historical actors themselves did not have. As an example of the first, he, at points throughout the book, makes clear how experiences belong to particular voices and their particular life worlds. Thus, he remarks at the beginning of the book about one archival source that this ‘report from the governor of Suriname, now in the Dutch national archives, helps to place the event firmly in white-folk’s time and space.’²⁹² At other points, he is acutely aware that experiences interact, like in a passage of the introduction of the written script by Moravian missionaries, reminiscent of the complex negotiation of colonized and colonizing people in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God*:

[A]s those whites most closely associate with books, the Moravians were seen as a potential entrée into the mysterious and hitherto forbidden world of reading and writing... the toll exacted over the centuries for this privilege remained constant: intense pressure to renounce “heathen” ways and to break off relations with non-Christian family and kinfolk. Saramakas then as now were caught in this terrible bind, knowing that literacy was a password to an understanding of the outside world and the key to being able to manipulate it, but also knowing that its acquisition entailed what was, for them, a truly Faustian bargain, the willingness to sell their soul.²⁹³

To be sure, there is an element of authorial intervention here that challenges the polyphonic nature of Price’s history. It is important to note that such interventions are much more scarce than they are in Alexievich’s *The Unwomanly Face of War* (albeit more regular than in her later *Second Hand Time*). Moreover, it seems to me that they serve a different purpose. Price here tries to give words to what he perceives to be the contradiction enforced upon the Saramakas by the Moravian mission. He returns to this contradiction in a later passage, arguing that ‘[s]queezed between, on the one hand, his private ideological commitment to Christianity, pacifism, and

²⁹¹ Here I am building on Chakrabarty’s argument about the persisting “European” metanarrative of a social scientific language that refers certain types of sense and meaning-making to lower stages of development or “backwardness”. See e.g. Chakrabarty, 20, 88-89, 106-108, 238-239. For his criticism of the assumption of an “empty, homogenous time”, see e.g. 75; 249.

²⁹² Price, *Alabi’s World*, 23.

²⁹³ Price, *Alabi’s World*, 67-68.

accommodation with whitefolks and, on the other, the widespread traditional Saramaka confrontational stance toward outside authority, Alabi had little room for maneuver.²⁹⁴ In other words, whereas Alexievich presented a polyphony of voices to find the eternal in the particular, for Price, mirroring his reflexive approach to the work as a whole, polyphony is the method to evoke the fundamentally pluriform experience of the Saramaka people in this moment of radical change.²⁹⁵

Finally, in what is perhaps the most delicate of balancing acts, Price has to face his own temporal advantage over the lived experience of the people he describes. In a fascinating passage, he contradicts the Dutch colonial records with Saramaka oral accounts and other historical research, on how the Saramakas tried to extract as much bounty from the colonial government in exchange for “returning” as few enslaved people who had escaped the plantations as possible. Thus, where the Dutch colonial government record reads that ‘*the [Saramaka] Bush Negroes are exceptionally jealous, hateful, and vengeful, which is why they are unable to protect many new runaways – since one of them will easily betray the next in return for a small gift from the postholder*’, Price argues that in fact, ‘the postholders... remained largely unaware of their ultimate powerlessness and ignorance regarding the shell game Saramakas had been playing with the runaways.’²⁹⁶

To be sure, Price’s work is open to criticism. On a methodological level, although he introduces sources that are radically different in nature (present-day oral recounting, official government records, missionary diaries, existing scholarship), he spends close to no time reflecting on different strategies of interpretation. To some extent, this is part of his polyphonic methodology, trying to leave the sources to “speak for themselves.” But to some extent this is also a rhetorical strategy, and a more critical approach towards the different interpretative strategies that Price, as critical and reflexive as he is, certainly employed would have been welcome. Moreover, it is hard not to detect Price’s own sympathies – certainly for the Saramakas, mildly for the Moravian missionaries, and strongly against the Dutch colonial government – that, together with some of the passages cited above challenge the polyphonic character of the work. However, overall his reflexivity and inventiveness make this polyphonic history a truly important work and gives credit to Peter Burke’s statement that *Alabi’s World* deserves its own full shelf of interpretations; interpretations that go beyond seeing his career as the twilight of the humanities.

²⁹⁴ Price, 2 *Alabi’s World*, 32-233.

²⁹⁵ See also his allusion to the importance of negotiation that continues to this day: ‘Such ritual compromises, in which Christian sympathizers retain part of the outward Saramaka rite that still holds meaning for them, continue to characterize that brand of Christianity practiced by Christian Saramakas to this day.’ Price, *Alabi’s World*, 225.

²⁹⁶ Price, *Alabi’s World*, 149-150.

Decentering the Historian-Author

In analyzing three histories that employ polyphonic elements, I have mostly been concerned with the position of the historian-author. That this is not an arbitrary focus I argued for above, but it is a partial one. Additionally, I used only a small sample of texts. These concluding remarks are therefore nothing more than tentative suggestions.

I opened this chapter by introducing a “polyphonic scale”, characterizing the similarities of these works with Bakhtin’s definition. This scale is not meant as a judgement of quality, where works closest to Bakhtin’s definition are “better” than others. Instead, I think about the deviations from Bakhtin’s definitions as perhaps the most interesting features of these works. In none of these works is the author completely decentered. This might be because in history production a completely decentered author is impossible, although a work like Alexievich’s *Secondhand Time* certainly seems to come very close. It might also be, because historians have different reasons to introduce themselves in their work: as I argued above, the authorial interventions of Price serve a different purpose than those in the *Unwomanly Face of War*. My reasons for introducing a “polyphonic scale” and analyzing the deviations from polyphony were exactly to point to the different motivations that historians can have when establishing their own position – an implicit argument against the omnipresence of omniscience.

I also frequently commented on the Rashomon effect. It seems to me that one of the fundamental differences with polyphony is that the former accepts a single truth (a “fact”), but struggles with its unknowability, while the latter posits a pluriform truth and aims to represent it as best as possible. This points, I think, to an important observation once made by L’ubomir Doležel that in understanding the difference between fiction and history, it is necessary to look at the nature of the gaps in a narrative. Where the gap in the former is ontological – there exists nothing beyond what the author chooses to incorporate in the story – the latter is epistemological, that is, there was a full past, but this past is no longer fully knowable.²⁹⁷ One recognizes here the assumption that the past is a story that needs to be uncovered, if only partially accessible.²⁹⁸ In *Rashomon*, there is a “fact”, a dead body, and even when the explanation for this fact is opaque, there must have taken place a series of events that led this fact to occur. I read Carlo Ginzburg’s

²⁹⁷ Fulda. Cf. L. Doležel, *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2010). Allen Megill has invoked a similar argument made by R.G. Collingwood: “[Collingwood] points out that “purely imaginary worlds cannot clash and need not agree; each is a world to itself.” Thus different fictions are under little if any pressure to harmonize. Collingwood maintains that, in contrast, “there is only one historical world.” Domańska, “Allen Megill,” 4-5.

²⁹⁸ Scholars like Chiel van den Akker and David Weberman have refuted the distinction between fiction and history as one between ontology and epistemology. Weberman, for example, speaks of the ‘ontological force’ of historical narrative. See e.g. Ankersmit, “Narrativist Revival,” 230-231.

metaphor of the historian as a hunter looking for traces and Evans' metaphor of the mountain as working from a similar assumption; both hunter, painter and historian share an existing "object" of which they are in search. Polyphony, on the other hand, seems to me to make an opposite claim: history is not the production of a single story, but the representation of a multitude. It is noteworthy that this can be read in two ways: one, to say that reality itself is inherently polyphonic (i.e. the story "found" is multivalent); or, to say that since history is a construction of the past and different historians act out this construction differently, polyphony is the most suitable form to represent the multi-interpretability of the past.

Rashomon also seems to me to be a good metaphor for a point that is sometimes missed by historians. In *Rashomon*, some events certainly did take place, but despite their "have-happenedness", which is factual, this does not influence the events' knowability. In other words, a simple quality – but one essential for historians – is that the fact that something happened establishes the possibility of *truth*, but not of *knowability*. And by extension, the claim that something is unknowable or partially knowable does not challenge the fact that something happened. In the words of Clifford Geertz, it is not the case that 'reality is going to go away unless we believe very hard in it.'²⁹⁹

Price and Mintzker (and to a lesser extent Alexievich) point to a different possibility of what history might be, not an authoritative interpretation based on probability (beyond reasonable doubt), but a conscious foregrounding of uncertainty, a representation of the gap between "what has happened" and "what the sources make us believe", as well as a self-reflexive presentation of the complexity, inconclusivity and incompleteness of the historian's task. And incidentally in a form that not only maintains the methodological complexity from which it was born, but also challenges the reader through its "unnaturalness" to put into question their own expectations of unity, coherence and closure. At the same time, and this connects Yang's history of Nanjing historiography with Doležel, in history, as opposed to fiction, the epistemological uncertainty is always potentially temporal, as there might at any time emerge new evidence that "solves" at least some of history's gaps.

²⁹⁹ C. Geertz, "Distinguished Lecture: Anti Anti-Relativism," *American Anthropologist* 86, no.2 (1984), 164.

In Search of an Ending?

*úzu úzu de a só lóbi.*³⁰⁰

It is a cliché to end one's thesis by saying that more research needs to be done. On the other hand, I find it hard to conclude the opposite; that the whole formal analysis of history production has been successfully resolved with this work, or that this avenue of research has no purpose and that formal analyses should be abandoned and left to narratologists and literary critics analyzing novels and films. In fact, since I started presenting some preliminary findings of this thesis on conferences and in a graduate class that I was lucky enough to be allowed to teach, I have become all the more convinced that this avenue of research is worth pursuing, strengthened by historians and legal scholars who are employing the tools of narratology and formal analysis to their respective disciplines.³⁰¹

In terms, then, of some final remarks, let me point to a couple of things that caught my attention in the process of writing this thesis. The first thing is how interested graduate students are in formal innovations, but how often they express a fear to experiment and how they envy those who have the position to do so. This is an argument that was once teased out by Richard Vann, when he suggested that methodological inventiveness is much easier from a tenured Ivy League position.³⁰² A similar observation was also central to a recent special issue of *Rethinking History*.³⁰³ Personally, I have heard it from fellow graduate students, with others expressing their happiness that I was presenting a series of innovative samples of historiographical texts in class.

Secondly, and this brings me back to the first chapter, I was surprised about the extent to which formal innovation was caught up in the “postmodernism” and descent-into-genocide-denial polemics of the 1960s-2000s. To be sure, advocates of innovation have also not always made the life of the more traditionally-oriented historians easy (in fact, there seems to me to be something fundamentally wrong with making a distinction between traditional historians and... (progressives, forward thinking?)). What I find encouraging, however, is that the output of histories that employ “unnatural narrative elements” does not seem to have been halted by these polemics. Further,

³⁰⁰ A Saramaka proverb, translated by Richard Price as “the way you’ve begun it, can you really finish it.” Price, *Alabi’s World*, xix.

³⁰¹ In addition to previous citations, see e.g. L. Hau, “Pathos with a Point: Reflections on ‘Sensationalist’ Narratives of Violence in the Light of Twenty-First-Century Historiography,” in J. Grethlein, *Experience, Narrative, and Criticism in Ancient Greece: Under the Spell of Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

³⁰² I seem to remember that Vann makes this point somewhere in his “Hayden White and Non-Non-Histories,” in R. Doran (ed.), *Philosophy of History After Hayden White* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), but I can no longer find the reference.

³⁰³ J. Goodman (ed.), “History as a Creative Writing,” *Rethinking History* 14, no.1 (2010): 1-160.

there seems to be flourishing scholarship that combines the “postmodern” ideas that I outlined in the first chapter, with due attention to sources and archives.

In terms of the formal analysis itself, I was struck by the insightful observation by Carrard, Burke, Fulda and others that historiography needs its own discipline-specific analytical tools and terminology, developed in dialogue with narratology and literary criticism, but also with a decidedly independent twist. My approach in this thesis has been inductive but inspired by historical theory. To the extent that I provided perceptive insights, I was lucky enough to build on a rich tradition of narratological and literary analysis, helped by some wonderful interlocutors.³⁰⁴ Taken as a whole, however, I have been surprised, humbled and somewhat frightened by the enormous complexity of a project that I certainly started with great naiveté some five years ago.

In terms of more content-rich remarks, I want to suggest two simultaneous current developments that are important in analyzing the forms of history production. The first is the falsification and politicization of history by authoritarian and authoritarian-inspired leaders and non-state groups. Writing in June 2024, at least three recent democratic elections saw the coming-to-power or return to power of a leader who himself, or whose party, is actively involved in changing the country’s history: in India, in Indonesia and in Argentina.³⁰⁵ To take the latter as an example, President Javier Milei repeatedly questioned the number of victims of the military dictatorship (1976–1983) during his presidential campaign, mirroring political strategies in Chile, Peru and most successfully during the Bolsonaro reign in Brazil. In March 2024, the Minister of Defense Luis Petri dismissed ten out of thirteen members of the Equipos de Relevamiento y Análisis, a group of researchers that since 2010 has combed the archives of the Argentinian army for forensic evidence of crimes against humanity committed during the military dictatorship. As a reason for the dismissal, Petri said that the army had been demonized and that the research would be taken over by officials of the ministry of defense.

It is hard to say how much political capital is gained from historical falsifications, or whether “attacks against history” can be considered the “canary in the coalmine” for “democratic backsliding.”³⁰⁶ What I think can be said, is that public falsifications of history have moved far beyond denial of the Holocaust and have become a viable part for political campaigning: the Overton-window seems to be moving. One effect that this is having is that it puts questions of truth and factuality at the center of historian’s attention. To refer back to the words of Deborah Lipstadt, there is a great urgency to say: ‘This has nothing to do with ideas. This is bigotry.’

³⁰⁴ I am particularly grateful to Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar, with whose courses this whole thesis can be said to originate.

³⁰⁵ See e.g. Network of Concerned Historians, *Annual Report 2024* (forthcoming). For India, see also NCH *Annual Report 2023* (https://concernedhistorians.org/content_files/file/ar/23.pdf).

³⁰⁶ A hypothesis that was recently made by Antoon de Baets.

At the same time, what were for a long time common-sense (albeit not unchallenged) notions of “objectivity”, “fact” and “truth” have come to be challenged. I referred to this in the first chapter as the double fragmentation of the historian’s authority. One way of dealing with this challenge is by suggesting that the questioning of the historian’s traditional authority and the discipline’s methodological and formal orthodoxy paves the way for historical falsification. As I have tried to outline in the first chapter, I consider this an ill-supported hypothesis. Another way of dealing with this challenge is to look for different ways of “doing history”: using different media; challenging conventional temporalities and spatialities; exploring different voices and points of view; disrupting unity and coherence; employing different authorial positions; or self-reflexively exploring the “traditional” ways of history writing.

At various point throughout this thesis I have suggested that innovative ways of doing history, what I have referred to as the employment of “unnatural narrative elements”, can cultivate a critical historical literacy, both on the side of the historian and on the side of the reader. This is, to be clear, a hypothesis. The idea of critical historical literacy interacts with ideas of “narrative savviness” and “media savviness” that have been developed a little more extensively, but a lot of work remains to be done. Importantly, this includes empirical research into how readers respond to “unnatural narrative elements”, a research direction that is currently being pursued in literature and film studies by Steven Willemsen, among others.³⁰⁷ Cultivating a critical historical literacy has the potential to challenge historical falsifications, without the need to resort to the challenged conceptualizations of “truth” and “objectivity”, by foregrounding the complexities, disagreements and unknowabilities involved in history production.³⁰⁸ A critical historical literacy can carve out a space between historical falsification and methodological and formal orthodoxy, acknowledging that ‘between the Scylla of false omniscience and the Charybdis of “post-truth” relativism lies a whole world of possibilities.’

³⁰⁷ S. Willemsen, et al., “Who Likes Complex Films? Personality and Preference for Narrative Complexity,” in S. Willemsen & M. Kiss (eds.), *Puzzling Stories: The Aesthetic Appeal of Cognitive Challenge in Film, Television and Literature* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2022). See also Alber, Jumpertz & Moyer.

³⁰⁸ At a recent conference lecture at the Third Forum on History Education, Arthur Chapman referred to part of this when arguing for the need to learn how to “disagree well”, something he linked at another recent conference to a need for engagement with narratology. I am indebted to Antoon de Baets for this reference.

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