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Pihlainen, Kalle

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# The Possibilities of 'Materiality' in Writing and Reading History

Las posibilidades de 'materialidad' en la escritura y la lectura de la historia

Kalle Pihlainen

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3361-5840> 

## ABSTRACT

In this article, I investigate the role of a particular kind of 'materiality' at work in the writing and reading of history. This involves examining the challenges posed to constructivist approaches to history by various post-linguistic-turn claims about presence and experience as well as by so-called post-narrativism. The core focus will be on outlining an argument for updating 'narrativist' or constructivist theory of history to deal with these recent concerns. This requires directing more attention to the relations between author, text, and reader, particularly concerning the key issues of reality, embodiment, and immersion. To demonstrate the value of approaching these relations in terms of 'materiality,' I consider three questions aimed at illuminating the balancing act between referentiality and invention performed in history writing as a genre: How can language 'embody' reality? How do referential texts encode reality? And, how could we read referential texts specifically with respect to reality?

## RESUMEN

En este artículo investigo el rol de una clase particular de 'materialidad' que opera en la escritura y la lectura de la historia. Esto implica examinar los desafíos planteados a los enfoques constructivistas de la historia tanto por los argumentos del giro post-lingüístico sobre la presencia y la experiencia como por el denominado post-narrativismo. El foco central será presentar un argumento para actualizar la teoría de la historia 'narrativista' o constructivista a fin de que esta pueda lidiar con esas preocupaciones recientes. Esto requiere dedicar mayor atención a las relaciones entre autor, texto y lector, particularmente respecto de los asuntos clave relativos a la realidad, la corporalidad (embodiment) y la inmersión. Para mostrar la utilidad del acercamiento a esas relaciones en términos de 'materialidad', considero tres preguntas que apuntan a iluminar el acto de equilibrar entre referencialidad e invención performed en la escritura de la historia como género: ¿cómo puede el lenguaje 'corporizar' (embody) la realidad? ¿Cómo pueden los textos referenciales codificar la realidad? Y ¿cómo podríamos leer los textos referenciales, específicamente con respecto a la realidad?

## KEYWORDS

Experience; Constructivism; Reception

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Experiencia; Constructivismo; Recepción

It seems self-evident to say that theory and philosophy of history should not exist in a vacuum. After all, its main problems and objectives relate closely to those of numerous other fields in the humanities and social sciences. Yet there is a surprising disjuncture to be discerned as theory of history has been impressively resistant even to the core debates in 'cultural theory' about, for example, affect theory or actor-network theory (as well as, obviously, 'post-ANT') — possibly the most salient developments that could currently contribute to a reinvigorated understanding of historical production as well as historical literacy. Even the connection to memory and heritage studies has largely been ignored, as if debates could be conducted in isolation... even, at times, in isolation from the practice of history writing itself.

When borrowings do occur, they are often carried out in superficial ways, and discussions tend to return to pre-linguistic-turn agendas. This is perhaps nowhere as evident as in the opposition of 'narrativism' by talk about 'presence' and 'experience' in recent decades, a subject that I go on to discuss below. So, while I hope to describe some issues that might make these other debates more approachable from the point of view of theory of history as well as to outline some central research agendas for going forward in conceptualizing history as a practice of communication, my main concern here is more to indicate missing connections for further elaboration. To set up the argument, let me begin by sketching the main issues relating to the personal relevance of history (the thread that binds together the contradictory impulses and commitments at the heart of 'doing' history).

## The personal relevance of history

Leaning on recent research in cognitive neuroscience to develop his 'phenomenology of autobiography' (primarily, that is, the experience of reading autobiographies), Arnaud Schmitt suggests that personal relevance could be a key factor in determining what is real and what is fictional. He bases his

argument on the finding, moving in the reverse direction, by which 'real' characters have more impact on us than 'unreal' ones. Accordingly,

what is real is what matters most to us [...]. These conclusions rest on the (scientifically reliable?) premise that reality makes a stronger impression, or leaves a deeper neural mark than fiction (with the possible exception of pathological cases of over-immersion in fiction). (SCHMITT 2017, p. 81)

Regardless of the extent of the generalizability from such findings (and Schmitt is to be commended for his wariness), there appears to be a similar impactfulness in play in the 'phenomenology' of (reading) history texts — as there is, indeed, in watching the news or listening to someone recount their experiences of the day, for example. Even when a story is not the most fascinating, its 'truthfulness' can command our attention. In this sense, reality plays an undeniable role.

But this is only part of the story regarding a personal or 'felt' relation to situations described: a second issue — and one that is more prominent in theoretical discussion about history — involves their easy identifiability. And it is in the creation of this (sense of) identifiability that a tension is introduced between 'reality' and truthfulness, on one hand, and the familiarity of the form, on the other. For circumstances to be identifiable, they must be described in identifiable ways. As Hayden White puts this, the past, or

history [*sic*] — the real world as it evolves in time — is made sense of in the same way that the poet or novelist tries to make sense of it, i.e., by endowing what originally appears to be problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognizable, because it is a familiar, form. (WHITE 1978, p. 98)

There is yet a further twist, however: in addition to the chosen story form, personal identification and even 'empathy' are also seen to figure in the creation of any 'felt,' personal

relation. Although discussed with respect to all referential texts, this may be most obvious in the boundary-case of the historical novel, in which reference is admittedly less important than it is in more 'aggressively' referential genres such as history, biography, or autobiography.

For Georg Lukács, in his influential discussion of the historical novel, the evocation of the personal and concrete nature of historical reality demands poetic engagement and an appeal to experience, including identification with the actors from the past:

What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and the human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality. (LUKÁČZ 1962, p. 42)

Lukács goes on to remind us that it is less the great events of the past that effect this experiential awakening than 'outwardly insignificant events' (LUKÁČZ 1962, p. 42), the matters of daily experience and life. In this sense, microhistory, for instance, is a natural move toward more experiential and hence, potentially, 'personal' historical representations.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, other attempts at creating experiential histories abound too. In these alternative forms of history writing — forms that depart from the purportedly objective reportage of more straight-forward history writing, and, indeed, of more realistic historical novels — the reading experience is pronounced and intentionally 'literary,' more in the manner of modernist fiction than has been the case for most now-conventional microhistories (see, for example, the playful, experimental styles adopted by Natalie Zemon Davis in the Prologue to *Women on the Margins* [DAVIS 1995] and James Goodman in *Blackout* [GOODMAN 2003]). The generic orientation of such writing forces us to maintain a referential attitude but, at the

*1 - The connection with microhistory is strong in Frank Ankersmit's arguments for 'historical experience' discussed below. For more on this, see, especially, FROEYMAN 2016 and PAUL & VAN VELDHUIZEN 2018.*

same time, aesthetically induced experientiality is ramped up by the seductive capacity and immersiveness of experimental, 'literary' forms — by their bringing that reality somehow 'closer' to us.

Ideally, such forms could make us more aware of ways to connect with readers and make historical insights more accessible while, at the same time, relying less on historians' authority and ideals of objectivity. Paradoxically, they might provide the best route toward making historical representations at once personally felt *and* more 'real.' As per my title, the main objective of this study is to better understand both the writing and the reading of history and, consequently, to also gain better insight into history as an academic practice. In addition to my attempt to draw attention to the aspects of what I mean by 'materiality' here, this debate relates specifically to the question of history as communication.

In elaborating on these issues, I will revisit the debate about 'narrative' with respect to history, where the complex challenge of narrative construction has at times been simplified and misunderstood to the extent that readings are currently very polarized. Perhaps more importantly, I will try to connect that debate to a largely ignored focus within 'poststructuralism,' broadly understood. In doing this, my goal is to outline three particular blind spots that seem currently to be the most interesting ones for going forward. These are loosely tied to the idea of 'materiality,' albeit in a sense that has been largely absent from debates within theory and philosophy of history.

Before moving on to discuss what I believe to be the main unappreciated concerns in this connection, a recap of the principal developments leading to the current debate may be helpful — hopefully this impressionistic 'history' can shed light on the ways in which these potential blind spots relate to tensions within the field today.

## The 'stuff' outside historical writing

Of the main developments in theory, the linguistic turn certainly needs no introduction, in part because of its dominance especially in the theory of history during the 1980s and 1990s, but also because of its controversial nature even throughout that period of relative success. To say that it needs no introduction is not, however, to say that there is not a continued need to get to know it better. Ideas falling under the umbrella of the linguistic turn have been subject to many misinterpretations and the work of its main proponents has been quite strangely received; within philosophy, the worst misreadings have arguably focused on Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty; in relation to history, particularly harsh readings have been offered up of Hayden White, Keith Jenkins, Elizabeth Ermarth, Sande Cohen, and Frank Ankersmit. At the same time, historically oriented presentations by Michel Foucault and Joan Scott, for instance, have been better received in at least some more forward-thinking history approaches — for Foucault and Scott, this has perhaps been the case most notably within cultural history and women's history. More recently, attempts to pursue similar goals and conceivably to also broaden the agenda of the linguistic-turn inheritance have continued in the pages of the journal *Rethinking History* and in the work of Martin L. Davies (2016) as well as Claire Norton and Mark Donnelly (2019), for example. These questions have also been kept alive by sporadic attacks on relativism and by virtue of regularly recurring debates concerning one revisionist history or another.

One of the most cited formulations of the linguistic turn as it relates to history is presented by White in his seminal essay 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact' (printed, for example, in WHITE 1978). Here, he enjoins us to reconsider the nature of historians' work:

to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: 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 the sciences. (WHITE 1978, p. 82)

At other times, including in this very essay, White (in)famously described this part of historical work in terms of turning fact into fiction. Although he pushes the envelope much further here than in expressing the more obvious need for personally appealing, recognizable forms (in relation to which I cited him above), this is clearly only a dramatization of the same thesis. Had these interventions not been as controversial as they proved to be, there might today be more agreement between the fields of 'theory' and 'history' regarding questions of construction and invention. While White later expressed regret for some of the more extreme provocations, there is no denying their core idea, however: history writing, like literature, requires the complex construction ('fictioning') of meaning, not simply an unearthing of facts; furthermore, history writing as we know it follows largely the same linguistic paths as literature in this meaning-making process.

Naturally, these provocations were met with numerous objections, but those have largely tended to rely on quite extreme interpretations of the initial claims, coupled with ignorance of the attendant qualifications about what is meant by 'fiction,' 'textuality,' 'construction,' and so on. As an example: during one of the formative moments of the linguistic turn debate in theory of history, Perez Zagorin rebukes Keith Jenkins with what he seems to perceive as a knock-down response regarding Derrida's 'well-known dictum that there is nothing outside the text.' In his denunciation, Zagorin ignores Derrida's and others' explanation of what is intended by this statement and chooses instead to take it literally:

On the face of it this is a very implausible proposition. It does not appear to be metaphorical and seems to say that everything that is is part of a text. Derrida puts this another way when he also denies that reading can get beyond the text to any sort of



referent or reality either historical, biographical, metaphysical, or other. (ZAGORIN 2000, p. 206)

Even with the clarification made here by Zagorin at his own initiative, the challenges to any 'getting beyond' appear to escape him as well as so many other critics of the linguistic turn and postmodern or deconstructive approaches to history. Zagorin's intended knock-down follows up on his literal (non-metaphorical) reading of what it means to be inside a text; obviously, he says, there are things 'beyond' texts for the simple reason that texts 'require for their physical realization such things as paper, ink, print, pens, parchment, stone, clay tablets, and so on, none of which is a text.' (ZAGORIN 2000, p. 206).

Regardless of the existence of such risible readings, actual anti-realist positions are hard to come by, and this is something that should be clear also from Zagorin's conflation of arguments concerning metaphysical realism (in the sense that reality exists irrespective of us) and naive realism (claiming that perceptions and experiences match and confirm reality), by which move he consequently attributes to 'postmodernists' an anti-realism in the strongest, crudest sense of claiming that there is no reality whatsoever. Even Jenkins — who may justifiably be viewed as taking the constructivist position furthest within theory of history — has been very clear to distance himself from anti-realism. As he explains: 'I'm a *realist* but a realist of a certain kind.' For him, this means that

not only does such stuff exist (and has existed previously and will exist in the future), but that it transcends each and every attempt in each and every social formation to reduce it to their inhabitants' experiences, vocabularies, lexicons, abstractions, etc. [...] For it seems apparent that the actuality of 'existence' skips free of every (definitive) anthropomorphism. Yet, at the same time such transcendental realism does not commit me to metaphysical realism (namely, that we can know the way things are independent of the way we access them). (JENKINS 2008, p. 60)

Although Jenkins' terminology is different (his description of 'metaphysical realism' here is what I would term 'naïve realism'), he is not denying the 'actuality' of 'stuff' but merely recognizing the inevitability of mediation and of impositions of meaning. Not even the 'reality' of our experiences is thus questioned, only our appreciation of their specific relations with actuality.

## Narrativity as hostile to reality and experience?

After over half a century of fairly focused debate about language and representation, it is not surprising that a pendulum swing is taking place in theory of history as well as within theory and philosophy more broadly. Some of the suggested routes were perhaps to be expected — many even anticipated by more nuanced approaches within constructivism and poststructuralism, for instance, as I go on to indicate. Nonetheless, the one-sidedness of some of the extreme popularizations is surprising. They move forward on a number of conceptual and disciplinary fronts: most obviously through ideas of presence and experience in relation to history and under the umbrellas of (speculative) realism and object-oriented ontology, for example, within continentally oriented philosophy. All in all, there may be said to be a general emphasis on 'materiality' (if, fortunately, not predominantly on 'reality') across the board in these efforts.

While there are sophisticated representatives of such approaches (particularly with regard to material remains and heritage, it seems), at their extremes many attempts run counter to the fundamental idea of mediatedness — that is, the problematic concerning our access to reality, an issue foregrounded by the majority of theoretical approaches since the 1960s. To be clear, this is not merely a case of their opposing the previously discussed straw-claim of reality not being 'there'; rather, the same charges are presented also against the far more modest views according to which we do not have *meaning-full* access to reality 'outside' or 'beyond' our sense-making processes. By these latter views, 'language' —

in one form or another — always gets in the way. Yet, even to suggest this is easily perceived as tantamount to making anti realist claims.

Despite the slew of elaborations regarding mediation and accessibility, simply ignoring all such ideas seems currently to be a popular tendency. With respect to the main 'linguistic turn' trend within theory and philosophy of history within the past decades — often (and often simplistically) referred to as 'narrativism' — this amounts to ignoring the linguistic problematic and treating language once more as if it were somehow a transparent medium. Even if the denial of these ideas is not always explicitly stated in the proposal of 'new' directions, it is worth asking: what else could it mean to present something as offering a *counter* to 'narrativism,' to 'textualism,' or to an *undue* focus on the linguistic turn? What could be presented as new and crucial '*after*' these concerns, instead of more moderately calling for increased attention to their less-discussed or less-central aspects while still remaining within a constructivist framework?

In relation to history writing at least, this trend has been building gradually, already incipient at the height of the linguistic turn. In his brilliant and well-timed challenge to conventional historical form, *In 1926*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht — very much in tune with linguistic-turn theory of history — outlined a theoretically sensitive and nuanced position aimed at defending 'our' desires for a presence of some sort in dealing with the past. For him, it was clear at that time that

Historical culture cannot avoid living between its endeavor to fulfill such desire for presence and an awareness that this is an impossible self-assignment. Therefore, historical culture — if it wishes to preserve its identity as a form of experience different from the experience of fiction — *must try to 'conjure' the reality of past worlds*, without indulging in naive analogies with magic but acknowledging the inevitable subjectiveness of every such construction of historical otherness. (GUMBRECHT 1997, p. 424, emphasis added<sup>2</sup>).

2 - The 'conjuring' of at least some feeling of reality might best be undertaken through an emphasis on underdetermination on the part of the historian, so as to leave more of the responsibility for interpretation to the reader; see PIHLAINEN 2017.

Thus, still operating very much within the 'constructivist' camp and, consequently, advocating a sense of 'irony' regarding this contradiction, Gumbrecht can talk about presence while simultaneously invoking its impossibility as a practical limit to more extreme, less theoretically sophisticated attempts. As historians, 'we' may feel such a 'desire for presence,' but it is moderated by an awareness of the impossibility of anything but imaginary fulfillment. There is also a visible conflation in Gumbrecht's argument of historians' constructions and consumer desires, however: speaking more generally about our historical-mindedness — at least for a large part of the population, one assumes from his tone — Gumbrecht claims that

what specifically drives us toward the past is the desire to penetrate the boundary that separates our lives from the time span prior to our birth. We want to know the worlds that existed before we were born, and experience them directly. (GUMBRECHT 1997, p. 419)

While this rhetorical 'we' may be too liberally constructed (it makes me at least want to shout, 'speak for yourself!'), this statement appears to be a fair representation of the kind of romanticizing attitude to the past that clearly does motivate many people, historians and their readers alike, to turn to history: to 'touch,' to 'taste,' to 'smell' something of a reality that once was. Gumbrecht gives us an example of this that is certainly persuasively familiar for anyone working among 'traditional' historians: 'touching the original manuscript of a text whose exact words would be more easily accessible in a critical edition seems,' he argues, 'to make a difference for many scholars.' (GUMBRECHT 1997, p. 419)

It bears emphasizing that this same dynamic is part of Zagorin's criticism of linguistic-turn approaches in the discussion I reference above. In criticizing Jenkins for lack of knowledge about historical practice, Zagorin dismissively asks: 'Does he [Jenkins] know what it is to read a manuscript written in an

ancient hand and determine its contextual background and its provenance, meaning, and significance as part of an evidential synthesis to which it is related?' (ZAGORIN 2000, p. 202) Apparently, such contact with the past somehow (magically?) contributes to the significance of historical studies.

What is notable in outlining the debate around these positions is that, when elaborating on this issue in 1997, Gumbrecht falls back to a relatively 'safe' position. He suggests — but does not yet quite make — a break with the 'fiction' debate. As he quite correctly notes: 'as soon as historical culture openly opts for this desire for re-presentation (which is not a given), it cannot help being ironic, for it then re-presents the past as a "reality" though it knows that all re-presentations are simulacra.' (GUMBRECHT 1997, p. 424) He later returns to the suggestion that it might be possible to somehow present or 'presentify' the past (or, to be precise, objects of the past) more explicitly. This time, he takes things a little further, however, arguing that

instead of asking for a meaning, presentification pushes us in a different direction. The desire for presence makes us imagine how we would have related, intellectually and with our bodies, to certain objects (rather than ask what those objects 'mean') if we had encountered them in their own historical everyday worlds. (GUMBRECHT 2004, p. 124)

Although he in part continues to connect this with his earlier formulation of 'conjuring up the past,' this latter view seems more a parsing of what it means to 'mean' than a significant objection in itself. After all, relating intellectually or relating with the body are essentially still forms of meaning-making in a constructivist sense, regardless of whether we encounter things 'directly' in their 'original' context or in an imaginary mode, as historical traces in some 'artificial' context. Meaning is always only an attribution and imposition, but it is also something that we can *never* avoid 'adding' when relating (to) something.

That said, it is important to note that the phenomenological sentiment here is desperately in need of further work in connection with history and should not be too hastily rejected. Indeed, we may go further in this regard with what I will refer to as 'materiality'. I will come to that soon. My intention in taking Gumbrecht to task in such a detailed fashion here, then, is less to point to difficulties with his position than to indicate the direction of the shift that has taken place in thinking about presence — first as a 'conjuring' type of parlor trick performed by reasonably theoretically self-aware historians, but later (now?) increasingly in some supposedly more 'authentic' way. Before moving on to the possible ways of following up on several aspects of the kind of presence suggested by this more basic phenomenological attitude, I want to briefly look at what, for me, are some routes not to be taken.

For this purpose, I turn to Frank Ankersmit's key provocation regarding 'historical experience.' While Ankersmit has shifted 'from narrative to experience' with some forcefulness (as insightfully observed by Ewa Domanska [2009] and elaborated in detail by Peter Icke [2012]), he is no less radical with this latter focus. In promoting this new position, he claims that there may well be ways for historians to 'enter into a real, authentic, and "experiential" relationship to the past – that is, into a relationship that is not contaminated by historiographical tradition, disciplinary presuppositions, and linguistic structures.' (ANKERSMIT 2005, p. 4) If substantiated, this would amount to a significant challenge to linguistic-turn thinking. Imagine it: to somehow bypass existing discursive traditions and linguistic practices...<sup>3</sup>

Ankersmit takes this further, arguing that our debates regarding history might — through historians' embrace of this kind of 'authentic' relationship — then also shift to focus on 'historical experience, that is, on how we experience the past and on how this experience of the past may come into being by a movement comprising at the same time the discovery and the recovery of the past.' (ANKERSMIT 2005, p. 9)

3 - If read more modestly, however, Ankersmit's focus is not far from Joan Scott's much earlier intervention regarding the role of lived experience in historians' interpretive work (cf. SCOTT 1991).

Although attending to the combination of discovery and recovery certainly makes sense both in this context and as an argument about approaching the past in general, tying this to the idea of an 'experiential' relationship *to history* as if that connection were already something available and established seems premature. Historians are obviously intent on discovering and recovering as much as, for example, uncovering, and it is of crucial importance for the discipline that we examine how these desires tie in with personal attitudes to the *historical* past. But how can our experience *connect* us to that distant past? (Beyond, that is, the kind of romantic or fetishizing attitudes in dealing with material remains, for example, as described by Gumbrecht in the citation above.)

Despite the way in which Ankersmit runs ideas of personal experience and the work of the historian together, it seems that the first part of his formulation was intended primarily as a provocation and is thus presented in this exaggerated form; certainly there is no denying its success in inspiring vocal spokespeople both for and against 'historical experience.'<sup>4</sup> Yet, while it was undeniably a timely and contagious sentiment — one that captured the imaginations of many — the idea is premised on a complete rejection of some of the established problems and understandings regarding historical representation and language. More worryingly, going forward, it has been received as a suggestion that we could now reasonably forget about 'narrativist' or linguistic-turn debates — as if the underlying issues had somehow been resolved.<sup>5</sup> In going so directly against the core idea of mediation, it should not, however, be enough to simply proclaim that we need not concentrate on such issues any longer.

## Making room for 'materiality'

What seems most urgent in the current conjuncture, then, is to seek real dialogue between these two key issues in theorizing historical work (those of experience and linguistic construction), instead of presenting them as mutually excluding as a matter

4 - For an example of the reception, see CHORELL 2006; for its contextualization in Ankersmit's overall thought, see VAN DER DUSSEN 2016 and PAUL & VAN VELDHUIZEN 2018.

5 - See, for example, Anton Froeyman (2016, p. 81 ff.), who explores the possibility furthest. More moderately, Jonathan Menezes (2018), for one, reads Ankersmit's position as one of 'suspending' rather than rejecting language when focusing on experience.



of principle. This is so particularly in trying to understand the question of what it is about history that 'speaks' to us. How is it that history (even when understood in the stricter sense of disciplinary history writing) can be important to us in personal and not only societal ways? While the answer to this question may at first seem to rest solely on the shoulders of the audience — the consumers of historical stories — and thus as relating more to experience, responsibility also rests with the producers and their storytelling skills and effort.

In this way, viewing 'narrativism,' for instance, as a hindrance to talking about experience and reality prevents us from asking better questions about historical work and its consumption. It further leads proponents of 'narrativist' versus 'realist' or 'materialist' positions to return to debates that have already been had at the early stages of the linguistic turn, with the consequence that current discourse must rehearse this same vicious circle — fact *or* fiction, reality *or* language, experience *or* storytelling, and so on. Some recent claims that serve to create an impasse to the elaboration of more theoretically nuanced positions include talk about it now being time to move 'beyond' language, or to think 'after narrativism' (see, for example, the special issue of *History and Theory*, 'After Narrativism' [v. 54, n. 2, 2015]). But this can only lead to a 'rinse and repeat' of the whole, now-familiar debate about history or, alternatively, leads us off on a tangent instead, to questions that are largely unrelated to history practices — to questions of the nature of experience and knowledge in general, for instance, or to substantive queries about time, societal change, and the like.

Admittedly, there is a balancing act to be carried out regarding the relevance of theoretical work when a particular approach is viewed as *passé* within a given field. The answer for retrieving relevance should not be an endless search for novelty, however, often resulting in a turning back of the clock and the reinvention of previous positions, but, instead, mining the work and insights already there, supplementing them as necessary. In such situations, attention to detail is needed for



taking the discussion forward. With respect to discussions of 'narrativism' in history this involves, hopefully, finally getting to talk about the meaning and relevance of constructivist thinking for actual history practices instead of arguing about very basic epistemological questions.

Charting this more interesting ground between extreme formulations of 'nothing outside language' and 'immediate experience' — in fact simply working through these discussions with more care and nuance — is important to 'history' topics involving broader analyses of 'historicity' (including debates in memory studies, public history, popular histories, and so on). Simply accepting these positions as in fundamental conflict would amount to saying that the debate regarding history has failed, and thus indeed to accede to the desire that we turn to something 'new' instead... Yet, while there are endless topics to tackle, most of them do not contribute to understanding 'history' practices even in the broadest sense — something that should arguably still be the main interest of theoretical work regarding history.

In what follows, I want to address all this in terms of the place of 'materiality' *in* texts and will proceed via three questions. To begin, I touch on the general issue of how reality can be thought of as present in language: How does language 'embody' reality? After this, I will discuss two further questions that relate to history writing specifically. How do referential texts encode reality? And: How do we read referential texts with respect to reality? Through a quick discussion of these three questions, I hope to suggest that the 'old' debate about constructivism and poststructuralism still has much to give, particularly relating to the area between the two extreme straw-positions described.

But, before turning to these aspects of 'materiality,' there is a need to rehearse the key ideas that should be retained from 'narrativist' discussions in order for further thinking on these matters to be sustainable. What is it we should hold on to from linguistic-turn debates? What do we want to keep

from at least the more sophisticated accounts of 'narrativism,' 'constructivism,' or 'poststructuralism' (or from 'relativism' or 'postmodernism' for that matter) to ensure that we do not just reset the debate? How should we read these efforts better and avoid reducing them to derisory 'isms' to be handily set in opposition to unexamining attitudes of 'realism'?

Perhaps a little surprisingly, what needs to be remembered is fairly underwhelming and probably quite clear to most historians from their practices, even if not always clearly articulated in theoretical terms. Overall, linguistic-turn thinking brings with it an increased sensitivity to language and poetics. With respect to history, this involves directing attention to the *writing* of history; even when viewed from a 'narrativist' or narrative theory of history perspective, the research side of things works well, and hence the challenge that this kind of theory raises is, in the most basic sense, not epistemological.<sup>6</sup> Questions regarding the establishment of individual facts are simply bracketed so that we can proceed to focus on the construction of stories from these facts instead. This involves accepting the idea of so-called singular existential statements ('facts') that are sufficiently authoritatively established by the profession as not to face the same challenge as complex emplotments.

6 - White acknowledges this alongside his early provocations. For him, we always also have recourse to 'such criteria as responsibility to the rules of evidence, the relative fullness of narrative detail, logical consistency, and the like.' (WHITE 1978, p. 97)

While this is obviously a compromise, it is a necessary one if we wish to talk about what histories are instead of returning to more fundamental questions of reference, better belonging to the sphere of philosophy of language, for instance. Clearly, 'facts' are no safer from the basic philosophical problems of representation and reference than are more complex representations. But we would never get to discuss issues specific to history writing if we were to insist on first resolving this debate regarding what can be described as its 'building blocks.'

In this same vein, it needs to be understood that 'narrative' and 'narrativization' do not imply a particular form as suggested by some critics of 'narrativism' (see, for example, CARR 1986

and KUUKKANEN 2015, who both seem to insist that the term implies an uncomplicated, Aristotelian tripartite beginning-middle-end structure). Against this overly simplified view of the practice, 'narrativization' merely means a process of storying — the creation of a story by connecting things into a larger whole in a process of sense-making, regardless of how linear and straightforward or fragmentary and complex the resulting 'narrative.' The fundamental point is, then, to remind that there is no 'entailment' from facts to meaning (that is, there is no moving from 'is' to 'ought' in the classic Humean sense). Thus, whatever the things we know, they cannot 'innocently' suggest to us evaluations or provide us with *the* meaning of a specific set of historical events, for instance. In this way, there is a harsh disconnect between knowing things ('facts') and making interpretations. The move from one to the other is always mediated by historians through their interpretative, sense-making processes. This is something we know all too well from historical practice, of course, but often still fail to articulate clearly in theoretical debates.

Centrally, from a 'narrativist' or, better, constructivist point of view, none of this is to say that we are free to operate in 'anti-realist' or otherwise fully unconstrained ways. History is not just what we wish to make of it — even if we discount the crucial role of facts and research — already for the very basic reason that we emplot reality in familiar forms and following the various linguistic and cultural rules and expectations that we inhabit. A reminder of this from White to pre-empt any such objections before proceeding:

The historian shares with his audience *general notions* of the *forms* that significant human situations *must* take by virtue of his participation in the specific processes of sense-making which identify him as a member of one cultural endowment rather than another. (WHITE 1978, p. 86)

The challenge, then, is to keep sight of this quite practical aspect of constructivism and see where it might still lead

us. In the present context this translates specifically to the question: Where and how might 'historical experience' and textually produced experientiality *à la* narrative theory overlap sufficiently for the former to be theoretically justified? That is, what are the preconditions against which we can talk about the communication of something that could sensibly count as 'historical experience'?

### A) How is reality in language?

The first kind of 'materiality' that I can only all-too-briefly gesture to here centers on the very basic question of how language 'embodies' reality. Naturally, we have an everyday agreement to use language referentially on many — if not most — occasions. And the justification for this practice comes from a straightforward pragmatic consideration: most of the time it works. But this still leaves open the question of whether and how reality is present *in* language, encoded *into* it.

The idea of embodied materiality I want to invoke here has a long tradition in phenomenological thinking, with the classic example of the hammer offering the easiest entry-point. While that example does not yet connect directly with language, it provides an easy route to articulating the relation between material objects and embodied affordances. (It is also very much in line with the sentiment expressed by Gumbrecht that I cited earlier, concerning our possible relations to objects.) In its simplest form: when we encounter a hammer and we grasp it, it 'communicates' to us the underlying purpose or intention behind it. It does this through its ready graspability, the weighting and the heft — and its use is intuitively clear as a result of our parallel embodied capacities. The same may be even clearer with something like a pillow or a baseball bat, for example, where options for utilisation are arguably more strictly limited by the correspondence of the object to our 'constitution' and experiences of the world (possibly 'primordial' experiences, as Heidegger at times phrases this). And to some extent, this is true of every artifact,

albeit in diminishing degrees with increases in complexity and abstraction.

The need to rescue glossed aspects of more sophisticated theorizing from their collapse into 'isms' is just as urgent with respect to much of the theory that undergirds the linguistic turn as it is in the case of 'narrativism' and related simplifications: the point of contact between language and embodiment has been an object of attention for existentialism as well as poststructuralism, even though both are mostly discussed in terms of an exaggerated focus on description and language as constitutive. While they attend to representation in what can arguably be termed a relativist way, they *do* take embodiedness (and the related question of materiality) into account and attribute some influence to it *vis-à-vis* linguistic practices — despite that dimension often being ignored by their critics (with the exception of the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, of course, for whom the embodied dimension plays a far more integral role than it did for his contemporaries and hence has not been similarly ignored). Since they also arguably provide the most significant framework for the linguistic turn, this aspect should not be too easily dismissed.

To give some brief examples: thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Paul Sartre admittedly do consider ethics and choice in relatively unrestrained ways, yet Levinas also relies on the existence of 'phenomenological structures' ('here,' 'near/far,' and so on) and attributes a great deal to our embodied experiences (with respect to 'The Dwelling,' for example in LEVINAS 1969) whereas Sartre bases the move to verbalizations of our internal states on the other's fixing of us as our body for them (SARTRE 1969, particularly the chapter, 'The Body'). Similar commitments can be discerned in the work of 'poststructuralist' thinkers, despite the typical claims made about their overt and even 'absurd' emphasis of language as somehow free-floating. (This partly overlaps with the arguments for 'anti-realism' and 'anything goes,' which are directed at these strands of thinking too, as already

discussed above in relation to Derrida.) But reading, for example, Derrida on Jean-Luc Nancy or Nancy on 'touch,' the embodied or corporeal aspect and its connection with language-use cannot be dismissed (see DERRIDA 2005; NANCY 1993). This same concern is equally evident in Luce Irigaray when speaking of 'touch' (see, for example, IRIGARAY 1985, especially the last chapter, 'When Our Lips Speak Together'), in Hélène Cixous' classic 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (CIXOUS 1976) or even in Roland Barthes' *Pleasure of the Text* (BARTHES 1975).

Another presentation of this connection — albeit moving from language 'down' to embodiment, as it were — can of course also be found in Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak, who have been intent on examining it from the point of view of an idea of representational violence (in line with Derrida's famous formulation in *Of Grammatology*; see, for example, BUTLER 1997 and SPIVAK 1990). For them, approaching this particular 'material' relation from a more radically constructivist point of view is an urgent task in order to be able to demonstrate the harmful, essentializing impacts of language. Hence also the resistance to ideas that might be read to suggest naturalization of (female) corporeality. But, despite the importance of understanding the workings of representational, linguistic violence, the connected 'material' connections and conditions need to be examined too. In this limited way at least, experiences of reality and language can be seen to go hand-in-hand in the approaches that inform current constructivist views.<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, this particular kind of 'materiality' also relates to both writing and reading, and I will come to those next. But, first, it is essential to recognize that it forms an underlying condition to everything else: reality and meaning are inseparable in our (embodied) experience. Or, as Merleau-Ponty famously put it: 'Because we are in the world, *we are condemned to meaning.*' (MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, p. xix) But this is not to say that meanings are determined, since language has a life of its own

7 - These are by no means the only route to the connection between language and physical reality. Georg Lakoff and Mark Johnson, for instance, convincingly outline many 'embodied categories' and bodily metaphors operative in language-use (LAKOFF & JOHNSON 1980).

too, and even someone like Merleau-Ponty has to take a very long route to demonstrate how the spheres of embodiment and language are united in 'gesture,' for example (see MERLEAU-PONTY 2002, p. 213–215).

What, then, if the overlap between language and materiality is so slight and difficult to place, might be the main take-away from attending to embodiment in this way for referential representations like history? Most importantly — because the practical, directly referential connection of language to reality can be there or not, because, that is, we can use it to refer *and* to create — this underlines the fact that even referential constructions will be suasive and seductive. The constant shifting between reference and invention contains the possibility of an immersive experience (remember White's point that histories 'have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences...'), and we are accustomed to crossing the boundary between reference and immersion without explicit acknowledgment. It seems important to acknowledge that these are two different modes, however, and immersion is not always a desirable condition. This relates to the two further questions below, both having to do with the distinctness of referential texts.

## B) How is reality encoded in referential texts?

For debates about history writing, looking at language in terms of both of these modes — that is: in terms of reference and realism, on one hand, and invention and immersion, on the other — can hopefully assist in overcoming the worst of the either-or debates and in shaking off some of the underlying intuitive, misleading attitudes. The key challenge then becomes one of understanding the connection and working dynamic between a pragmatic 'contact' with reality and 'literary' immersiveness in attempts to write about the past. How is reality present in these texts? Or, more precisely, how do overtly referential texts encode and embed reality?



Specifically, for referential texts as opposed to fiction, a crucial 'mistake' introduced by following too closely on the heels of a literary theory approach has involved the professed 'death of the author.' While this has not been substantially elaborated within theory of history, the implications of looking *at* history writing rather than 'behind' it to the intentions of the author has been part and parcel of a textualist approach. Combined with the epistemological problematics involved in history writing and historians' explicit attempts to deal with them, this attitude has undoubtedly compounded the difficulties historians have had in accepting constructivist views. Given the challenges history faces as a practice, a break with extreme textualist positions is warranted on this point, however, and authorial intentions need (cautiously) to be brought back to the debates.

A key outcome of neglecting the historian (as author) in textual readings has involved ignoring the writer-reader contract in play in history (for more on this, see PIHLAINEN 2017; 2019a; 2019b and TAMM 2014). Yet part of this contract is formed by the historian's promise to be truthful — and, in this sense, the historian-as-writer and specifically the intentions involved constitute our only conduit to 'reality,' however tenuous. Textually, this connection is present in the form of factual statements and the literary decisions needed to accommodate them. Although this claim clearly calls for some caveats, at its core it amounts to saying that — because of genre commitments, including the particular promise to be truthful — we are, as historians, constrained by all the practices that fall under the admittedly all-too-vague umbrella of 'historical method'; chief among these: to aim not to 'distort' things (to seek some kind of match or 'correspondence' with what is known) and to include all relevant facts (to be 'comprehensive' in our interpretations).

If we can agree on the relevance of intentional engagement on this basic level, the exhumation of the author does not necessarily need to go further. Recognition of this commitment is a sufficient reminder that there are interruptions in



the text that result from and echo historians' referential commitments. Thus, when a *text* is taken seriously, these commitments can also be seen as producing textual markers — markers that can be 'read back' as long as one remains constantly curious for them (as long, that is, as one then, as a *reader*, continues to honor that same referential contract and resists immersion into a fully fictional reading mode). On this level, simply the aim of inclusiveness can be argued to effect a disruption to 'purely' fictional form: a historians' hands are tied with respect to literary invention and this interrupts the 'literariness' of history texts — as with any referential text. At the very least, textual invention proceeds 'facts first' rather than from the storyline.<sup>8</sup>

Such interruptions to overall literary form are hard to demonstrate, since, as readers, we tend to read everything for broader meaning and significance. Yet, some of the key generic disruptors we encounter in history texts are fairly obvious: Firstly, facts ('singular existential statements') tend to be 'realistic.' Thus, even when a particular fact appears to involve broader meaning 'in itself' (something as trivial as 'Trump trumps Clinton' or as conspiracy-minded as the appearance of a 9/11 'prediction' in *The Simpsons* four years prior to the event, for example), we may note this with some curiosity but tend not to read it as meaningful. Admittedly, we overlook such 'meaning' in part as a consequence of the referential genre commitments and the underlying understanding relating to reality; but the key to differentiating between referential and 'fictional' processes here is not in the existence of individual instances of this kind of potential meaning, but in the coincidence of their overall direction when more of them are present. Secondly, in line with this, history texts present references to be followed up. They *read* outwards. Again, this could be seen as a practice of 'truth-creation' that could be used effectively in fictional writing too, but in referential texts it produces interference (and, sometimes, when references are not employed in this usual way, histories are accused of being too free with their facts). Thirdly, point-of-view tends to

8 - For an elaboration of this dynamic, see Pihlainen 2017.

be severely limited and subject-positions are largely narrated without recourse to internal states. So, while histories may incorporate different perspectives, distinct storylines, parallel and intersecting objectives, and so on, they tend to reject even very basic literary conceits that go against realist expectations. While not an active interruption, this realistic mode limits the meaning-making process in much the same way as do more explicit referential commitments.

All this (and much more) works as an interruption to any properly literary meaning-making processes. And it thus makes the kind of aesthetic closure described in literary criticism more difficult to achieve. Polyphony, for instance, can be a strategic choice for a fictional text. But, for referential writing, at least some of these interruptions *unavoidably* leak over to infringe on the storyline and the text's aesthetic coherence. In this key aspect, referential text production is not *led* by form and meaning-making, as is the case for fiction. So, even though there is always a 'content to the form,' that content is not as comprehensive and controlled because of these resistant elements — *because of this resistant materiality*. And, in this respect, there is a difference between the kind of ideological meaning-imposition suggested by White ('the content of the form') in emplotments for history and an aesthetic closure that involves firmer control of the meaning-making impact of individual textual elements, as sometimes postulated in literary theory.

Critically, a negotiation necessarily takes place in referential text production between the 'brute facticity' that is the touchstone of referential representations and the immersivity that is inevitably introduced by the textual process — between the two contending modes that such representation is forced to move between. And this negotiation leaves textual traces. But why be concerned with this? What is the significance of these kinds of disturbances in referential texts? Ultimately, this significance is only realized in the reading process.

### C) How do we read referential texts?

The third relevant aspect of 'materiality' that I want to articulate in this connection involves our specific commitments as readers with respect to referential texts. The question is: How are referential texts read differently from non-referential ones? Crucially, how are they read back *for their reality*?

Considering the strong arguments for textuality, and in particular their separation of meanings from intentions in the process of text production, it seems safe to say that the kinds of interruptions created by referential commitments of history writing are by themselves insufficient to establish a referential reading practice. To be effective, such textual interruptions require the complicity of the reader — the consummation of the contract between the writer and the reader, as it were. Without it, these interruptions are always in danger of being lost within the overall immersivity created even by these expressly referential storytelling practices. (This is only a somewhat milder manifestation of the 'impossible self-assignment' involved in history, cited from Gumbrecht above: here the referential interruptions that constitute the aspect of presence available to us in history writing are repeatedly covered and concealed by the fictional, immersive pull of the story.) To make this side of the referential commitment better visible, the practice of reading — something that has been given far too little attention in the theory of history (see AHLBÄCK 2007; PIHLAINEN 2017; ROTH 2018) — needs to be discussed explicitly.

It seems safe to assume that readers are positioned differently by a referential reading contract than they would be by a 'fictional' or more explicitly literary one. Importantly, there is an understanding of sorts regarding the premises and expectations directed at the text as well as collusion regarding referentiality. Without this 'materiality' *reaching into the reading* — without the reader's mindfulness of reality as a part of the communication — referential writing would simply not make sense as a genre. Arnaud Schmitt formulates this brilliantly in

the case of autobiography, and I want to quote him at some length to do justice to his argument:

the phenomenology of fiction originates in the childhood experiences of games and make-believe. What is the point of autobiography if it is based on similar experiences? If it gives rise to a 'rapt state'? I am not saying that it is not able to give rise to such a state, I am only asking if it is meant to. *In other words, fiction dictates the phenomenology it creates, but, up to a certain point, autobiography should be monitored by the reader who can curb her regression in order to fully experience the referentiality of a self-narrative.* (SCHMITT 2017, p. 97)

Clearly, the same question applies to history: What is the point if it (only) creates a 'fictional' experience for us? And if one accepts that 'doing' history indeed has a referential purpose, then the same kind of self-monitoring should be expected of readers when they read histories. Readers should not immerse themselves in history writing to the extent that their reading experience (the 'phenomenology' of the reading) is dictated exclusively by the text. But, to return to Schmitt:

To go back to autobiography, it is then my contention that immersion neutralizes the referential potential of this narrative modality, and as already stated, without this referential branching out, autobiography does not make any generic sense. An autobiographical pact is not enough: it simply is a plea on the part of authors, a desperate invitation to read them as they want to be read, as they intended to while they were writing their texts. The best autobiographers can do is leave blatant paratextual traces and hope for the best: that the reader will agree not to *lose sight of them*. (SCHMITT 2017, p. 97)

Schmitt does not see all this happening without some kind of empathy. The reader needs to be empathic — and respectful, perhaps, in the tradition of Buber and Levinas — to the lived experience of the author. It should be remembered, however, that Schmitt is speaking explicitly about self-narratives. And because self-narratives involve a more direct communication

(because, that is, at least ostensibly the experience and reality to be communicated reside with the author), self-interruptions and empathy also have a different objective. To 'see' or 'hear' the other.<sup>9</sup>

When, as in the case of history, the situations and events are not connected with the author, postulating this same dynamic becomes more difficult, however. The experiences described are not the historian's own and there is no parallel to the privileged position or 'access' of an autobiographical writer. So, if we were to choose to try to look behind the presentation at the author in the manner suggested by Schmitt for autobiography, we would still remain many times removed from the actual stuff of the 'historical' realities that constitute the object of a historical representation. (Once again: this is not intended as a comment about the *factual* standing of a description, but rather to point out that there is no additional 'experiential' privilege involved in historical representations that we can be called on to respect as part of the communication, as in autobiography through acknowledging the figure and life of the author.) Given this, it may well be the case that the experiential break between historical subjects and the historian's work is too significant to 'overlook' in the same way as the more immediate textual processes between author and reader.

What makes the 'historical' experience personal to us is not, then, as much the recognition of the subject's experiences and reality (that is to say, not our 'communication' with subjects from the past) as it is the recognition of the storytelling skills and power of the historian-author, coupled with our complicity in the game of history writing and reading. The historian's ability to evoke emotional effects in us is not based in the same way on the *reality* of the objects of representation but, instead, rests on the mutual agreement to proceed together in this conceit in a self-aware way, recognizing the twofold fictioning required. This is not to say that our belief in the existence of the objects and events plays no part, of course, only that it too is part of the game.

9 - Here, in connection with autobiography, it is easy to see how the Levinasian idea of the face-to-face can be helpful. For an attempt to extend this possibility to history, see FROEYMAN 2016.

## Conclusion

So, what does this all amount to? What could it mean for thinking about history and for the ways in which we theorize historical practice? If we accept that the opposition of the straw-figures of 'only language' and 'direct experience' are at logger-heads in an irresolvable way, the obvious course would be to try to rethink these attitudes in more sophisticated ways — ways which are, in fact, already present in much of the underlying philosophical and theoretical traditions, and which can assist in elaborating on the details of the relation between 'narrativity' and 'experience.' The worst thing that we can do is accept their presentation as mutually exclusive and ally with one at the expense of the other.

To be sure, reality is 'present'; but it is always mediated in multiple ways even in 'immediate' sensory experience, let alone writing. So, because referential writing is still writing — because, that is, it is constructed, fictioned, rhetorical, poetic, and so on — its referential commitments are vulnerable, and it needs to (strategically) curb its fantastic and immersive tendencies. Here, pursuing 'materiality' may offer useful insights for rethinking historical practice, particularly if we examine it in terms of the *communication* of that materiality on at least the three levels indicated.

Important, then, is attending to reference, *first*, in the fundamental terms of language interacting with reality, particularly through embodiment. While this is a difficult issue and does not necessarily need to be theorized to a great extent for purposes of history writing, existing theoretical elaborations can aid in analyzing actual text production. Fortunately, history writing has additional strengths to help remind of its referentiality. These result from the 'agreement' or understanding that its production and consumption involve an attempt to communicate truthfully about reality. Hence, *second*, we should give due consideration to the textual interruptions effected by referential materials and strategies — the resistant,

residual 'materiality' resulting from the historian's promise. The writer's commitment to facts interrupts semiotic meaning-making processes and, consequently, the text incorporates interruptions to its 'literariness.' Ideally, these could take the form of polyphony, lack of formal closure, expressed doubts, elaboration of alternative possibilities, recognition of the contingency of events as well as irony concerning representational practices. But they will also obviously include straightforward extra-textual markers such as generic labeling, references, notes, and so forth.

*Third*, we should explore strategies that help readers read for reference and refuse immersion (this is the point at which the writer's commitments are actualized, after all). Readers usually *do* ascertain the commitments of a text correctly and can self-interrupt to keep their side of the referential agreement. But, in cases where readers may prefer immersion (such as when reading more popular accounts of commonly romanticized periods or events, for instance), historians are faced with a harder challenge. We may want to persuade readers out of immersive attitudes by changing our representational strategies and reinforcing the material connection in the text (by increasing complexity, inducing confusion, appealing to disruptive embodied experiences, and so on). But 'felt,' personal relevance can always be achieved by either route and our specific emphasis ultimately depends on subjective preferences and level of historical-mindedness.

What needs to be remembered is that 'presence' and 'reality' cannot save us, in themselves, or subdue the poetic dimension of language. They cannot, in the end, prevent the kind of 'fictionalization' and immersive opportunities outlined even by simplified 'narrativism,' for example, from taking place. There is always sufficient overlap between fictional and referential texts for the readers of referential ones to ignore connections to reality if they wish. And perhaps, at times, they do so even when they have not expressly willed it: language is seductive and — *almost by default through being readers* —

our imagination is engaged, leading us to more easily welcome immersion. Ideally, however, this dynamic hands responsibility over to the reader: we can try to read for 'understanding' others and hence for reality *and* we can read for pleasure and perhaps some deeper awareness of the human condition.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND INFORMATION

Kalle Pihlainen 

kalle.pihlainen@utu.fi  
Tallinn University  
Estonia

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