

Narrativity and Historical Writing

Introductory Remarks

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Historical Theory and the Issue of Narrative

Although many historians since the eighteenth century have occasionally asked and answered the question whether history can or should be called a ‘science’ or whether it belongs to the arts or to literature, ‘the question of narrative’ or ‘narrativity’ as such was only put explicitly on the table as a philosophical issue concerning history in 1965, with the publication of Arthur Danto’s path-breaking *Analytical Philosophy of History*. This observation is not meant to deny or to relativize the *Methodenstreit* that has accompanied history as a discipline since its institutional origins, in which one side had emphatically claimed the autonomy of the *Geisteswissenschaften* vis-à-vis the natural sciences – and since the second half of the nineteenth century also vis-à-vis the social sciences.¹ Until the 1960s, however, the ‘autonomy of historical understanding’ (Louis Mink) had not been claimed in the name of its ‘narrative’ character.² Between then and now the discussion about ‘the narrative character of history’ has branched out exponentially – especially since the publication of Hayden White’s modern classic *Metahistory* in 1973. As the debate about narrative simultaneously spread to many other disciplines – in particular to departments of (comparative) literature and later also to history didactics³ – the result has been that although the word

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‘narrative’ has remained the same over the years, the concepts of narrative have not.⁴ As Paul Roth remarked in 2017, ‘Although historians and others unapologetically use narratives to explain, as a category narrative explanations exist in a philosophical limbo’.⁵

Luckily, narrative has kept a core meaning that has remained stable through all the changes in time, that is ‘the representation of a set of chronologically and logically connected events’ . . . ‘Although there is discussion as to the boundaries of the phenomenon referred to as “narrative”, the combination of a “set of events” (what can loosely be called plot) and “representation” (the use of some medium) seems to be common to all definitions’.⁶ The term ‘narrative’ came to be used as ‘the umbrella term to talk about representations of connected events in a way that was specific neither to particular genres (for example, journalism, novels, history) nor to particular media (the spoken and the written word, film, drama) and that was in principle indifferent to ontological status’.⁷ In short, whether the events were real or fictional was irrelevant for the notion of narrative as such, although this difference is – obviously – constitutive for history as a scholarly discipline. As a consequence, *historical* narratives did not show up as a subspecies of narrative in the handbooks of what came to be known as ‘narratology’.⁸

The famous exemption to this rule was Roland Barthes, who published his fundamental essay ‘The Discourse of History’ in 1967 as an application of semiotic analysis to historical writing. Barthes noted that normal historical discourse suppresses the voice of the narrator completely and thus claims ‘objectivity’. Historical writing thus presupposes the all-knowing narrator, just like the realist novel. White later acknowledged his debt to Barthes.⁹

The emergence of the term ‘narratology’ is directly connected to the rise of a new interdisciplinary subject of the same name within cultural studies. The discussions on narrative among historians have ‘intersected at points with those in narratology or “narrative theory” as it later was known. But by and large, debates among historians have taken place independently and been shaped by specifically disciplinary concerns’.¹⁰ While narratologists overwhelmingly focused on questions of narrative strategies unrelated to the issue of truth, historical theorists mainly focused on the epistemological status of narrative as a form of explanation.¹¹

Given this background, a lot of ink – if not most of it – has been spilt by historians and historical theorists in debating the borderlines between fact and fiction in history, and the connected question in what way(s) historical narratives can be said to explain the past that they describe – an issue that has regained a new and more general urgency ever since Donald Trump launched his pet word ‘fake-news’.¹² This discursive constellation was a consequence of the circumstance that Hayden White played a major

role in the debate from the 1970s and that he routinely liked to provoke historians by telling them that they, just like novelists, were ‘fictionalizing’ events when they configured them in the form of plots in narratives, thus intentionally blurring the borderline between fiction and fact. The fundamental point that events do not dictate how they are represented by historians allowed historians to emplot them and explain them as they liked, White argued.¹³ So just like the *enfant terrible* of the philosophy of science in the 1970s, Paul Feyerabend, White’s message was that, also in history, almost ‘anything goes’.¹⁴ The historian’s choice for one narrative type of plot (comedy or romance, for instance) over another (tragedy or satire, for instance) is guided by her *aesthetic* and/or *political* preferences and not by epistemological criteria, as most historians were inclined to think. The same goes for the ways in which historians explain events by other means than by emplotment: whether they adduce causes and laws (‘mechanicism’ in White’s terminology) or relate events to bigger wholes (‘organicism’ and ‘contextualism’ in White’s terminology) in order to make them comprehensible, is also purely a matter of individual choice according to White.

The basic argument of White’s provocative ‘wake-up call’ addressed to the historical profession was as fundamental as it was simple: when historians leave their archives and compose their factual, research-based findings into narratives (their ‘representation’), they inevitably ‘emplot’ them – that is, they establish their meaning by constructing their ‘plot’, which always implies a beginning, a middle and an ending. But these ‘plots’, with their implied beginnings, middles and endings, cannot be found in reality, nor in what is left of the history in the archives. Therefore, the ‘plotted’ narratives of historians are never based on historical facts. History, as Louis Mink had already argued before White, is not an ‘untold story’ waiting to be ‘retold’ by historians. Therefore, narrativity is not a property of historical events themselves, but only of the way historians represent them.¹⁵ And because – and as far as – narrating is ‘plotting’, according to White’s famous phrasing, writing history is a fundamental ‘poetic’ activity: it is only regulated by the rules and conventions of literature and not held in check by any ‘historical method’. So much for White’s basic argument concerning the inescapable ‘narrativity’ of history and ‘the fiction of factual representation’.¹⁶

White’s narrativist arguments were neither welcomed by ‘traditional’ political and diplomatic historians in the 1970s and 1980s – for the obvious reason that they were under attack – nor by their challengers from social history, who from the 1960s drew their inspiration from the French *Annales* school. In this school, ‘narrative’ history was identified with the old-fashioned ‘Great Men’ and ‘wars and battles’ type of history, in which historians presented the events in their presumed chronological order. Instead

of the ‘superficial’ *l’histoire evenementielle* the Annales school propagated and practised *l’histoire structurelle*, which aimed at discovering and reconstructing the ‘deeper’ (socio-economic, demographic and geographic) structures hidden behind the ‘surface’ of (political) events. In order to uncover and analyse these structures, historians needed to use the quantitative methods and the theoretical tools of the social sciences. In fact, in order to gain *any* scientific credentials, history needed to leave its traditional narrative forms of representation behind and transform itself into a social science according to the new gospel that was spreading from Paris over the rest of the world.¹⁷

The arguments of White, and later of like-minded historical theorists like Frank Ankersmit and Keith Jenkins, were squarely directed against all claims that history should become a ‘social science’.¹⁸ The major question in the debates of historical theory therefore became the following: if narrative indeed means ‘plotting’ and in this literary sense means ‘fictionalizing’, how can narrative history then be seen as a proper and autonomous form of knowledge? How can the constitutive claim of history since antiquity that historical narrative is ‘true’ and ‘objective/unpartisan’ in some meaningful sense – in contrast to all fictional narrative genres – be philosophically elucidated and vindicated? It was this direct connection between the question of narrative in history and the epistemological status of history as a discipline – that is, history’s claim to some notion of truth and objectivity – that explains why the question of narrative came with high stakes in history and in historical theory.¹⁹ It also explains why White’s plea to abandon epistemology and to embrace epistemological anarchism with a good conscience, as Feyerabend was doing in the philosophy of science, was not initially applauded by most historians and historical theorists.²⁰ Even when many historians may have supported White’s central message that writing narratives in history bears significant – formal – similarities to writing fictional narratives both in terms of constructing beginnings, middles and endings and in terms of constructing a plot, they simultaneously emphasized that writing history implied a claim to truth and objectivity that fictional narratives did not. As long as the question regarding history was phrased in terms of ‘fiction or fact?’ (alias ‘narrative or knowledge?’) most chose the latter horn of the dilemma. One may even hypothesize that the absence of an elucidation of the ‘reality claim’ of history in White’s work has blinded most historians for a long time concerning the innovative narratological potential of White’s approach to historical texts – as this volume hopefully exemplifies.

However this may be, the fundamental provocation of White’s work has forced his many critics to reflect on and to formulate the criteria that distinguish historical from fictional narratives. In this discussion it soon became apparent that cherishing disciplinary hunches concerning the ‘reality claim’ of history is one thing, but transforming these hunches into clear

criteria is another. This leads us to recent developments in narrative theory of history, but before that we will first summarize what could be called ‘the realist position’ that emerged out of the various critiques of White that has emerged since the 1980s.²¹

The basic realist critique of White’s version of narrativism pertains to the irreducible argumentative and social character of historical discussion – in contrast to literary fiction. No matter how rich rhetorical and literary *aspects* of historical narratives may be, historical scholarship cannot be *reduced* to that, as Paul Ricoeur, Jörn Rüsen and Lionel Gossman, among others, have emphasized when they underlined the rational and empirical character of writing history. Thus, Gossman argued:

The way historians communicate with each other and criticize each other’s work suggests that they indeed expect their colleagues to be able to recognize the force of contrary arguments and narratives to adjust their own accordingly – either by developing answers to these arguments or by revising their own. . . . Historians do apparently believe that there are procedures of verification and criteria for judging between different hypotheses and narratives.²²

In the same vein, Jörn Rüsen in his long career has always argued that history, in contrast to fiction, must always meet controllable standards of ‘empirical plausibility’.²³ Alan Megill and Deirdre McCloskey summarized this realistic line of critique as follows: ‘Historians are not in the business of producing literary artefacts that stand isolated from the world. They do produce literary artefacts, but in doing so they also produce arguments intended to persuade particular audiences of the truth of particular statements’.²⁴

This means that historical narratives tend to exist in argumentative contexts that prevent historians from just telling their own narrative of, for instance, the Renaissance, the French Revolution or the Holocaust, as if each one of them were alone in the world. Contrary to the narrativism of Ankersmit and White, there are three fundamental ways in which historical narrative is – intersubjectively – ‘open’, in theory at least. The Belgian historian Bart Verschaffel has argued why this ‘openness’ makes history writing a rational undertaking, meaning that historical argument is open to questions aimed at obtaining clarification and to criticism:

First of all the subject is public. . . . An argument can never be the only possible or the only relevant argument about a subject. Other texts are possible on the same subject matter by definition. Different studies are not therefore only linked intertextually (through borrowings, citations, echoes or nods). They are also connected in their *object*. Second, the relevant evidence is public [in principle, at least].²⁵

So – importantly – it is not for the individual author to determine what material is relevant to his or her subject: this is established by the community of researchers through public discussion.

Finally, the methodical nature of the argument means that it is subject to rules that the argument does not determine for itself. Members of the disciplinary community, in complete contrast with novelists or critics, basically have access to the process in which the ideas are developed. They can evaluate how terms are defined, how assertions are crystallized and how descriptions are pulled together into wholes.²⁶

There are, of course, cases where evidence is available to some historians exclusively – as was the case with the historical commission that wrote the official Dutch history of the Srebrenica mass murder, for example – but this is clearly frowned upon by the wider academic community of historians, as it goes against the basic premises of the profession, as outlined by Verschaffel.²⁷

It is in the rationality of historical scholarship based on this tripartite – intersubjective controllable – ‘openness’ that the fundamental limitations of narrativism as the philosophical elucidation of the discipline are exposed. While it is true that narrativism has done historians and historical theorists a great service in the rediscovery of the literary and rhetorical aspects of the discipline, following almost two centuries in which they were repressed and pushed aside as ‘unscientific’, the problem with White’s and Ankersmit’s formulations is that these components have tendentially been taken for the whole – as Paul Ricoeur also argued in his critique of White.²⁸ The task of historical theory, however, is to avoid the devilish dilemma of ‘narrative or knowledge’ – a dilemma that was a consequence of the usual yet inaccurate identification of narrative and fiction – and to elucidate in which ways epistemological criteria are working in historical practice and discussion. Therefore, it is no wonder that the recent further development of narrativism by Matti-Jouni Kuukkanen, who emphasizes the essentially open and argumentative character of history writing, is taking place under the label of ‘*post-narrativism*’.²⁹

Postnarrativism and the Issue of Narrative in Historical Theory

Postnarrativism has broken with the commonsensical idea that historical narratives can somehow represent ‘historical reality’ – as White and Ankersmit still do – because ‘historical reality’ is only constructed by historical arguments. Therefore postnarrativism is a variety of *non-representationalism*, which has broken with the idea that historians are striving to develop texts (or other media) that somehow represent a past that existed *outside* their research-based arguments: ‘historical’ reality in the non-representationalist view only enters a – discursive – existence when historians retrospectively ‘label’ a complex of heterogeneous events in the past – as, for example, ‘Class Struggle in Antiquity’, ‘The Rise of the Gentry’, ‘The Thirty Years War’, ‘America’s Century’ or ‘Bloodlands’. The historical past thus never existed as a present for its contemporaries (just as the future as imagined now will never be a

present for its contemporaries in the future) and therefore ‘the past’ cannot be *re-presented*). Eugen Zelenak has aptly characterized the distinction between representationalism and non-representationalism as follows: ‘It is possible to distinguish two general views of historical works within the philosophy of history. Proponents of representationalism maintain that historical works are primarily representations. Advocates of non-representationalism argue that historical works are not representations but rather the outcomes of specific practices’.³⁰ According to Kuukkanen and other non-representationalists like Paul Roth, what historians do in practice is present arguments that are evidence-based and that bolster a point of view that claims (1) to be explaining the evidence in a rhetorical way *ex post* (like White suggested with his four modes of emplotment), and (2) to be epistemologically superior to other points of view concerning a topic and a body of evidence at a particular moment (as White had explicitly denied by stating that the historians’ choice for a point of view is of an aesthetic and/or a political character).

In short, according to postnarrativism, history writing essentially consists of ‘colligating’ heterogeneous events into complex wholes (which was the main point of White’s and Ankersmit’s narrativism against the previous analytical approaches in philosophy of history, which focused on the ‘atomic’ level of singular statements in historical narratives, like in Danto’s *Analytical Philosophy of History*). At the same time, however, postnarrativism rejects the narrativist claim that colligation is *not* guided by epistemic criteria (epistemic rationality) and that every sentence in a narrative is an essential part of it (which is ‘narrative holism’, as defended by Ankersmit).³¹ Instead, according to postnarrativism, historical arguments are always directed at other historical arguments and are therefore located in a particular discussion and relative to a particular moment in time. Every historical argument is thus connected to a specific present, and therefore the only way to judge historical arguments is ‘presentist’.³²

Allan Megill and Deirdre McCloskey had reached similar conclusions earlier on when they argued: ‘The need is not to abandon epistemological standards. These too are part of the discipline and of its conversation. They mark out a successful attempt to make history, like science, cumulative. Yet at the same time they create an obstacle. History that tries to do without rhetoric loses its contact with the wider conversation of mankind’.³³ This conclusion leads to two recent proposals of historical theorists – Kalle Philainen and Marek Tamm – how to solve the problem that White had put squarely on the historians table: how to conceive of historical representations as both knowledge – so based on the regulative ideas of truth and objectivity – and narrative.

This does not imply the claim that historical representation is necessarily narrative, because especially in the domain of digital history non-narrative

forms of representation are increasingly being used, as Rigney observes. As a consequence of the rise of the new media there has been

a shift away from plot as a key feature of narratives to that of immersivity (digitisation having provided new technologies for evoking virtual worlds) and interactivity (digitisation having afforded new agency to users). Add to this the fact that the hypertextual organisation of information and the availability of visual materials are generating new forms of semantic organisation, and new possibilities for producers and users to link events in ways that seem quite far removed from the core definition of narrativity given earlier.³⁴

These changes have as yet hardly been reflected philosophically in narrative theory, but the contribution of Adriaansen in this volume is dealing with them empirically and is taking us to the borders of narrativity. But truth be told, ‘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 strange new objects’, as Lev Manovich remarks.³⁵

The key to the solution that both Philainen and Tamm propose is derived from narratology because both suggest that the specificity of historical narratives can best be conceptualized as a ‘factuality pact’ – that is, a pact in terms of the relationship between historians and their public that allows readers to check that the events reported are real. The observation behind this proposal is that it has turned out to be impossible to define the claims to truth and objectivity of historical narratives explicitly in terms of ‘text-immanent’ characteristics – such as the ‘correspondence’ and the ‘scope’ of narrative in relationship to reality.³⁶

In a number of publications Pihlainen has pointed out that although historical and fictional stories share the narrative form, just as White claimed, historical narratives are distinguished in principle by their claim to be true and their reference to a (past) reality *outside* the text – and Ricoeur, Megill and Rüsen have made the same point.³⁷ Because of this, the historian’s ‘communicative act’ is fundamentally different from that of the novelist. Historians have a commitment to reality and are bound by conventions to reflect this.³⁸ They share this with their readers. Because of the commitment to reality, from a textual perspective the historical narrative is a fundamentally ‘disturbed’ narrative in comparison with fictional texts (see Daniel Fulda’s contribution in this volume). It is not a pure ‘literary artifact’, which has no necessary ‘external’ relationships: ‘In addition to intending at communication, the historical text also intends at reality, at *discovery* rather than simply creation’.³⁹

This distinction also involves a different ‘ontological commitment’ of historical and fictional narratives, in their intertextual relations and in the relationship between the author and her readers. This is because there is an entirely different pact for the historical text than for the fictional text:

The pact between the reader and the author reserves certain literary devices as referring to extra-textual evidence. The most obvious of such devices is quotation. Dialogue that is presented directly in the text is marked as opening up on the extra-textual through a system of notations demonstrating its origin. Yet this is something that also happens in fiction where speech is attributed to particular characters. The difference here, then, is obviously not textual despite the divergence between the means for indicating origin.⁴⁰

The difference is not effected directly in the text but by reference to sources, which represent the link with the reality outside the text: ‘Historical narratives present references and evidence with an eye on the validation of the truth of the account they offer . . . Truth-creation in historical narratives is not a textual feature but is based on a shared understanding between the author and reader concerning the legitimacy of interpretation and the epistemological standing of acceptable evidence’.⁴¹ The claim to truth and objectivity must, therefore, be localized in the communicative relationship between historians and their public, and not in the historical text itself, according to Pihlainen.

A similar line of argument has recently been advanced by Marek Tamm, who uses Searle’s theory of *speech acts* to analyse the pragmatic ‘truth pact’ between historians and their readership.⁴² Historical truth is conceived by Tamm as an *intentional* category that is based on a pragmatic and communicative pact between the historians and their readers:

Every historian has to make a kind of ‘truth pact’ with his addressees, asserting, more often implicitly than explicitly, that it is his intention to tell the truth. Needless to say, this commitment rarely takes such an abrupt and total form; it is, rather, an implicit pact of honesty or a declaration of his intention to confine himself to the truth bound to the evidence and disciplinary practices, as well as an explicit indication of the field to which this oath applies. However, it is extremely important that this ‘pact’ be sincere and serious, not part of the game we can often witness in the case of fiction.⁴³

Tamm points out that the ‘truth pact’ between historians and their readers is very similar to the class of *speech acts* that Searle analysed as ‘illocutionary assertives’: ‘In order to explain an assertive illocutionary act, Searle writes: “The point or purpose of the members of the assertive class is to commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something’s being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition”’.⁴⁴ Searle identified the following characteristics for this type of speech act:

1. The essential rule: the maker of an assertion commits himself to the truth of the expressed proposition.
2. The preparatory rules: the speaker must be in a position to provide evidence or reasons for the truth of the expressed proposition.

3. The expressed proposition must not be obviously true to both the speaker and the hearer in the context of utterance.
4. The sincerity rule: the speaker commits himself to a belief in the truth of the expressed proposition.⁴⁵

These four rules only specify the necessary conditions, but not the sufficient conditions, to be able to speak of the historian's claim to historical truth and objectivity. In our fallible universe, something – or almost everything – may go wrong in practice.

Like Pihlainen, Tamm sees the presence of footnotes as an essential textual feature of historical narratives, through which their referentiality and claim to truth take shape.⁴⁶ In addition, Tamm mentions quotations, the bibliography, tables and illustrations as clear 'signals of factuality' in historical narratives – even though these 'signals' are only picked up by readers who know in advance that they are dealing with a historical text.⁴⁷

Tamm then takes objectivity to mean the relative quality of the discussions in academic disciplines, such as can be established on the basis of the quality criteria specific to that discipline. The pragmatic view of objectivity can then be expressed as follows:

While traditionally the truth of the historian's statements has been often linked to their correspondence to historical reality, the pragmatist viewpoint considers it impossible to check any such correspondence since it is only the historian's claim, not a provable fact. In pragmatist terms, the historian's truth intent is based not on its direct relation with reality but is mediated in various ways and based on a disciplinary consensus as to methods of inquiry, cognitive values and epistemic virtues. The 'truth pact' is made reliable and checkable primarily by what might be called the regulative ideal of objectivity.⁴⁸

Finally, Tamm stresses that the epistemic virtues do not allow themselves to be moulded into formal rules but nevertheless are essential to each discipline (as they form a constituent part of it).⁴⁹

That this is so becomes obvious in cases where authors try to bend fundamental rules of a discipline. Writers who write fake autobiographies, for instance – such as 'Benjamin Wilkomirski' alias Bruno Dössekker with his initially highly praised 'Holocaust Testimony' *Bruchstücke. Aus einer Kindheit 1939–1948* (1996) – or those who deny the Holocaust – such as David Irving in *Hitler's War* (1977) – break the 'factuality pact' between the historian and the reader. In so doing they are not producing 'literary fiction' but fake or bullshit history – and this represents a fundamental difference.⁵⁰ The circumstance that factual statements are also fallible and in principle amenable to revision does not make them superfluous or suspect.

So, while narrativism in the versions of White and Ankersmit mobilized all philosophical attention to the historical narrative as a text, postnarrativism

in the versions of Kuukkanen, Philainen and Tamm has brought the reality outside the text into play again. All in all, we can conclude retrospectively that the arguments derived from narratology, that were first introduced in the historical debate by White in order to question the strict borderlines between history and fiction, are now being used by Philainen and Tamm in order to restore these borderlines again through their adoption of the narratological notion of ‘factuality pact’. Seen this way, paradoxically, narratology turns out to be both part of the problem of ‘narrative in history’ as well as part of its solution.

The Structure of the Volume

Overall, then, we have witnessed a wide range of debates surrounding narratives and the narrative nature of history-writing in historical theory (see above) and in history didactics.⁵¹ However, we rarely had scholars examining concrete historical narratives asking about how historians had used narrative strategies in order to arrive at historical interpretations that include truth claims. Some exceptions only seem to confirm the rule. Philip Carrard, for example, subjected the history writing of the *Annales* school – which earlier on had declared ‘narrative history’ to be ‘unscientific’ – to a ‘poetic’ analysis inspired by White and Michel de Certeau. He argued that the *Annales* type of history-writing consists of a mix of narrative and non-narrative elements, like the description, the synchronic cross-section and the analysis (compare Wulf Kansteiner’s chapter).⁵² Norbert Frei and Wulf Kansteiner edited a volume discussing diverse narrative strategies of scholarly accounts of the Holocaust, out of which emerged the strong proposition that Saul Friedländer’s masterpiece *The Years of Extermination* could only be written because the author had consciously broken with the narrative strategies of the realist novel, and had adopted non-linear strategies of the modernist novel.⁵³ Ann Rigney’s book on the narratives of the French Revolution, and Jacques Ranciere’s book *The Names of History*, are further outstanding examples of applying narrative theory to historical writing.⁵⁴

Others have examined the role of narrative in the transition to and the development of scientific history. Daniel Fulda, for example, has analysed how modern German history writing in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century emerged out of aesthetic, poetic and narrative considerations.⁵⁵ In the context of the ‘Writing the Nation’ project that examined the writing of national histories in modern European history, several authors have explored the narrative structures and their employment in national histories.⁵⁶ With regard to popular histories, examinations of those popular forms of history

writing have also at times highlighted the narrative structure of popular histories.⁵⁷

Whilst, in sum, there have then been several attempts to analyse the narrative structure of historical texts, the number of actual explorations of how narrative strategies work in a variety of historical texts – or, how the narrative form conditions its content, to speak with White – until now has remained fairly limited.⁵⁸ So the diagnosis that Jerzy Topolski made in 1994, namely that ‘White’s rhetoric proposals and his analyses resulting from the same inspirations have not had, at least for the time being, any marked practical importance for professional historians’, still seems to be largely valid at present⁵⁹ – at least with regard to narrative analyses of historical texts and in contrast to the enormous amount of discussions and critiques that his work has generated in the theory of history.

The current volume is an attempt to redress this remarkable imbalance between narrative theory and narrative research in history by furthering the actual study of emplotments and narrativity in a wide range of forms of history writing.⁶⁰ We have chosen to start our examination with ‘scientific’ accounts of history-writing, for they are often regarded as the ones following most directly the claims to truth and objectivity referred to above. Taking examples from ancient history as well as the history of the twentieth century, readers will observe in this part how all those scientific histories are guided by moral-political concerns that derive from the contemporary world inhabited by the historians. Alexandra Lianeri (Chapter 1) examines Thucydides’ narration ‘The Peloponnesian War’, seeking his specific perspective on the defeat of the Athenians. Central to her argument is the entanglement of narrative gaze and historical temporality. Her main interest is in examining how Thucydides relates the past with the future. Thucydides, she argues, involves his readers by means of internal focalization. This narratological method lets the historical moment become ‘visible’ for the reader, who is at the same time confronted with how the contemporaries could never be certain about how future events would unfold. In this sense, Thucydides is not telling a history that holds lessons for the reader, nor does he try to persuade his readers that the future can be planned if only the contemporaries would know their history. Instead, by narrating a history of the vanquished (Athenians in this case), he conceptualizes an unforeseeable future as a force that lies beyond human cognitive capacities.

From ancient history we move to the history of the twentieth century, with Wulf Kansteiner’s exploration of Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands* (Chapter 2). Kansteiner’s is an example of the benefits of applying insights from the linguistic turn to works of historical scholarship. A close textual analysis leads us to what Kansteiner describes as the ‘inner workings’ of Snyder’s text, and the conclusion that the narrative purpose of the book has primarily to do

with restoring the victims of Communism to equal status with those of the Holocaust. Many reading Kansteiner's text will hopefully be stimulated to reflect on their own practice as historians, and it is precisely such reflection that the volume as a whole wishes to engender in its readers.

Herman Paul (Chapter 3) looks at secularization narratives arguing that secularization was not just a theory, but a narrative that also circulated inside and outside the academic realm, affecting the ways in which scholars and non-scholars alike perceived religion. He calls for an expansion of the conventional focus on great thinkers and influential books in order to arrive at the 'narrative template'⁶¹ of secularization, which had a deep impact on politics, culture, society and the everyday lives of people, including their understanding of the present and their predictions for the future. This is exemplified in relation to two specific examples of historical narrativizations of secularization from the 1950s.

In the final contribution to this part, Gabriele Lingelbach (Chapter 4) compares the way in which Donald Wright's history of Niimi and Giorgio Riello's history of cotton narrate the history of global interconnectedness. She underlines how global history as such has no distinct narrative pattern or preferred narrative form. Global histories oscillate widely between very different narrativizations of the global. The focus of her comparison is how different ways of relating global processes of transfer and exchange to regional and local processes lead to very different ways of narrativizing those histories. Wright's history is one that systematically introduces global developments first before asking about their impact on regional and local developments. Riello's, by contrast, constantly changes the spatial perspective moving between the local, the regional and the global, making his narrative more complex but also less clear. The latter is a more analytical and interpretative but also more abstract approach, whilst the former can narrate more freely. Wright's more concrete narrative form is also capable of incorporating more of an individual agency perspective, but at the same time it cannot systematize and generalize to the same extent as Riello's narrativization of the interaction between global, regional and local can. Thus, the latter is far better in working out structures that are at play in the interconnection between the global, the regional and the local. Overall, Lingelbach's chapter draws attention to how the narrativization of global histories is directly relevant for diverse interpretative and cognitive frameworks for the understanding between the global, the regional and the local.

In the second thematic part of the book, examples from history didactics take centre stage. Ranging widely across time and space, they emphasize on the one hand the strong influence of politics and of contemporary intellectual predilections on history textbooks, and on the other hand they highlight the proximity of textbook production with national imaginaries,

even when the topic of the textbooks is no longer national. Björn Onken (Chapter 5) analyses how German history school textbooks deal with Persian history, first in narratives from ancient Persia, secondly in narratives dealing with the Islamic expansion in the Middle Ages, and thirdly in narratives related to Persia in confrontation with nineteenth-century imperialism. He argues that textbooks convey ambivalent narratives of the Persians in ancient history, orientaling Persia to a great extent. This is also the tendency with narratives of the Islamic expansion, which are accompanied by critical evaluations of the relationship between religion and lack of tolerance. The narrative is complicated, however, for they also emphasize Persia and the Near East as the cradle of Western civilization. Old colonial representations are still present in colonial and imperial narratives dealing with the nineteenth century, although there is also today a much greater willingness by authors of Western textbooks to problematize the exploitation of the colonies and the crimes committed by the colonizers.

Daniel Wimmer (Chapter 6) examines narrativizations of the Middle Ages in attempts to construct spatial identities in the twenty-first century. He traces the diverse ways in which the Middle Ages still capture the imagination of twenty-first-century politicians. Focusing on narrativization of cultural encounters between Muslims and Christians in medieval times in school textbooks that were published between the 1970s and the 2000s, he traces the narrative building blocks that still influence many people's imaginary of the Middle Ages. His analysis is testimony to the power of long-lasting narrative structures focusing on medieval history and its actualizations for social, cultural and political purposes in present-day societies.

Naoki Odanaka (Chapter 7) analyses two specific Japanese world history school textbooks in the context of their production and reception history. Against the backdrop of the Japanese government's insistence that school textbooks must be both neutral and objective, Odanaka looks at the selection of materials and methodological presuppositions in world history textbooks. He shows how their respective narrative styles correspond to temporal and spatial understandings of the past that endow that past with very different meanings. How this is done corresponds closely to the social and intellectual environments in which the textbooks have been produced. Odanaka distinguishes between modernization narratives that remained dominant in Japan until the 1970s. However, when Japan finally seemed to have achieved the key aim under modernization (i.e. catching up and even possibly overtaking the West), modernization narratives were replaced by postmodern narratives that were far more sceptical towards the modernization paradigms.

Mario Carretero and Everardo Perez-Manjarrez (Chapter 8) outline how maps in school history textbooks often emphasize an essentializing narrative of national territory and nation-ness. Taking their examples from

many different countries in Europe and the Americas, the authors argue that these maps strengthen the belief of high-school students in homogeneous unified nations sharing a timeless national identity that can be narrativized through heroic, teleological and moral storylines celebrating the idea and practice of nation.

The third part of this volume focuses on historical narratives in a variety of mass media, from Instagram, to e-cards and more traditional media like newspapers and popular historical novels. Robbert-Jan Adriaansen (Chapter 9) analyses historical narratives on Instagram arguing that social media generate their own distinct forms of narrating the past. Using examples from genocide heritage, the author argues that Instagram is an important medium through which young people are engaging with the past in an increasingly global way – one that transcends regional and national boundaries. Whilst this is often entirely different from formal environments of historical learning, such as school settings, we ignore these new forms of historical learning at our peril, as the new digital forms of communication challenge traditional narrative analysis simply by being so different in terms of form and context. The author gives many examples illustrating those differences, such as the use of hashtags, hyperlinks and the typical combination of visual and textual representations on Instagram.

Kenan van de Mieroop (Chapter 10) examines narratives of civil rights' activism that come from different individuals and groups in the United States. The civil rights movement is one of the most widely discussed and controversial subjects of American history. Both in scholarship and in popular culture, for example in electronic greeting cards, it is evident that different groups present different 'narratives' of the events that are related to different political outlooks. The author examines the narrative meanings inherent in some of these narratives of the civil rights movement. His semiotic analysis across different kinds of media offers critical insights into the diverse ways in which meaning is constructed through history and disseminated in contemporary society.

Jörg Requate (Chapter 11) investigates the narrativizations of 1970s left-wing terrorism in several media. Terrorist attacks, he argues, pose a particular challenge for mediatization: few events receive as much attention in the media as terrorist-related ones, not least as they provide many pictures of death and destruction that are highly marketable in the media. However, such visual narratives, Requate argues, work against understanding terrorism as communication, as they only capture the end point of a story that is not really explained otherwise. Hence such visual narrativizations decontextualize events, and do not provide historical understanding. Furthermore, media representations often carry a bias towards narratives constructed by the police, the legal profession, high politics, and scientific scholarship, depending

on which narratives appear to be the most coherent and plausible to the journalists mediatizing them. In fact, the media have become, according to Requate, a major battlefield for different narratives on terrorism, all relying on diverse constructions of the past.

Daniel Fulda (Chapter 12) asks how contemporary media systems impact on the form of the popular historical novel – a genre that has seen a massive increase of sales figures since the 1980s. There is a literary market that thrives on ‘realistic’ narrations of the histories of colourful underdogs in history. By focusing on this popular segment of the market rather than high-brow literary works, Fulda shows how the past becomes a quarry for contemporary concerns that change rapidly and suit diverse political interests in contemporary society. He not only analyses the production of popular historical texts but also their reception among university students. As there are very few reception studies when it comes to the impact of particular forms of narrativization, this chapter is making a powerful plea for more such reception studies – a plea that is in line with the earlier observation that new forms of digital history are endowing the reader/viewer/player with unprecedented forms of agency.

The fourth and final part of the volume analyses historical narratives that have been prominent in national history writing. It considers in particular the interrelationship between national and transnational narratives in former empires and ethnocentric multinational states, such as China, Portugal and Britain. Xupeng Zhang (Chapter 13) investigates the national narratives present in Chinese global history writing that has been thriving in the country since the 2000s. On the one hand, this new boom in global history writing is a direct reaction to the criticism levied against traditional forms of world history that narrativized the world as a compilation of national histories. The new global history seeks to avoid the Eurocentrism that was a core ingredient of the old world history. On the other hand, global history reintroduces a national grand narrative for Chinese historians after the decline of the materialist concept of history, which once was regarded as the only grand narrative in China’s historical studies. This new grand narrative contextualizes the Chinese nation in diverse eras of globalization ending up with the present day, when it arguably is becoming a leading world power in the latest era of globalization. The emphasis on China in fact combines national narratives with global ones. Zhang uses the example of Yu Pei, the former director of the Institute of World History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who argued that global history should indeed be rooted in one nation’s special historical memory of globalizing processes. Zhang therefore asks whether the Chinese narrativizations of global history amount to a global history with Chinese characteristics. These global narratives would then not so much transcend national histories but

complement them. And they might be used to demarcate a Chinese global history from its Western counterparts. Global Sinocentrism may in that sense replace global Eurocentrism.

Valdei Araujo (Chapter 14) examines early Brazilian national master narratives and the ways in which they constructed the nation through a differentiation between Brazil, Portugal and Europe. Araujo shows how constructions of democratization, ideologization and temporalization were crucial to the emergence of modern national narratives. These narratives facilitated and were a reaction to the independence processes that accompanied them. He also provides a fine example of a twenty-first-century retelling of the national master narrative in a presentist mode befitting the political turn away from the Workers' Party and towards more pro-capitalist forces in Brazil.

Finally, Arthur Chapman (Chapter 15) asks to what extent citizenship tests in Britain are constructing a particular national narrative through primers such as the Home Office's publication *Life in the United Kingdom (LUK)*, which has gone through three editions (2004, 2007 and 2013), all of which included a dedicated 'history' chapter that amounts to an official history of Britain. By contextualizing *LUK*, Chapman explores, through grammatical analysis and an analysis of 'transitivity', the differences in the narrative strategies adopted by *LUK*'s history chapters over time, focusing, in particular, on its 2004 and 2013 iterations. He points to basic continuities on the macrolevel of these narrativizations of a national past. Key elements, such as the strong parliamentary tradition and the growing together of the four nations, or the absence of references to the labour movement, remain the same. However, on a micro-level of analysis, Chapman also notes striking differences in the 'grammar of narration', which incorporates subtle shifts in meaning that do not affect the story as a whole but do affect the way it is narrated.

Overall, the fifteen case studies that have been assembled in this volume underline the benefits of investigating, in Fulda's terminology, 'historiographic narrations'. The conclusion to this volume seeks to draw out some of the results that emerge from those case studies and to formulate an agenda for the future study of historical narratives that will hopefully contribute to an even greater self-reflexivity about historical writing among both practitioners and consumers of such historical narratives. Furthermore, it discusses the empirical analyses of historical narratives, which themselves have implications for historical theory.

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Notes

1. For an overview, see: Lorenz, 'History and Theory', 13–35.
2. See Mink, 'Autonomy of Historical Understanding'. Of course occasionally individual historians and philosophers have formulated some ideas about history and narrative, starting with the German Johann-Gustav Droysen (1808–1864) in his *Historik*. Also the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) came close to defending a narrativistic view in his 1941 address 'Over vormverandering der geschiedenis' [On the change of form of history], but he did not develop a philosophical argument of his own, and just referred to the German neo-Kantian philosophers Rickert and Windelband.
3. Seixas, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*.
4. Rigney, 'History as Text'. For recent overviews, see also: Carrard, 'History and Narrative'; Munslow, *Narrative and History*.
5. Roth, 'Essentially Narrative Explanations', 42; Roth 2020.
6. Rigney, 'History as Text', 184.
7. Ibid.
8. In the *Einführung in die Erzähltheorie* by Martinez and Scheffel, one of the most widely used textbooks on the subject in Germany, historical narratives only make their appearance in the last section of the last chapter. Moreover, this section only contains an uncritical summary of White's idea of 'emplotment'. Symptomatically, in the first chapter the authors make a distinction between 'factual narrative' and 'fictional narrative' without making a connection to historical narrative. Compare now, however, Fulda, 'Historiographic Narration'.
9. See also: Curthoys and Docker, 'Boundaries of History and Fiction'; Ranciere, *Names of History*.
10. Rigney, 'History as Text', 185. Cf. Bal, 'Point of Narratology', 727–53, which emphasizes the great variety of approaches in narratology, as Martinez and Scheffel do, and suggests that in the meantime the most interesting applications of narratological analysis can be found in fields outside text-oriented narratology, like anthropology, rhetoric, feminist studies and visual analysis.
11. Ann Rigney, Philippe Carrard and Lionel Gossman are three of the few exceptions among literary scholars who have shown a systematic interest in the relationship between fictional and historical narratives.
12. For an analysis and overview, see: Lorenz, 'Narrativism, Positivism'; Roth, 'Essentially Narrative Explanations'.
13. White, following Northrop Frye, distinguishes four types of plot: the romance, the satire, the comedy and the tragedy. In the – epic – romance, the hero struggles against evil and overcomes it: good triumphs over evil, light over darkness, and self-deliverance is the result. The romance offers the opportunity for identification. A prime example of this type of narrative is Michelet's history of the French Revolution, in which the French people are given the role of romantic hero. Satire is the opposite of romance: 'evil is not conquered and mankind remains the prisoner of meaningless finiteness'. In comedy there is no question of good overcoming evil entirely: there is hope for peace and quiet, when conflict is resolved through reconciliation. Ranke's depiction of the history of the European states is modelled on comedy. The plots of tragedy show the inevitable demise of the hero. However, the future is not entirely hopeless, as it is with satire. The audience or readers of a tragedy gain insight into the hard realities of life from the horrors presented to them, and 'sadder and wiser' are then able to face up to them. See: White, 'Introduction: The Poetics of History', in *Metahistory*, 1–43; White, 'Interpretation in History', in *Tropics of Discourse*, 51–80. For a nuanced contextualization and assessment of White's ideas of plotting, see: Paul, *Hayden White*, 57–82.
14. See especially Feyerabend, *Against Method*.

15. Rigney, 'History as Text', 199.

16. As Rigney, 'History as Text', 193, points out, White's treatment of emplotment is exclusively based on the nineteenth-century realist novel and does not deal with the modern twentieth-century novel. She criticizes this reduction as a 'one-size-fits-all approach to storytelling'. Carrard also argues against the idea that all history writing is narrative by specifying non-narrative textual strategies. Therefore he is pleading for a 'poetics' of history. See: Carrard, 'History and Narrative', 181–86, and 'Historiographic Discourse and Narratology', 140: 'Poetics . . . takes over when narratology leaves off, that is, when the latter toolbox is no longer appropriate, because the texts to be accounted for follow models that do not have a narrative structure'.

17. The historiography on the Annales is legion. See, for example, Burke, *French Historical Revolution*.

18. For Ankersmit's important role, see the Tamm and Zelenak Special Issue: 'Frank Ankersmit's Philosophy of History'. For Jenkins, see his *Rethinking History*.

19. In history didactics, Jörn Rüsen's *Historik* was and is influential as the theoretical foundation of teaching and learning history in school and society. See Rüsen, *Historik* and Brauch, 'Bridging the Gap'. In history didactics, 'narrativity' is the core aim of teaching history, now implemented globally in the history curricula of most schools.

20. 'Epistemological anarchism' was coined by the Austrian-born physicist and philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend (1924–1994), and implies the position that there is not a set of methodological rules in science that guarantees or explains the progress of knowledge. It boils down to the most radical formulation of methodological pluralism. Therefore, Feyerabend in *Against Method* claims to be just that – 'against method': methods only limit the creativity of practising scientists, and 'methodical rules' are therefore constantly broken in scientific practice, as the history of science amply illustrates.

21. Now also see Mitrovic, *Materialist Philosophy of History*.

22. Gossman, 'Rationality of History', 309 and 313, emphasis in original. Also see Martin Jay, 'Of Plots, Witnesses, and Judgements', 105: 'Another consideration also militates against the unfettered freedom of historians to narrativize arbitrarily, and this concerns the community of others that reads and judges their work. . . . It is not so much the subjective imposition of meaning, but rather the intersubjective judgement of meanings that matters'.

23. Rüsen, 'Rhetoric and Aesthetics'; and Rüsen, *Evidence and Meaning*. See also: Rüsen, *Historische Vernunft*; Rüsen, *Rekonstruktion der Vergangenheit*; Rüsen, *Historik*. For the wide reception of Rüsen's notion of 'empirical plausibility' in history didactics, see Seixas *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* and 'Model of Historical Thinking'; and Seixas and Peck, 'Teaching Historical Thinking'.

24. Megill and McCloskey, 'Rhetoric of History', 228.

25. Verschaffel, 'Geschiedschrijving', 96. Also see Mitrovic, *Materialist Philosophy of History*.

26. *Ibid.*, 96.

27. See Blom et al., *Srebrenica*. For critical analyses of the Srebrenica report, see: Erna Rijdsdijk, 'Reconstituting the Dutch State'; and Eelco Runia, 'Forget About It'.

28. Ricoeur, 'Geschichte und Rhetorik', and Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*; see also: Stückrath and Zbinden, *Metageschichte*. Also see: Partner, 'Historicity in an Age of Reality-Fictions', 26–31. Cf. Rüsen, 'Rhetorics and Aesthetics'.

29. See: Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*; Simon and Kuukkanen, 'Forum: After Narrativism', 153–234.

30. Zelenak, 'Non-representationalism'.

31. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy*, 30–50. Famously, Ankersmit has claimed from his *Narrative Logic* onwards that each narrative is defined by all sentences that it contains, and that changing just one sentence already produces a new narrative.

32. Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy*; Roth, 'The Pasts'; Zelenak, 'Non-representationalism'. Compare Landwehr, *Die abwesende Anwesenheit der Vergangenheit*.
33. Megill and McCloskey, 'Rhetoric of History', 235.
34. Rigney, 'History as Text', 197.
35. Cited in Rigney, 'History as Text', 198.
36. For the general problem of truth in history see Tucker, 'Historical Truth'.
37. Pihlainen, 'Confines of the Form'; Pihlainen, 'History in the World'; Pihlainen, 'On History as Communication'. His most important articles have recently been reworked and collected in his *The Work of History*.
38. Pihlainen, 'On History as Communication', 75.
39. *Ibid.*, 71.
40. Pihlainen, 'Confines of the Form', 61.
41. *Ibid.*, 62.
42. Tamm, 'Truth, Objectivity and Evidence'.
43. *Ibid.*, 274.
44. Quoted in: Tamm, 'Truth, Objectivity and Evidence', 272.
45. Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, 12–20.
46. In history didactics, Wineburg defined sourcing, contextualization and corroboration as the three heuristics that professional historians use to come to intersubjective communicable narratives. See e.g. Wineburg, 'Making Historical Sense'.
47. Tamm, 'Truth, Objectivity and Evidence', 275–76. See also: van den Akker, 'Mink's Riddle of Narrative Truth', 349.
48. Tamm, 'Truth, Objectivity and Evidence', 278. Cf. Kuukkanen, 'Why We Need to Move'.
49. This is in line with the recent so-called 'virtue epistemology' as formulated, among others, by Paul, 'Performing History'.
50. See Martinez, 'Ein Faktualitätspakt'; and Fulda, 'Historiographic Narration'.
51. For the debate on narrative in history didactics, see and Brauch, 'Bridging the Gap'.
52. Carrard, *Poetics of the New History*. See also: Carrard, *History as a Kind of Writing*; Carrard, 'History and Narrative'; Carrard, 'Historiographic Discourse'.
53. Frei and Kansteiner, *Den Holocaust erzählen*.
54. Rigney, *Rhetoric of Historical Representation*; Ranciere, *Names of History*.
55. Fulda, *Wissenschaft aus Kunst*.
56. Berger and Lorenz, *Contested Nation*; Berger and Lorenz, *Nationalizing the Past*; Berger with Conrad, *The Past as History*. For further historiographical analyses, see: Ostrowski, 'Metahistorical Analysis'; Bentivoglio and Prado Júnior, '1930s Generation'. For the general reception of White among historians, see: Vann, 'Reception of Hayden White'; Spiegel, 'Rhetorical Theory/Theoretical Rhetoric'; Carrard, 'Hayden White and/ in France'; Weber, 'Hayden White in Deutschland'; Ankersmit, 'Hayden White's Appeal to the Historians'.
57. Berger, Lorenz and Melman, *Popularizing National Pasts*; Korte and Paletschek, *History Goes Pop*; Korte and Paletschek, *Popular History*.
58. White, *Content of the Form*. Cf. Brauch, 'Alles authentisch'.
59. Topolski, 'Non-postmodernist Analysis', 34.
60. For one theoretical model of how to do this, see: Fulda, 'Historiographic Narration'.
61. Wertsch, 'Specific Narratives'.

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