

Historiographic Narration

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1 Definition

Historiographic narration is an umbrella term encompassing the forms and functions of both narration (as an act) and narrative (as a structure) in historiography (both within and beyond the academic study of history) and in thinking about history. In the field of historiography (= the representation of history – *historia rerum gestarum*) and history (= the represented facts – *res gestae* – in their historical coherence), narration is primarily discussed as a means of lending coherence to the historiographic text or artefact (and to the narrated history) and interpreting a historical event. Narrative configuration is currently considered fundamental to history as a genetic cause and effect relationship between factual events at various moments in time (cf. Ricœur [1983–85] 1984–88).

2 Explication

History is narrated: historiography organizes its material by naming adversaries, establishing or imputing intentions and identifying obstacles and factors in overcoming them. This entails a fundamentally important operation, since only structuring the infinitely ramified process of human actions in time according to the “dramaturgical model” [dramatisches Handlungsmodell] (Harth 1980: 99–104) can give rise to the coherence and meaningful development implied in the collective singular “History” (coherence in the “syntagmatic” dimension). The dramaturgical model and narrative linking structure serve as heuristics for selecting among the amorphous happenings of the past (as attested by sources) and configuring them historiographically as a consistent and hence understandable (hi)story (cf. Gallie 1964 and Simmel [1916] 2003: 300 who describes the historiographical act as “drawing an ideal line (*ideelle Linie*) through the happenings,” which connects certain elements and leaves others aside).

Furthermore, one can speak in terms of an “aesthetic dramaturgical model” where the actors are understood as proponents of collective actors (classes, nations) or more general tendencies (ideas, structural changes, etc.). Here, “aesthetic” refers to the interpretive act of projecting the relevant “foreground” of vivid personal

interaction onto a “background” of supra-personal, abstract processes (coherence in the “paradigmatic” dimension). In order to write history, historiography inevitably uses the process of narrative linkage, if history is understood as portraying past events with the coherence, logical consistency and significance demanded by the concept of history since the 18th century. “[W]here there is no narrative, there is no distinctively historical discourse” (White 1999: 3).

By no means does all writing about history take the form of narrative. For example, a critical discussion of sources need not of necessity establish a link between actions at various moments in time. However, once we begin to think of history as a process in time, narrative linkages come into play as an assumption framing our understanding of it. For “History,” as a concept or mode of thought, is characterized in its modern form—which integrates past, present and future—by the principle of narrative configuration. The narrative structure of historical *thought* manifests itself as configurational structure of one narrated (hi)story as soon as historical processes are described in a text.

3 History of the Concept

3.1 From Antiquity to the 19th Century: Rhetoric and Academic Scholarship

Within the field of historiography, the question of narrative hardly figures as a novel theme. The writing of history has been conceived as a form of storytelling since Greek antiquity—for almost as long as it has existed. Rhetorical theory thematized and regulated historiography as *narratio* up to the 18th century (cf. Keßler 1982). Even after the emergence of history as an academic discipline in the 19th century, the representational work of the historian was consistently understood as a narration, although the writing and narrating of history came to be regarded as posterior to historical research and of lesser importance than it. No less a historian than Theodor Mommsen even summoned narration to the explanatory service of history:

In fact history is nothing else but the clear perception of factual processes, composed in part of the examination and sifting of the available evidence, and in part of its interweaving in a way that accords with the knowledge of the people involved and the relations that exist to a narrative explicating cause and effect (Mommsen 1905: 10).

3.2 Deep-structure Narrativity of Historiography and

Historical Thought

Demonstrations of the narrative structure of historiography have been plentiful since the 1960s. These have been based on differing epistemological approaches, but they have built upon one another's arguments. Invariably, they do not deal with "narrative" features (focus on well elaborated characters, intentions and interactions, vividly described setting), as presented by classical historiographers from Antiquity through to Historicism, but with a narrative "deep structure" (comparable to the plot in narratology, but in very general way, not individuated for the respective text) which constitutes historiography. This includes historical research with a post-narrative agenda, such as that of a sociological, structuralist or "kilometric" orientation (for corresponding analyses by *Annales* historians, see Carrard 1992 and R uth 2005).

Analytic philosophy was the first to establish that at a deep-structural level—and thus of necessity—historiography proceeds through narration. Here, narration was shown to be an explanatory form particularly suited to historical processes (cf. Danto 1965). Laws are ineffective in explaining historical processes, being contingent upon multiple factors, whereas the typical three-phase structure of narrated (hi)stories is inscribed with an immanent explanatory power: an initial state of affairs is altered by an event, turning not only the temporal, but also the qualitative difference, into a final state of affairs. Narrative "explains" such changes in the state of affairs by proceeding from Phase 1 to Phase 3 in a way deemed plausible in the experience, or at least in the imagination, of narrator and recipient.

Furthermore, transcendental philosophy showed narrative to be an *a priori* pattern forming the basis of all historical reconstruction and indeed perception (cf. Baumgartner 1972). According to this view, the narrative model of coherence functions as a conceptual form in historical thought, transforming "bare," amorphous happenings into structured history characterized by continuity and meaningful development. Hence, historical thought itself genuinely takes the general form of narrative.

3.2 Interpreting History through Emplotment and Multi-layering

At the most basic level, the structural principle of history is the necessity of narrating it. This structural principle expresses itself differently in each particular historical work. As White (1973) has shown, the narration of classical historiographical works in particular follows the typical plots of literary genres (White mentions comedy, tragedy, romance and satire, following Northrop Frye). Not

only does the narrative act give rise to history as such, but each history narrated is given its own meaningful plot, which is (or may be, to express it more cautiously than White) structurally based upon the different types of story in literary genres. In principle, this plot can be chosen from any of the types of story accepted within a particular culture. Therefore, this choice of plot is significant for the (hi)story being narrated, as it is for history in general. Historiographic narration creates a meaning that may vary greatly, thereby revealing something of the historiographer's ideological intentions. Hence, the comic structure of Johann Gustav Droysen's *History of Alexander the Great* (1833), with its tendency towards reconciliation, attests to particularly high expectations of history to provide meaning. The choice of emplotment is bound up with specific models of action and society, ethics, ideologies and world-views (cf. White 1973; based on this, but more differentiated, is Rigney 1990).

In terms of literary-historical location, historiography is closest to the 19th-century Realist novel in its narrative technique. This applies also to the historiography of the present. It has not taken its lead from literary Modernism's experimentation (fragmentation, achronicity, depersonalisation)—nor can it, if it does not wish to undermine the very concept of history based on narrative consistency. The repeated demands to modernize historiography following the literary precedent can only be satisfied in individual, experimental cases (e.g. Richard Price's *The Convict and the Colonel*, 1998). Expressed as a general stipulation, such demands ignore the divergence of the two discourse formations (literature and historiography) that has arisen from literary developments since circa 1900. White (2013) and Kansteiner (2009) consider a historiography with Modernist multi-perspectivity to be possible, while Jaeger (2000) remains skeptical.

The ascription of meaning through emplotment represents a crucial moment of multi-layering in which historiography engages in a similar way to literary texts. "Multi-layering" means that, beyond their conventional meaning, other meanings are assigned to linguistic signs, based on metaphoricity, isotopes, symbolic potential, sound correspondences, repetitions of partial sentence structures (anaphora and other figures), etc. Multi-layering techniques are also used in (academic) historiography, in the representation of factual content (details of events, monuments, but also horoscopes, dreams, etc.) as symbolic content, the meaning of which extends beyond the given, specific situation, or in the creation of structures of correspondence between different phases of the (hi)story or parts of the text through repetition of motifs. This also means that historical works, too, may exhibit the self-referentiality frequently considered characteristic of literary texts (cf. McIntosh-Varjabédian 2010: 43–65; by contrast, Rüh 2005: 193). They use self-reference and multi-layering techniques to produce their meaning, which thus

remains at least partly implicit (besides the explanation demanded by academic rigor).

3.3 Historiographic vs. Literary-fictional Narration

The insight that narrative is the generative structure of history (see 3.2) has frequently led to the conclusion that historiography, thus understood, is mutating from an academic discipline into a literary genre. Such a view fails to consider that narration is not unique to literature but constitutes a real-life, omnipresent mode of understanding, structuring, interpreting and transmitting real or imagined experience, knowledge, ideas and intentions. If one's view of scholarly insight is not limited to the establishment of, and deduction from, laws, there is no reason why the linking and representational power of narration may not be deemed academically valid—provided that historiographic narratives go along with methodical reflection and evidence from historical sources (Chartier [1988] 1988: 61-3).

Where the term fiction is used interchangeably for both historiography and literature, the aim is to homogenize them. White characterizes historiography as “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in sciences” ([1974] 1978: 82). On the one hand, White attributes fictive contents to historiography, since not all of its statements are based on sources. Indeed, collective subjects such as “The Bourgeoisie” or even abstractions such as “Modernity” are not referenced from sources, but constituted within narrative discourse (cf. Ankersmit 1983). On the other hand, White infers from historiography's narrative form that it belongs to a mode of fictional literature that cultivates this form. The theory of fiction objects to such arguments by pointing out that cognitive or methodical (including heuristic) fiction differs from literary fiction, both in its relationship to reality and in its pragmatics. Where historiography makes statements that go beyond what is substantiated by sources (even if only by using language's powers of abstraction or lending the structure of narrated stories to historical processes), there is an expectation that it does so in order to develop insights into past reality. It does not, however, have the same license to play with referentiality that is afforded to literary fiction by virtue of a ‘fiction contract’ agreed between author and reader (Schaeffer → Fictional vs. Factual Narration [1]).

Historiographic narration is rather a type of factual narration. While McIntosh-Varjabédian (2010: 237) also attributes “une volonté de croire” to the reader of historiography (similar to Coleridge's “willing suspension of disbelief”), this is not a matter of temporarily taking leave of reality, but of a trust in the professionalism of

the historian-narrator that *endures beyond* the act of reception.

Nünning (1999: 368–77) has gathered internal textual criteria for demarcating the boundary between historiographic and literary-fictional narration. Among the privileges accorded to the latter, he includes the opportunity for unlimited representation of inner worlds; the complete freedom to combine invented components (characters, settings, events) with real ones; intertextual references to fictional texts rather than just to other scholarly texts; a meta-fictional reflexivity that identifies the text as fiction; the differentiation of author and narrator (who in fictional texts is always fictitious); a broad spectrum of possible perspectives such as internal point of view so that the “how” of transmission may assume greater importance than “what” is narrated; scenic narrative with extensive dialogue; and semanticization of space. However, a categorical rather than merely gradual separation of literary and historiographic storytelling based on textual features in this way is open to objections. Some of the features that, according to Nünning, remain the preserve of fiction can also be found in some historical works and not only in pre-modern or non-academic texts: scenic narrative with dialogue, free indirect speech, symbols, sometimes even introspection.

The strongest argument against too close an approximation of historiographic and literary narration is the fact that they have been situated within two distinct social systems (*sensu* Niklas Luhmann) for two centuries. Their reception can be assigned to one or the other system without any reference whatsoever to internal textual features, purely on the basis of paratextual clues (“Novel” as genre description, information on the author) or where it is distributed or marketed (Fiction or History section in a bookshop, seminar in literature or history, etc.). As a general rule, however, historiography also demonstrates its academic affiliation intertextually by engaging explicitly with other scholarly opinions or using footnotes as back-up. Doležel (2010: 37–9) argues that historiography and fictional narratives can be distinguished from one another by the type of gaps they leave. While historiography’s epistemological gaps may be filled by using new sources or arguments, gaps in fiction are ontological, since there are no referents beyond the fictional world. This also applies where fictional narrative masquerades as historiography.

3.4 The Historicity of the Storyformedness of History

History understood as the specific structure of the past in its connection with the present and future does not follow automatically from the narration of stories about the past. Such (hi)stories (in the plural) can be found in the earliest texts of our civilization. But these particular (hi)stories must be clearly distinguished from the

narrative configuration of (virtually) all events we know as “history” (hereafter “History”; cf. Megill 1995). To conceive of the past in narratives—be it the individual past of one’s own life or be it in the larger sense of the past of certain peoples—by no means implies that the entire past in its relation to the present and the future forms one unique History. According to Koselleck the conception of History as a single, totalizing process emerged no earlier than the 18th century ([1979] 1985: 200–02).

Mink associates this modern concept of History with its storyformedness and regards it as the product of “a single unified story of the human past” which emerged within the philosophy of history during the second half of the 18th century (1978: 140). Since then, “the idea that the past itself is an untold story has retreated from the arena of conscious belief and controversy to habituate itself as a presupposition in that area of our a priori conceptual framework which resists explicit statement and examination” (140–41). The narrative techniques of the historiography that developed around 1800 made a decisive contribution to this habituation. In an exemplary work of historicism, Ranke’s *Römische Päpste*, written in the early 1830s, ways of thinking and representational techniques formed in the literature of the late Enlightenment and of Romanticism (the Goethe period) can be recognized: e.g., the conversion of historical happenings into story form (often with plots like those of the *Bildungsroman*), the assigning of ideal tasks to important characters together with the withdrawal of the omniscient narrator, the immanent narrative explanation of historical processes, the symbolic concentration of the whole (hi)story at decisive moments as well as the incorporation of seemingly trivial but nevertheless significant and/or vivid details (cf. Fulda 1996: 344–410, 2005a). Historiography emerged as an academic discipline through the process of aestheticization and narrativization.

3.5 History as a Pattern of Thinking: Cognitivist Approaches

For the most part, narrativist historical theory has developed independently of narratology in literary scholarship and rarely makes use of its categories. Cognitivist narratologies, which have developed considerably in recent years, offer the opportunity to form a substantial link between the two. They postulate that knowing (understood in a comprehensive sense of including perceptions and utterances) is structured by scripts and frames. What is perceived is perceived because the cognitive apparatus checks it against “internally stored” schemata. These schemata process narrativity when the signified can be related to the recipient’s prior knowledge of standard narrative elements and patterns: “Telling and understanding narratives is a certain way of reconciling emergent with prior knowledge” (Herman 2002: 90; (Herman → Cognitive Narratology [2]; Emmott & Alexander → Schemata [3]

).

Cognitivism localizes such schemata in an interchange between experience and expectation: "Stored in the memory, previous experiences form structured repertoires of expectations about current and emergent experiences." (Herman 2002: 89) This recursiveness or interchange can explain the epistemological status as a pattern for thinking that History achieved around 1800: actions and transformations are perceived as historical on the basis of "historical experiences" (which, admittedly, occur in eminently mediated forms) and are further elaborated on the basis of this knowledge of History. Here, the object and mode of perception mutually support one another such that they can be differentiated only on the basis of explicit theoretical criteria. Admittedly, this contrasts with the everyday understanding of History, which assumes that history has actually happened. Using the cognitivist approach, it becomes possible to describe History narratologically as both a pattern for reception and a product of reception, in contrast to the everyday understanding of history as simply happening and given (cf. Fulda 2005b: 178-81).

According to this view, History represents a cognitive (macro-) schema containing, as sub-schemata, a number of elements already invoked in the foregoing paragraphs including dramatic action, coherence, genetic cause and effect relationship, emplotment, aesthetic agency and referentiality. The (macro-) schema History does not seem to be innate but is established in specific cultures and epochs and must be acquired by the members of these cultures. Its sub-schemata, by contrast, may be anthropologically inherent and ubiquitous, or it may already have been tried, developed and practiced in other discourse formations, such as literature. Based on cognitivism, History is to be conceived as a *historical* pattern of thinking.

This perspective appears to be all the more germane in view of contemporary representations of history, which are often suspicious of narrative coherence. Such representations require considerable narrativizing effort on the part of the recipient: as History, these texts or other artefacts are "incomplete," for they have no readily discernible plot. Nevertheless, they can be "read" as historical narratives, for narrativization is a constructive process "which enables readers to re-cognize as narrative those kinds of texts that appear to be non-narrative" (Fludernik 1996: 46). Not least, narrations outside traditionally printed books can be analyzed more appropriately, on a cognitivist basis, as historiographic narrations: if narrativity is something attributed by the perceiving subject, then the object of this attribution is of secondary importance, be it films, TV programs, or other sequences of images, exhibitions (cf. Fulda 2005b: 182-90), theater, historical reenactments or radio plays.

This approach also leads beyond the bounds of traditional narratology in the sense

that the analysis of artefacts takes a back seat to reception studies. This at least is the call of Nitz and Petrulionis (2011: 4): “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” (as an example of one such study, cf. Lippert [now Nitz] 2010).

By contrast, Fludernik, one of the best-known proponents of cognitivist narratology, excludes historiography from the field of narrative, since the narrator here is not recounting experiences (be it of his or her own, be it of fictive characters) and personal motifs, emotions or perceptions but knowledge obtained from a distance (1996: 328). However, the dependence of narrativity upon experientiality is a minority view within narratology. In any case, Fludernik softens her position in a more recent publication: “I would now argue that experientiality (and hence narrativity) occurs on a scale, and that the more academic a historical text is, the less experientiality there will be” (2010: 50). She concedes that not only can historiography “cite” the experience of people living in earlier times, but that the reception of historiography “can in itself constitute an experience” (51; cf. Jaeger 2009: 120–21).

4 Topics of Further Investigation

While general or literary narratology has a wide array of systematically elaborated theories and concepts at its disposal (most recently Schmid [2003] 2010), there is nothing comparable for historiography. One difficulty lies in the fact that for a historiographic narratology to be comprehensive, it would have to explain the function of narrative in constituting History and its contribution to History as an academic discipline and also to systematically set out the formal repertoire of narrative techniques in historiography. The function of narrative in constituting history has been relatively well studied, while less attention has been given to the repertoire of narrative technique. This applies particularly to narration as an act of a narrator, which is the focus of traditional narratologies. It is fundamentally lacking an inventory with a consistent conceptual framework which frees itself from the models of literary scholarship, be it Frye’s plot structures adopted by White or the terminology of Genette.

In historical terms, the spectrum of historiographic narratives investigated from a more or less narratological perspective is encouragingly broad, extending from Greek Antiquity (cf. Grethlein & Rengakos eds. 2009) to the present day (cf. Carrard 1992; R uth 2005). Less satisfactory is the fact that it is almost exclusively “great works” that are analyzed, i.e. the histories of nations and epochs or major micro-

historical studies by famous historians. How and to what degree the many smaller formats that form the bulk of historiographical text production can be characterized as narrative remains entirely unclear. Periodical articles, lectures, edited sources and possibly also reviews would need to be incorporated into investigations of the narrative disposition of historiographical writing (and reading). Due to a lack of previous work to build upon, developing a specific historiographical narratology on the basis of these types of text seems to be a task that is as urgently required as it is exceptionally difficult.

An important question of detail here would be whether unlimited validity should be given to the largely customary identification of the historiographical narrator with the author. For Genette, the striking formula reads: "A[uthor] = N[arrator] ≠ C[haracter] → historical narrative" ([1991] 1993: 74). Indeed, first-person statements in historiographic narration always refer to the author-historian. However, the narrator can be removed both ideologically and temporally from the position of the author such that it seems necessary to separate author and narrator (cf. R uth 2005: 35–6). The Protestant historian Ranke, for example, narrates his (hi)story of the *R mischen P pste* overwhelmingly from the vantage point of this historical power. The authorial position can be said to be temporally removed if the narrator attempts to portray the course of history as remaining open and the past in question as the erstwhile future. On this view, the narrator comes to be seen more as a function of the historiographical concept in question than as being identical with the empirical author: for Droysen (1977: 365) the historian's "general I" is already distinguished from his or her "empirical I." Narrative perspective also seems to require differentiated consideration as when, for example, Ranke's narrator, despite attempting to reconstruct the Popes' perspective of the narrated conflicts, passes judgments from a Protestant perspective. Schmid ([2003] 2010: 100–05, 116–17) additionally provides a distinction between perceptive, ideological, spatial, temporal and linguistic perspective.

Gathering historiographic narrations systematically becomes even more difficult once we branch out beyond written historical texts. This appears necessary, as the academic study of history does not have a monopoly on gaining and imparting historical insights. A comprehensive narratology of historiography would also have to consider sources such as television programs, exhibitions and even historical reenactments, and much more, thus engaging with a much broader range of media than printed books. In addition to the cognitive power of narrative forms, this would lead to a wider focus on non-cognitive, emotional aspects of the reception of the various forms of historical representation. Philips (2013) has accomplished this "emotional turn" in an otherwise classical analysis focusing on historiography and historiology in the Enlightenment and in Romanticism.

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