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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SANTA CRUZ

**NARRATIVE PHILOSOPHY OF  
HISTORY. AN EPISTEMIC  
APPROACH**

A dissertation submitted in partial  
satisfaction of the requirements for the  
degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

PHILOSOPHY

by

**Mariana Imaz-Sheinbaum**

September 2021

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Professor Ethan Kleinberg

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Title: *Narrative Philosophy of History. An Epistemic Approach*

Name: Mariana Imaz-Sheinbaum

*Abstract*

This dissertation seeks to vindicate the place that narrative has in historiography and recognize the rational components that are involved in narrative construction. The first chapter of this dissertation develops a novel account of some of the cognitive principles that are involved in narrative construction. One of the central aims of this chapter is to challenge the long-standing idea that narratives do not entail any rational or logical structure. I argue that the principles of organization brought to light by the Gestalt school of experimental psychology illuminate the principles underlying an organizational logic that historians engage in when constructing a narrative.

Having developed an account of the “principles of narrative reason” in Chapter 1, I turn in Chapter 2 to the challenge presented by the multiplicity of interpretations in history. An answer to this challenge needs to explain the persistence of the diversity in historiography while maintaining epistemic standards. Chapter 2 first examines two attempted answers to this phenomenon. I argue that neither offers a

satisfactory resolution. By developing a Wittgenstenien notion of *aspect perception* I provide a novel account of aspects as applied to the case of historical explanation, one that yields a more philosophically satisfactory answer to the “diversity problem.”

Finally, the last chapter of this dissertation sketches a normative epistemic account of historiography. For although there exist multiple ways of understanding a particular event, we can nonetheless identify criteria that can guide us in deciding which narrative is better than another. I argue that three prevailing normative accounts of historiography (realist, antirealist and the tripartite theory of justification account) all prove unsuccessful in providing a good normative framework. My positive account is inspired by the works of Catherine Elgin and Alva Noë. Particularly, by Elgin’s notion of *understanding*—in opposition to knowledge— and Noë’s conception of *reorganization* in artistic creation. I conclude this dissertation by suggesting an important link between aesthetics and historiography. One that recognizes the value of *reorganization* and *understanding* as central to the epistemic significance of these disciplines.

## *Introduction*

This dissertation has three central chapters that aim, as a whole, to recognize the importance of narrative in historical explanations and understand the cognitive principles that underly narrative construction. By doing so, I aim to provide a novel account of the importance of narrative in historical explanations. Furthermore, this dissertation is also an effort to understand the connections between the underlying psychological tenants that narrative entails and how that informs the construction of historiography. In this sense, my work aims at reconnecting psychology and epistemology by recognizing how certain psychological principles are in charge of creating meaning about the past. Thus, my project fits contemporary debates in the field of philosophy of history but also in field of epistemology more generally.

Moreover, these three chapters can also be seen as a response to two central positions that are current in the field of philosophy of history. The first position is the *postnarrativist position* held by J-M Kuukkanen that argues in favor of a new conception of historical explanations. According to his view, we should move beyond narrative and

understand historical explanations as rational hypotheses that historians seek to defend. The suggestion according to Kuukkanen is that “historiography is about reasoning for some theses and that the main contribution of a work of history is to provide an informal argument for or against a given thesis.” He goes on to argue that for the “narrativist, the historian is a kind of descriptive storyteller” rather than a “critical reasoner.”<sup>1</sup> The first thing that is noticed about Kuukkanen’s position is the division that he makes between narrative and rational practice. This division is not necessarily new. The history of this separation between narrative and rationality can be traced to a long tradition in historiography that saw narrative as a literary practice that needed to be purged in order for history to be a genuine science. In the second half of the twentieth century, for example, the French Annales school and one of its most acclaimed defenders, Fernand Braudel, argued against narrative—seen as a chronological description of singular events—in favor of a *long durée* that privileged quantification and statistical methods.<sup>2</sup> The idea was to foreground a deep temporal

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<sup>1</sup> Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015 p. 66-67.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 67.

structure that historians had ignored and leave in the background the day-to-day life of historical agents. Narrative was taken to be a practice that not only described a type of history that needed to be reconceptualized, but also one that failed to portray the scientific side of the historical practice. Differently from Kuukkaken, the Annales school thought that history could be made a social science by having statistical truths and methodological assurance. Kuukkanen does not share this aim for history. His efforts are not to be understood as trying to compare history with the social sciences and reclaim a science-like status for the former. But similarly to the Annales school, there is a sense in which narratives are simply not the right fit for historical explanations because they lack rational structure. For Kuukkanen, narratives are seen as simply describing one event after another without any sort of cognitive or epistemic sequencing. This dissertation will show how narrative has an underlying cognitive structure that will prove to be central in validating narrative as a cognitive instrument.

The second view that this dissertation responds to is what has been called historical realism. This type of philosophy of history takes many

forms and different commitments depending on what they are holding to be “real”. We can recognize a type of realism that, for example, holds on to the “realness of the past”. The central claim here is that the past has a certain structure that is defined even before historians get involved and once they are involved, they can re-present the unique and unchangeable meaning that the past contains. In a way there is structure of fact and/or of meaning that is independent of the historian but which can be discovered/recovered through an examination of the sources.

The historian G. R. Elton, for example, argues in *The practice of History* that “the study of history amounts to a search for the truth.” The historian’s “subject matter is to a remarkable extent *quite independent of him* [...] the subject of his investigation is outside his control. He cannot escape the first condition of his enterprise, which is that the matter he investigates has a dead reality independent of the enquiry.”<sup>3</sup> What Elton confirms here is a type of realism that holds on to the reality of the past as being independent of and beyond the control of the historian. Furthermore, Elton also affirms that

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<sup>3</sup> G.R Elton, *The practice of history*, Sydney University Press 1967, p.52-53.

the task of the historian is to understand the past, and if the past is to be understood it must be given full respect on its own right [...] historian studying the past is concerned with the later event only insofar as it throws light on the part of the past that he is studying. It is a cardinal error to reverse this process and study the past for the light it throws on the present.<sup>4</sup>

What Elton argues against here is a type of “presentism” in historical research. Elton pushes back against the conception that the past should be “in service” of the present and that it is modified according to the inquiries and motivations of the historian. Because the past has a reality that is prior to the historian, the past should only be studied for the sake of the past, not for the sake of how it illuminates the present. For authors such as Elton, “only questions that interested past authors or their readers—that is, questions from their world—are permissible.” If historians allowed their own inquiries to intrude that would only mess with the objectivity and the search for truth. As an example of this, Elizabeth Clark regrettably recognized that Elton even lamented the “corruption” of historical writing by “strident” feminist historians—a result of their “bigoted idleness.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Idem, p. 47-48

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, p.21.

A contemporary effort that preserves the idea that the past should be understood “historically”, that is through the concepts and categories of the historical agents, can also be found in the recent revival of the work of R.G Collingwood. Thinkers such as Giuseppina D’Oro and Jonas Ahlskog argue that,

[...] while understanding agents who are long dead and cannot be engaged in a live conversation poses additional obstacles, it is not a task that is different in kind from that of understanding other people in general (cf. Collingwood 1993, 219). To avoid misunderstanding past agents, *historians, just like travellers to faraway lands, should acquaint themselves with the beliefs and social customs of the period they are studying, rather than try and extrapolate from those of their own culture.*<sup>6</sup>

Although D’Oro and Ahlskog claim that their view and for that matter Collingwood’s view is not a “naïve realist” one, one can evidently see that the central claim here is identical to that which Elton makes. The historian ought to utilize the concepts of the past as they “were meant to be” to speak about the past. The historian should be able to submerge herself in the beliefs and costumes of past agents that are

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<sup>6</sup> Giuseppina D’Oro and Jonas Ahlskog, “Historical Imagination and Revision”, forthcoming, 2021, p.8. (my emphasis)

no longer here. It is as if the historian should be an anthropologist doing field work. The commitment here is that the field work actually exists, and the historian can and should be immersed in it to re-produce the *spirit of the age*.

The imposition of modern concepts or frameworks of understanding seem to go against what the historian needs to do. For the categories that are relevant to understanding past agents are those of the agents themselves, “not those of the historian.”<sup>7</sup> This reveals a type of realism that is committed to unveiling a reality that is prior to the organization and frameworks of understanding that the historian uses to grasp the past. If this is true, then feminist histories or Marxist frameworks could not be used to understand the past because the agents that lived in certain times had neither the concept of feminism nor the concept of proletariat for that matter.

This type of realism ends up excluding a multiplicity of histories that provide the past with new conceptualizations and understandings that allows us to illuminate aspects that the historical agents were not necessarily aware of. Furthermore, it commits itself to a

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<sup>7</sup> *Idem*.

methodological approach of the past in which the historian needs to detach herself from all of her concepts and frameworks of understanding to purely grasp the concepts of the past.

My dissertation consists of three chapters that target the postnarrative philosophy of history and the type of realism just described. In chapter one I develop an account that explains the cognitive processes that go into narrative construction. My work aims at understanding the underlying structure that allows the historian to give meaning to the past. I take the principles of organization of space used by the Gestalt school of experimental psychology and apply them to classic historiographical narratives. I examine Marx's introduction of the concept of surplus value, Vico's *Autobiography*, Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance*, Koselleck's *Futures Past*, E.P Thompson's *The making of the English working class*, and finally Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages*. My analysis shows that narrative entails its own kind of explanatory structure. It proves to be *a way of thinking* that provides with meaning and structure to what is otherwise unstructured and undetermined. The principles of organization show how experience is

organized into a systematic whole by imposing a structure of meaning onto it.

Louis Mink remarked that narrative turns events into stories, but he actually left open how exactly this transformation takes place. This first chapter answers such question by recognizing that narrative is, in fact, a cognitive instrument because it imposes organization and therefore meaning to what is otherwise unstructured and unorganized. In other words, these principles prove to be an epistemic tool that allow us to give meaning to the past, they are the epistemic apparatus that intertwines events to transform them into a story. In this sense, one can recognize a “naturalized” effort in my work because I aim at reconnecting certain psychological processes to epistemology. In other words, I aim to show how certain psychological tenants are indispensable for knowing and giving meaning to the past.

Furthermore, what these principles of organization ultimately show is that the historian does not detect a structure in the sources but rather imposes an order to the occurrences that she is studying. This challenge both the posnarrativist thesis and the form of realism described above because it claims that there are in fact cognitive

structures that are involved in narrative construction. This also suggests that the cognitive structures are not detected in the sources. Rather they are an unavoidable imposition. On the account defended here, the historian imposes a certain type of organization to the sources and, in turn, this organization gives a particular meaning to the past. Organization proves to be a key concept here because it allows us to recognize that the mind of the historian performs an action—a meaning making action—that provides with structure and meaning to what is otherwise a chaotic figureless puzzle.

In this same vein, a second contribution of this dissertation has to do with understanding why historians can give many different interpretations, structures and organizations to the past. In other words, why is it that so many puzzles can be created with the same pieces? As mentioned before, chapter one recognizes the organizing structure that the historian imposes to give meaning to what is otherwise unstructured and disorganized. Chapter two takes these principles as a whole and recognizes that the way these principles can be used respond to a particular framework that historians engage with to make sense of the sources. I name this framework aspects.

In Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, he recognizes that there are certain ambiguous images that can be seen in many different ways. He was puzzled about this phenomenon and named it *aspect perception*. For Wittgenstein there were different ways that certain images could be seen depending on how a picture was organized. He recognized that sometimes what we see depends on our previous concepts and ideas and how we impose that onto unclear stimulus. Providing with organization and interpretation are two of the central features that the queer phenomenon of aspect perception entails.

In chapter two I make use of the features of organization and interpretation and argue that historians impose aspects to the past. These aspects entail a particular way of organizing and interpreting the sources. For example, if a historian wishes to give a feminist interpretation of the French Revolution, she will use this aspect or framework to bring to the foreground certain events, leave in the background others and take completely out of the picture particular occurrences. Historical aspects are a way that the principles of organization work to *focus* a particular interpretation about the past. Certain historians can decide to bring to the fore a feminist

interpretation of the French Revolution while others one can decide to tell the history of France as an entity that went through a particular process. What I argue in chapter two is that just as Wittgenstein suggested with certain ambiguous pictures, the past is also ambiguous, and one can choose to portray many different meanings about it. This explains why we have so many different interpretations regarding the same historical event. That is, chapter two embraces pluralism regarding historical narratives and makes evident the particular psychological process that explains such pluralism.

As previously stated, historians have different frameworks, or aspects, that allow them to convey particular and different stories from the same set of information. This insight is important because it recognizes that the past is *open* for interpretation and that one does not detect meanings *in* the sources, rather one imposes meaning to them. Additionally, the idea of aspects also allows us to understand that by foregrounding certain events and deciding which ones make it into the

narrative, historians are making decisions about the type of story that wish to tell.<sup>8</sup>

In this second chapter I look into an account held by Frank Ankersmit that tries to explain the diversity about the past by also applying to the concept of aspects. Nevertheless, for Ankersmit these *aspects* are not something that the historian uses to interpret and organize the sources, rather they are features of the past itself that are still present in our current days. We can find them in the archives and in the vestiges that the past has in the present. The historian simply chooses which one of these aspects will take part in her narrative. Nevertheless, as Ethan Kleinberg holds, even when Ankersmit is deeply critical of conventional historical scholarship, his emphasis “on the material presence of the past in the here and now is strangely similar to that of the ontological realist approach insofar as both are predicated in the logic of presence.”<sup>9</sup> At the end of the day, Ankersmit claims that one can portray Napoleon as a traitor, a hero or a megalomaniac because these were all attributes that the historical figure had and are still

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<sup>8</sup> Adrian Currie & Kirsten Walsh, “Frameworks for historians and philosophers”, *HOPOS*, forthcoming, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History*, Stanford University Press, 2017, p. 3.

noticeable in the present. But to claim that entails that the past is still present, and the job of the historian is simply to detect and *re-present* that presence. Ankersmit fails to recognize that it is the mind and the circumstances of the historian that give meaning and choose to articulate a narrative in terms of traitor, hero or megalomaniac.

One of the underlying arguments in chapters one and two is the importance of the imposition of a certain organization onto the sources and how that conveys a particular understanding about the past. In these chapters we recognize the epistemological effort that the principles of organization and aspects entail to provide the sources with meaning. In short, they are a cognitive activity that transforms events into stories by the imposition of a meaning-making structure. An important idea to recognize here is that what we are taking as the central activity of the historian is precisely this transformation from events into stories.

This is precisely why chapter three makes clear that an evaluation process about multiple interpretations regarding the same event needs to take into account the meaning-making activity rather than the number of facts that historians decide to put into their narrative. In

other words, because what is important to recognize is the meaning-making structure, we need an evaluative account that can bring us a step closer in recognizing which types of aspects are better than others in organizing and giving meaning to the sources. Chapter three provides a framework for how to evaluate these meaning making aspects.

Because historians have different concerns and ways to impose a multitude of aspects upon the past, this dissertation embraces pluralism regarding the possibilities that historians have to frame occurrences with. But there might be cases where alternative histories are mutually exclusive. One cannot have two contradictory interpretations about the same event without asking, which one is better? *This question brings to the foreground the need for a normative account in historiography.* In other words, we need an account that can answer how can we evaluate different interpretations of the past? Do all of them have the same value? Are there better narratives than others? Or to frame the question in a slightly different light: Are there better aspects than others? The work of Hayden White left this question open inasmuch as he never talked about any epistemic criterion that we

could use to evaluate one narrative over another. This is precisely the task of my third chapter. To do so I first recognize the efforts of Kuukkanen and his tri-partite theory of justification. But I show that on a number of ground that his account is problematic and that we need a new understanding of epistemic evaluation. To accomplish such task, I utilize works by Alva Noë and Catherine Elgin to argue for an epistemic criterion that takes the concept of reorganization and understanding at its center.

The idea here is that the historian always organizes the material in a certain way, we have already made that clear in chapter one and two. But what comes out in chapter three is the importance of *reorganizing* the material in a new and insightful ways that can challenge prevailing paradigms—or organizations— in history and improve our understanding about certain events. In other words, there are better ways to focus interpretations about certain events about the past than others. Historians foreground certain things and leave in the background others to highlight a particular story that they wish to tell. I argue that successful historical accounts will be able to recognize prevailing ways in which certain histories have always been told.

Reorganization should be evaluated depending on new and interesting ways that it expands our way of seeing and understanding certain events. Again, it is not by collecting more facts or filling in the narrative with more scrutinized detail. Rather, it is by choosing what framework of understanding can allow us to rethink and expand our classical and traditional ways of thinking. I take this to be, as Alva Noë suggests in *Strange Tools*, a reorganizing aesthetic activity that has an epistemic nature to it. As choreography does with dancing, new aspects in history bring into the open something that is concealed, hidden, implicit, or left in the background. A good historical narrative, I will argue, aims at reorganizing our thinking. It seeks to provide new and insightful ways of understanding the relationship between events that challenge our previous and default assumptions about such events. By doing so we learn to investigate ourselves and incorporate new ways of understanding.

To show how this plays out I take the classic example of the discovery of America and compare two existing narratives that portray Columbus' actions in radically different ways. I ultimately argue that the account that gives us new frameworks that allow us to question

prevailing paradigms and further our understanding is epistemically better. By this I do not mean to answer every question regarding normativity in history, I simply mean to show that this can be a route that can allow us to start answering the normativity question in history. Finally, my view focuses on which framework of organization allows us to expand our understanding about the world, and in particular about the past.

## *I. Principles of Narrative Reason*

Abstract:

J.M. Kuukkanen has posed the thesis that narrative does not involve rational content. Rather, on his account narrative is only a descriptive practice consisting of singular statements. Kuukkanen thus ends up divorcing the rational and narrative frameworks, arguing that historiography belongs to the former and not the latter.

This chapter aims to establish a new conceptual framework that provides a revised understanding of *narratives as a rational practice*. I argue that the principles of organization brought to light by the Gestalt school of experimental psychology illuminate the principles underlying an organizational logic that historians engage in when constructing a narrative. To illustrate how these principles operate in historical narratives, and how they prove to be rational, I examine classic historical works such as Marx's introduction of the concept of surplus value; Vico's *Autobiography* and Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance*; Koselleck's *Futures Past*, E.P Thompson's *The making of the English working class*, and finally Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages*. My analysis shows that narrative entails its own kind of explanatory

structure. It proves to be *a way of thinking* that provides with meaning and structure to what is otherwise unstructured and undetermined. Finally, my new framework provides an outline on which to base the rational evaluation of narratives by showing how the context of discovery and the context of justification cannot be parsed apart in the case of narrative histories.

## 1. Introduction

In current debates regarding the nature of historical explanation we face two different approaches. One has been labeled *representationalism* and the other *non-representationalism*. According to Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, within representationalism we can clearly distinguish two central figures: Frank Ankersmit and Hayden White. White's remarkable revolution exposed the similarity between historiography and literature, while Ankersmit appropriated White's view in order to develop a comparison between historiography and the visual arts. Kuukkanen notes that both Ankersmit and White –although less so

the latter– are closer to modern historiography than has been recognized.<sup>10</sup>

Both authors play the realist “language game” in which the historian’s task is to “mirror”, “copy”, “symbolize” or “re-present” an ontologically existing past. The mistake that Kuukkanen notices is that both White and Ankersmit commit to the idea that the past exists before any representational act and that such representational act needs to be presented in a realistic form.<sup>11</sup> He argues that “although White thus regards the dream of copying the object [the past] in the historian’s language as impossible to realize, he nevertheless hesitates in taking a step further and denouncing that the object is forever unreachable.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, in the case of White, Kuukkanen recognizes that the copy theory of representation is rejected, but there is still a compromise with a “middle voice” that reassures the subject-object dichotomy. Furthermore, the subsequent mistake that specially

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<sup>10</sup> Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, New York, Palgrave macmillan, 2015, 32

<sup>11</sup> Kuukkanen argues that White’s suggestion of a middle voice seeks to “describe (real) historical events through our own experiences. It is remarkable that White still wishes to cling to the idea of realistic representation.” *Ibid*, 33

<sup>12</sup> *Idem*.

Ankersmit is guilty of is the reliance on narrative as a medium for *presenting again* such existing past. Even when Ankersmit aims to change the understanding of representation into a three-place relationship, Kuukkanen argues that the core statement is still “to make the past present” in the form of an aspect. Thus, Kuukkanen contends that narrativists such as White and Ankersmit, view the historian as a “descriptivist storyteller” that *re-presents* events set in another place and time. His main claim is that the historian, seen within this perspective, does not really engage in rational activity while creating a narrative.

Kuukkanen’s proposal of non-representationalism aims to reject the first ontological compromise that representationalism commits to, viz., that of the existence of a historical past. And secondly, he wants to move away from the idea of narrative as the central activity that historians engage with. Towards this end, Kuukkanen sharply distinguishes between the rationality and narrative as frameworks for histories. The first is responsible for constructing theses to justify conclusions by recognized patterns of inference. *Historiography* as Kuukkanen conceives of it is the study of practices that provides argumentative support for a thesis, and so belongs to this first kind.

Narrative, on the other hand, does not necessarily involve considerations relating to rationality. Rather it simply concerns the form of a set of descriptions of singular events. Therefore, Kuukkanen chooses to move beyond narrative (thus his postnarrativist suggestion) to explain what historiography is, how it formulates explanations and so identify the mechanisms for evaluating competing interpretations.

But what if we can provide a view which not only holds onto the non-existence of the ontological past but also argues that narrative is in fact a rational practice? This chapter aims to uncover some of the basic cognitive and ultimately rational principles involved in the construction of a narrative. I argue that the principles of organization brought to light by the Gestalt school of experimental psychology in fact illuminate the principles underlying the logical of the processes that historians engage in when constructing a narrative. This, in turn, will allow us to explain how historiography formulates explanations<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Explanation and understanding were traditionally taken to be contrastive views that aimed to differentiate the role of the natural and human sciences. Explanation was taken to be about causal or nomic relations and so appropriate to the natural sciences. Understanding however was “idiographic,” providing non-generalizable contextual perspectives and so what the human sciences strived for. Be that as it may, this essay will not be

and by doing so point to a previously unappreciated normative framework for evaluation.

One of the central debates within philosophy of history is that of the nature of historical explanations. A particular focus of this debate has been the intrinsic role that narrative plays in the construction of these explanations. But what exactly are we to understand as a narrative? How is it that historians construct them? What does this process of construction look like? Does it involve a cognitive—rationally evaluable—capacity?

To start answering some of these concerns let us go back to Louis Mink's classic essay, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument". In it, Mink defines narrative as a form of human comprehension that is productive of meaning by its imposition of a certain formal coherence on a virtual chaos of events.<sup>14</sup> He argues that the transformation of events into stories endows narrative with cognitive content. Thus,

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invested in this traditional distinction. Rather, I will focus on the cognitive operations that inform the construction of a narrative and how that conveys meaning to certain events and occurrences. This argument aims to be set at a prior stage than that of the distinction between explanation and understanding.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Mink, "Narrative Form as a cognitive instrument", in G. Roberts ed. *The History and Narrative Reader*, London-New York Routledge, 2001, 211-220.

Mink recognizes that the creation of a narrative structure involves some sort of cognitive activity that transforms scattered and otherwise disorganized events into a coherent whole. Nevertheless, Mink's insightful analysis leaves two important questions: 1) how exactly is it that this transformation, from distinct events into stories, takes place and, 2) what are the cognitive principles that inform the construction of a narrative?

In trying to answer the first issue we can identify two different attempts that take the concept of "organization" as key in bridging the gap between events and stories. Commonly, 'organization' refers to the process of bringing together parts into wholes to comprehend, as Mink puts it, "the world as a totality"<sup>15</sup>. Generally, the two types of organization that are common in the philosophy of history literature are 1) the classic Aristotelian format of beginning, middle and end<sup>16</sup>, and 2) the causal account that argues that through a constructive sequence of related occurrences we provide events with meaning.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Louis Mink, "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension" in *New Literary History*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Spring 1970, 549.

<sup>16</sup> Some defenders of this view are Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur, F.R. Ankersmith, and David Carr.

<sup>17</sup> Some defenders of this view are Noël Carroll, M.C. Lemon, and G. Currie.

Although there are many different positions to be found within each of these accounts and among each other, they all engage with the difficult task of providing an answer to how stories are constructed. Nevertheless, it is rare that either of these accounts engages with the second issue that Mink left us with, namely, what are the cognitive principles if any informing the process of transforming events into stories.

Perhaps one of the unique and remarkable answers this issue is the classic Whitean proposal of *tropes*. White argues that the historian, as any other prose writer, *fashions* her materials in a certain way. White answers Mink's first gap by arguing that this *fashionable* activity "transforms the events from the meaninglessness of their serial arrangement in a chronicle into a hypothetically arranged structure of occurrences about which meaningful questions (what, where, when, how, and why) can be asked."<sup>18</sup> He goes on to say that the process of transformation is *poetical* in nature. White answers Mink's second gap by claiming that if one wants to comprehend what goes into the

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<sup>18</sup> Hayden White, "Historicism, History and the Figurative Imagination", *History and Theory*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Dec., 1975, 59.

composition of a story, it is this *poetical structure*, rather than the logical one, that one needs to pay attention to.<sup>19</sup> By claiming that the poetical structure is the relevant one, White's proposal ends up divorcing the poetical (or rhetorical) and the logical components of a narrative. In other words, his argument sides with the idea that there is no rational or logical component in artistic creation. This becomes a problem in historical narratives because if there is no logical or rational structure that guides the construction of a narrative, then, as Roth maintains<sup>20</sup>, White promotes a position in which the rational evaluation of a narrative becomes impossible.

My account aims to give another answer to the unresolved double-issue that Mink left open. Unlike White, my account will concentrate on the rational or logical component of historical narratives. I argue that there is a key concept that needs to be discussed with further insight, precisely that of organization. I suggest that the principles of organization of Gestalt psychology can illuminate the constructive process of historical explanations and provide a novel account of how

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Roth, "Hayden White and the Aesthetics of Historiography" *History of the Human Sciences*, no.5, (1992)

exactly the transformation from events into stories takes place. Furthermore, by establishing an analogy between the principles of perceptual organization and narrative, we come closer in understanding the cognitive elements that the construction of a narrative involves. Thus, this chapter will concentrate on the principles of organization that historians employ in order to construct narratives and in a way that makes explicit their cognitive components.

Part one explains the principles of organization in visual perception and argues that these principles represent, in fact, a cognitive capacity that we use to make sense of our experience of the world. *By characterizing a capacity as cognitive, I mean that these principles make experience intelligible by fitting it into a systematic understanding of the world.* In this case, the Gestalt principles entail the cognitive capacity of constructing knowledge of space by organizing parts into wholes and the ability to find coherent structure in what “gives meaning” to perceptual experience. Systematicity will prove key to rational evaluability.

In part two I argue that the same thing happens with time and narrative. *We construct knowledge of past experiences by organizing parts into wholes, thereby giving meaning to otherwise scattered and disconnected experiences.*

To illustrate this, I map the principles of spatial organization onto historical explanations. The principles that I will engage with are the principles of foreground/background, continuity, proximity/similarity, and closure. These principles are what I call the *organizing base ground* for constructing a narrative explanation. They not only allow us to construct knowledge about space, but they also allow us to construct knowledge about past experiences, and therefore, time. Finally, in the third and last section, I sketch some of the payoffs of this account. The first payoff that I point out to is that by understanding and making explicit the process of construction of a narrative, historians can use this account to become aware of what lays at the base of their explanations and, therefore, use it to recognize and reflect on ways that could improve their narratives. *In other words, this account is not only to be understood as describing the process that historians engage with, but can potentially become a prescriptive account that enables the enhancement of historical explanations.* The second payoff that I sketch out is that these principles not only allow us to describe the process of narrative construction, but they also allow us to recognize that narratives are *products*. This means that these principles allow us to recognize

narratives as end results or, to use a metaphoric expression, as *ways of seeing*. Understanding narratives as *products* is to understand them as wholes that frame events, occurrences, and experiences in a particular and unique way. I suggest that appreciating narratives as *products* can help us explain the multiplicity of historical interpretations and guide us in understanding –and give a normative account– of narrative-evaluation.

## 2. Gestalt Principles

At the beginning of the twentieth century, under the term ‘Gestalt’, which is usually translated as “whole-form” or “configuration”, the Berlin school established a series of principles that referred to how it is that we structure into meaningful features certain observational stimuli. Alongside the discrimination of Foreground and Background, the principles of Continuity, Proximity/Similarity and Closure were recognized as basic features of our visual perception.

I begin with a brief description and some visual examples<sup>21</sup> of these principles and their main features and then explain the relevance of this particular organizational structure to historical explanations.

- 1) *Discrimination between Foreground and Background*. Köhler maintained that in most visual fields, the contents of certain areas just “belong together” so that we have bounded units before us from which surrounding elements are excluded.<sup>22</sup> As Köhler notes:

When I look at the desk before me I find quite a number of circumscribed units which appear detached and segregated in the field: a piece of paper as against the surface of the desk, a pencil, a cigarette, and so forth. In all these cases there are two mutually dependent conditions. The existence of a unit involves its segregations from its surroundings.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The first image that explains the principle of Figure and Ground is taken from Baingio Pinna, Adam Reeves, et al, “A new principle of figure-ground segregation: The accentuation”, *Vision Research*, February 2018. Images for the second, third and fourth principles are taken from I. Rock and S. Palmer “The legacy of Gestalt psychology” *Scientific American*, December, 1990.

<sup>22</sup> Wolfgang Köhler, “Human perception” in *Selected papers of W. Köhler*, translated by Mary Henle, New York, Liveright, 1971, p.148.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

The distinction here leaves vague the process of segregation of figure and ground. In a recent article, Pinna, Reeves, et.al<sup>24</sup> try to develop this distinction and suggest that there is an element of “accentuation” or focus that helps to distinguish what we characterize as figure. They argue that one seems to *choose* to see one segment and segregate it over another. I emphasize the word *choose* because, although the Gestalt school did not really expand on this idea, we can suggest that one of the keys to defining and distinguishing figure from ground has to do with some sort of voluntary focus that enables us to “bring forward” certain stimuli over others. This, they claim, involves the very definition of ‘shape’ or figure as a unity that is different and distinguishable from what surrounds that shape.

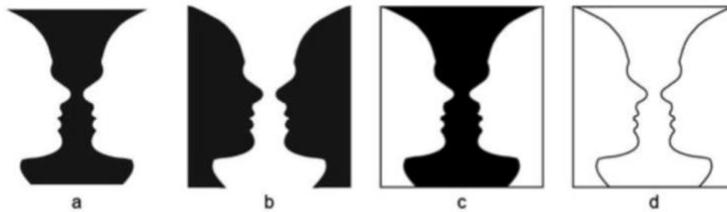


Figure 1. One sees either a vase or two faces. When one chooses to see the vase the faces disappear. The vase becomes the figure and the faces the background. The same thing goes when one chooses to see as figure the faces and as background the vase.

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<sup>24</sup> Baingio Pinna, Adam Reeves, et. al, “A new principle of figure-ground segregation: The accentuation”, in *Vision Research*, February 2018.

- 2) *Principle of Continuity*: “Some things are called 'one' because of their continuity, as in the case of a curved line.”<sup>25</sup> The principle of continuity refers to the *tendency* to perceive objects that seem to have a relationship with each other as being continuous. In other words, *perception favors continuous contour or shape*, so that it is atypical to break contour in identifying the figure.

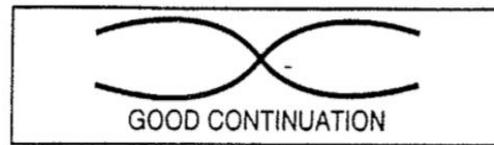


Fig.2 One tends to perceive this figure as a relationship that is held between two lines that intersect each other, not as four lines that converge at one point.

- 3) *Principle of Proximity and Similarity*: Koffka writes, “It is not so easy, however, to formulate the law of proximity. So far we have demonstrated that when the field contains a number of equal parts, those among them which are in greater proximity will be organized into a higher unit.”<sup>26</sup> The principle of proximity is the tendency to

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<sup>25</sup> D. W., Hamlyn, “Psychological Explanation and the Gestalt Hypothesis” in *Mind*, Vol. 60, No. 240, Oct. 1951, p. 514.

<sup>26</sup> Kurt Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt psychology*, London, Routledge, 1955 p. 165.

perceive objects that are close to one another as being grouped together in a meaningful way. These objects can also be perceived as proximal by their similarity, which can be achieved using basic elements such as shapes, colors, and size.

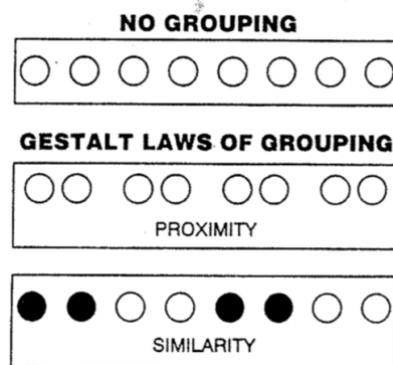
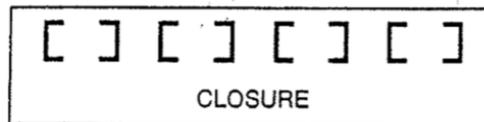


Fig.3 When the spatial positions of elements are changed, the elements are separated into groups on the basis of proximity. Elements can also be grouped by their similarity in various dimensions such as color.

- 4) Principle of Closure: “There is a tendency to close off open structures.”<sup>27</sup> Closure describes our tendency to look for unity in objects and to see lines as a single unit. Therefore, given the mere suggestion of an object, we will tend to fill in the details, in other words, we will tend to close and give an end to the figure.



<sup>27</sup> Gaetano Kanizsa, *Organization in vision: essays on gestalt perception*, New York, Praeger, 1979, p. 108.

Fig.4 This image is a clear example of the principle of closure. Although there is no closed structure, we perceive four “boxes” that confine something.

I have just outlined the Gestalt principles of organization, but why is it exactly that we are looking into these principles to find some answers in what seems to be a completely different area of interest, namely historical explanations? It is interesting to point out that the reference to Gestalt principles to explain how understanding works in other areas of knowledge is not a philosophical novelty. N.R Hanson<sup>28</sup> took the Gestalt legacy and the Wittgensteinian notion of *seeing as* to explain the phenomenon of observation in scientific research. In this same line, Thomas Kuhn<sup>29</sup>, in his well-known contribution to the philosophy of science, linked the case of paradigm shift to the Gestalt shift. In the field of anthropology, Mary Douglas<sup>30</sup> explained that our manner of signifying things as belonging to certain categories is because we culturally organize our visual field in certain ways. She explicitly

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<sup>28</sup> N.R Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1958.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1962.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, London, Routledge, 1966.

mentions the influence of Gestalt psychology in her contribution. Recently, Elisabeth Camp<sup>31</sup> in her account of “framing devices” and understanding, links her idea of “perspectives and characterizations” to Gestalt perception by arguing that applying “new characterizations” and “new framing devices” to a specific phenomenon can alter the significance that the explanation has as a whole by reorganizing basic features.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the contribution of the Berlin school did not remain confined to the field of descriptive psychology. They have been recognized to have epistemic or normative significance as well. It seems that becoming aware of the principles fosters the possibility of new choices regarding how to organize certain information. In this sense, the principles prove to be philosophically relevant by exerting normative significance

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<sup>31</sup> Elisabeth Camp, “Perspectives and Frames in Pursuit of Ultimate Understanding”, in Stephen Grimm ed., *Varieties of Understanding: New Perspectives from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Hayden White argued that tropes have a prefigurative structure that enabled the transformation from a mere chronicle into a narrative whole. This has been recognized as White’s Kantianism. In this same vein, I argue that the principles of organization are a cognitive prefigurative structure that allow us to recognize how the mind organizes experience. In this sense, there is no natural a priori structure *in the world*. Rather we impose features that allow us to make sense of it. This is why the parallelism between gestalt principles and narrative structure seems to work.

regarding the structure of what can be an object of knowledge. In other words, the notion of Gestalt organization assumes cognitive significance that helps explain phenomenon other than visual perception. Now, I will use these principles to illustrate their cognitive operation in narrative. I examine two key ideas that Gestalt psychology highlighted and analyze their cognitive significance:

1) Regularities enable us to give meaning to our surroundings. By recognizing certain patterns in the world, we are able to discriminate some stimuli over others, to understand certain parts belonging to wholes, and to *recognize* wholes as independent from other wholes. Our perception, therefore, is particularly organized, the world “does not appear to us as a collection of sensations with no meaningful connection to one another” but comes to us in a particular way, “with a spontaneous, natural, normally-expected combination and segregation of objects.”<sup>33</sup>

2) Organized perception allows us to assimilate new events in a variety of ways. The cognitive function of organization seems to

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<sup>33</sup> J. Wagemans, “Historical and conceptual background: Gestalt theory”, in *Oxford Handbook of Perceptual Organization*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 8.

guarantee that by being able to organize single kinds into wholes we create or lend inferences that secure an understanding of different experiences.

These two points become central to understanding the importance of organization in narrative. Nevertheless, there is an important difference regarding how the Gestaltists conceptualized these principles and how are we to understand them when applied to narrative. Notice that in the first point above, I use the word *recognize* to refer to the *detection* of the organization that is “in the world”. As Dinishak notes<sup>34</sup>, Köhler characterizes organization with such terms as “visual thing”, “visual reality”, and “sensory fact”. In this sense, Köhler takes organization to be a visual property akin to color or shape. These commitments provide some grounds for thinking that for Köhler organization is something that we recognize *in* the world, not something that we do *to* the world. By separating organization from any sort of cognitive or intellectual activity “he denies that the ‘original’ or ‘primary’ organization of the sensory field is the product of some

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<sup>34</sup> Janette Dinishak, *Wittgenstein and Köhler on seeing and seeing aspects: a comparative study*, PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2008, p. 30.

intellectual process that follows sensory experience.”<sup>35</sup> Dinishak remarks that this point did not go unnoticed and many commentators pointed that Köhler disregarded the fact that our descriptions of perceiving objects typically involve meaning, knowledge, or interpretation.

Leaving aside interpretive issues concerning Köhler’s stance on the role of meaning, knowledge, or interpretation in the organization of the visual field and whether organization is detected or imposed, I will argue that the grouping principles, as they operate in historical narrative construction, *do involve imposition*. The central idea here is that we organize experience with certain interpretative features and these features allow us to give meaning i.e., coherence and comprehension, to experience. In this sense, by claiming that we give intelligible structure to past experiences by *imposing* an order that is not there to be found, we retain the non-representationalist commitment that Kuukkanen deploys against the ontological realist claim.

But even further than that, the historian, who of course lacks the possibility of having any sort of access to the past as a whole, has to

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.

construct historical explanations *by imposing a narrative structure* that organizes the material and sources into an understandable and meaningful whole. This entails a process of organization and selection of what goes into the narrative. This imposition of organizational features is what allows us to give meaning not just to one kind of historical experiences, but to all of them. In other words, in order to “recreate the past” the historian must structure a narrative that constructs that which is set out to be explained (The Conquest of America, The Waning of the Middle Ages, The American Revolution) In this sense, as White so finely stated, “the authority of the historical narrative is the authority of reality itself: the historical account endows this reality with form and thereby makes it desirable, imposing upon its processes the formal coherence that only stories possess.”<sup>36</sup> *The imposition of an organization is not something that the historian has an option to do or not. It is rather an essential step that goes to the core of the historian’s endeavor.*

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<sup>36</sup> Hayden White, “The value of narrativity”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, No.1 Autumn 1980, p. 23.

### 3. Historical narratives and organization

Let us now see exactly how is it that these principles of organization are present in historical narratives. It is important to understand that these principles, which seem to be so clearly definable from one another are not that easy to separate. In theory we can set out what would seem to be the main features of each of these principles, but in practice, the work becomes a lot more complicated. *One of the reasons for this difficulty may be that there is no temporal hierarchy among them.* It is not as if we first discriminate between figure and ground to then apply the principle of continuity and follow up with the principle of proximity ending up with closure. It is more of a simultaneous occurrence, where all of the principles are in play together.

Nevertheless, I do believe that we can identify how these principles work in narrative and how they illuminate the cognitive task of the historian. To illustrate their role, I will consider Marx's introduction of the concept of surplus value to explain the centrality of the figure and ground organization; Vico's *Autobiography* and Burckhardt's classic historical work *The Civilization of the Renaissance* to explain the principle of continuity; Koselleck's *Futures Past* to illustrate the principles of

proximity/similarity and, finally both E.P Thompson's *The making of the English working class* and Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages* to explain the closure principle. It becomes clear that in these classical works the principles of organization play a fundamental role in: 1) constructing the subject matter; 2) giving an interpretation of how that subject matter came to be and how it developed; and, 3) creating a meaningful temporal whole.

### 3.1. Foreground and Background in Narrative

It has not changed, and yet I see it differently.  
L. Wittgenstein

As with visual perception, where one sees certain figures or unities rather than others, in narrative we experience the construction of a unity or figure that guides how the explanation will unfold. This central figure can be defined as the main feature that the historian chooses as the focus for her narrative. It is in a sense the leading character of the narrative. Let us say that you want to provide an account of the French Revolution, but maybe you choose as your figure women's participation in the Revolution; or the crisis and comeback of the

monarchy; or France as an entity that went through a particular process. Whatever it is that is chosen as the figure, it will influence, at the very least, the information that is selected and, consequently, the course that the narrative will follow. If the historian chooses as her figure women's participation in the French Revolution, occurrences such as the Storming of the Bastille or the conflict between Jacobins and Girondins will not necessarily be part of the central development of the narrative. These events will probably remain in the background, not playing a central role in the development of the central character. On the contrary, occurrences such as the Women's march to Versailles on October of 1789 or the consolidation of the Assembly of Republican Women in the Paris Commune and their confrontation with the Jacobins will appear as vital elements to explain the development and consolidation of the central figure of the narrative. Here is another example that can illustrate this principle even further. Friedrich Engels remarked that what constituted a fundamental novelty in Marx's formulation of surplus value was not its "discovery" but the realization that this concept needed to be placed as a central problematic in the historical development of the capitalist production.

Engels recognized that Marx's novelty was equivalent to Lavoisier "discovery" of oxygen and the foundation of modern chemistry. Contemporaries of Lavoisier, such as Priestley and Scheele, had produced oxygen before without knowing what they had actually laid their hands on. They, Engels remarks, "remained prisoners of the phlogistic categories as they came down to them. The element which was destined to upset all phlogistic views and to revolutionize chemistry remained barren in their hands." In the same vein, Engels argues that Marx established the concept of surplus value as a problem rather than a solution to a problem. This means that he placed it as the central figure of his discourse and because of that, he "developed the first rational theory of wages we have, and for the first time drew up an outline of the history of capitalist accumulation and an exposition of its historical tendency."<sup>37</sup> Surplus value became what needed explanation.

Other theorists, Engels explains, such as Ricardo and Smith recognized and talked about the existence of this "added value", but they did not

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<sup>37</sup> Friedrich Engels, Preface to the first edition of *Capital*, Translated by S. Moore and E. Aveling, London, Lawrence & Wishart 1954, p.14.

really define it as a central problem of their discourse. Rather, they defined it as a consequence of capitalist production. Engels goes on to observe that they "confused" it with its forms of existence: profit, rent, and interest. Both Smith and Ricardo explained the function and development of the capitalist system through labor theory value. By placing this as central in their proposal it allowed them to see the system as a rational one that produced wealth and value. As Ricardo stated in the first lines of the "Principals of political economy and taxation": "the value of a commodity, or the quantity of any other commodity for which it will exchange, depends on the relative quantity of labor which is necessary for its production, and not on the greater or less compensation which is paid for that labor..."<sup>38</sup> What is interesting to note from this quote is that the compensation of the worker, which is independent and less than the value of the commodities that he produces, is not something that catches Ricardo's eye. He sees it as a natural process that reflects the rationality of the system.

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<sup>38</sup> David Ricardo, *The principles of political economy and taxation*, Empiricus Books, London 2006, p. 5.

Marx, on the other hand, takes this as a central problem that needs to be explained. In *Theories of Surplus Value* Marx argues:

Adam [Smith] makes what is in substance an analysis of surplus-value, but does not present it explicitly in the form of a definite category, distinct from its special forms; he subsequently mixes it up directly with the further developed form, profit. This error persists with Ricardo and all his disciples. Hence arise (particularly with Ricardo, all the more strikingly because he works out the fundamental law of value in more systematic unity and consistency, so that the inconsistencies and contradictions stand out more strikingly) a series of inconsistencies, unresolved contradictions and fatuities, which the Ricardians (as we shall see later in the section on profit) attempt to solve with phrases in a scholastic way.<sup>39</sup>

What Marx ends up illustrating is that the capitalist mode of production is characterized by the appropriation of alien labor in the form of surplus value. He explains the way in which capitalists conduct this process of production and appropriation of surplus value, as well as the different contradictions and arrangements in the distribution of it. Thus, Marx makes plain the irrational dynamics (with a permanent tendency toward crisis and inequality) of the capitalist system.

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<sup>39</sup> Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Translated by G. A. Bonner and E. Burns, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1951, p. 130.

What we have here is an example of the consequences of placing a figure “x” of a certain subject matter as central to the narrative rather than figure “y”. The significance of *seeing* something that remained “hidden” or simply *seeing* something that was not considered to be a puzzle, has deep significance for the meaning that the narrative acquires as a whole. Ricardo and Smith didn’t notice the importance of the concept of surplus value and as a consequence, their understanding of the Capitalist system and the meaning attributed to specific moments of the development of that system were drastically different from that of Marx.

This difference in focus allows us to understand the significance and centrality that organization of foreground and background play in giving meaning to an explanation. While the capitalist system did not change its structure from Smith to Marx, they nevertheless saw the system differently. In other words, their conceptual organization reframed what they saw: Marx saw the Capitalist system as a system of exploitation rather than Smith and Ricardo that saw it as a profitable system that added value.

What is interesting to press on is that it is not as if the concepts that Marx used were not available to Smith and Ricardo. In fact, Marx made use of the prevailing concepts to talk about the capitalist system, but he nevertheless, introduced a new way of thinking about them. By reordering and placing a particular concept in the foreground he could make new inferences and therefore constructed a new framework of meaning around such a concept. In other words, it is not “the discovery” of the phenomenon of surplus value that made Marx’s account novel, but rather *the imposition* of such concept as a puzzle that needed to be solved.<sup>40</sup>

It is interesting to point out that Marx’s particular way of seeing or reasoning about capitalism became after some time autonomous from him. In other words, *his* way of seeing became *a* way of seeing. The same thing happened with Smith and Ricardo’s perspective. We call the first one Marxism and the second one neoclassic theory. As with the image of the vase and the two faces exemplified by the Gestalt

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<sup>40</sup> Hacking has a similar insight which he calls “style of reasoning”. He defines it as a framework that governs a certain way of investigating the world. He argues that a new style always brings “a new type of object, individuated using the style, *and not previously noticeable among the things that exist.*” (my emphasis) Ian Hacking, “Style for historians and philosophers” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, vol. 23, No. 1, 1992, p.1.

school -where one experiences a shift in seeing one or the other- one can also experience a shift between Marxist and neoclassic views. One can see the capitalist system as a profitable system that creates value and shifts to see it as a system of exploitation. By performing this shift, one sees a new gestalt.

Authors such as Thomas Kuhn and Hayden White previously hinted at this analogy between gestalt shifts and narrative explanations. Yet neither of them really explained the nature of “the shift”. Kuhn likened the change in the phenomenal world to the Gestalt-switch that occurs when one sees the duck-rabbit diagram first as a duck then as a rabbit. He argued that “in times of revolution, when the normal-scientific tradition changes, the scientist’s perception of his environment must be re-educated—in some familiar situations he must learn to see a new gestalt.”<sup>41</sup> In the same line of thought, Hayden White contends that “all the historian needs to do to transform a tragic into a comic situation is to shift his point of view or change the scope of his perceptions. Anyway, we only think of situations as tragic or comic

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 115.

because these concepts are part of our generally cultural and specifically literary heritage.”<sup>42</sup>

Two interesting questions arise with what has been said so far. First, why do some people see one organization over another? Is it that one organization is “more effective” in explaining certain phenomena than other, if so, how exactly are we defining “more effective”? Second, how exactly is it that particular individuals come to think of new ways of organizing and placing in the foreground elements that were left in the background?

### 3.2. Continuity in Narrative

Continuity in narrative is a necessary  
condition of its intelligibility.  
M.C. Lemon

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<sup>42</sup> Hayden White, “The historical text as a literary artifact”, *Clio*, T. 3, No 3 June 1974, p. 282.

When we tell a story it is expected for it to have a sequence, a temporal continuity that explains and relates certain experiences to each other. One might have the intuition that life itself, structured under a natural time (day and night) has already a particular order, and that, in this sense, the work of the narrator—or historian—is to present that prefigured order. Furthermore, one might also have the inclination to think that the meaning of past experiences comes prefigured and that actions are intentional independent of our description of them.

The problem with this view is that it entails a conception of the past as “still being there”, as ontologically prefigured, whereas in fact, *le passé n'est plus*. Hence, we should think of past human actions, as Ian Hacking so forcefully maintains, as being to a certain extent indeterminate.<sup>43</sup> By describing past actions we are ordering them and providing them with meaning. In short, we are transforming them from indeterminate to determinate. This description—which is not a chronicle that gives scattered dates and actions<sup>44</sup>—proves to be

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<sup>43</sup> I. Hacking, *Rewriting the soul. Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 243.

<sup>44</sup> Regarding the difference between chronicle, annals, and history: Noel Carroll *On the Narrative Connection* and Hayden White, *The value of Narrativity*.

meaningful by imposing a continuous link between past human actions.

A fundamental point to note here is that, as Arthur Danto has rightly pointed out, the particularity of any historical narrative is that it is always structured a posteriori, in other words, retrospectively. It is only after the passage of time that the historian establishes a temporal coherence between events. In this sense, “the facticity of events established ex-post is never identical with a totality of past circumstances thought as formerly real.”<sup>45</sup> The possibility of establishing a before and after that the agents of the historical events did not *see* is what characterizes the particularity of historical narratives. And this turns out to be key in understanding the principle of continuity.

To illustrate this, consider the following passage from Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*:

The struggle between the Popes and the Hohenstaufen left Italy in a political condition which differed essentially from that of other countries of the West. While in France, Spain and England the feudal system was so organized that, at the close of its

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<sup>45</sup> R. Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the semantics of historical time*, translated by Keith Tribe, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 111.

existence, it was naturally transformed into a unified monarchy, and while in Germany it helped to maintain, at least outwardly, the unity of the empire, Italy had shaken it off almost entirely [...] a new fact appears in history — the State as the outcome of reflection and calculation, the State as a work of art.<sup>46</sup>

In just one paragraph Burckhardt connects a multiplicity of occurrences: the drama between an important German dynasty of Kings and the Catholic Church; the power of organization of certain European feudal systems and how they were transformed into monarchies; the unity of the German empire and the establishment of a new political condition in Italy. These events, although dispersed in time, are organized in such a way that we see continuity between them. Interestingly, this continuity seeks to establish an explanation as to why the latter event –the emergence of the State– took place. In other words, it seeks to establish a “historical cause.” By making reference to the drama between the German dynasty and the Popes, call it *time a*, and linking that to *time b* –the shedding of the feudal system in Italy– and then to a *time c* –the appearance of the State– Burckhardt is pointing out that the earlier event in the narrative is in a way, necessary

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<sup>46</sup> J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, translated by S.G.C Middlemore, London, Penguin books 1990, p.19.

or even indispensable for the occurrence of the latter events. The connection of a “historical cause” with its “historical consequence” can only be established, as Danto remarked, once the historical consequence is known.<sup>47</sup> The consequence is never predictable; it only acquires its role as the “fulfillment of the previous event” within a narrative that constructs the cause as the cause and the consequence as the consequence. Continuity becomes a fundamental feature of narrative because it connects these two elements. It makes intelligible what would otherwise be an undetermined set of events.

In Hayden White’s analysis of Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, he explains that the latter uses the idea of figure-fulfillment as a way of “delineating periods in the evolution of literary realism.”<sup>48</sup> This idea comes in handy because it helps to explain the difference between causal demonstrations and interpretative understanding of events. White’s suggestion is that Auerbach’s treatment of the history of literary

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<sup>47</sup> Danto argues: “A sufficient condition for any event may thus occur later in time than the event. We cannot readily assimilate the concept of cause to the concept of necessary and sufficient conditions unless we are prepared to say that causes may succeed effects.” Arthur Danto, “Narrative Sentences”, in *Narration and Knowledge*, Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 155.

<sup>48</sup> H. White, *Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis effect*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2000, p. 91.

realism is one that links and connects authors only retrospectively. For example, the relationships “among the Homeric, Virgilian and Dantean kinds of epic (as well as the relationship between these three and the early modern novel) constitute a sequence of figure fulfillment relationships.”<sup>49</sup> Moreover, this proposal argues that historical events are not to be understood as causal or genetic connections established prior to the event set out to explain. This connection is to be understood as a fulfillment that is established only in a retrospective gaze. In other words, the relationship between occurrences is not determined by a causal connection, but by a “retrospective appropriation” that interprets a later event as a fulfillment of an earlier one.

Here is another example where we can see narrative continuity in play.

This one is taken from Giambattista Vico’s autobiography:

He was a boy of high spirits and impatient of rest; but at the age of seven he fell head first from the top of a ladder to the floor below, and remained a good five hours without motion or consciousness [...] The surgeon, indeed, observing the broken cranium and considering the long period of unconsciousness, predicted that he would either die of it or grow up to be an idiot

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<sup>49</sup> *Idem*.

[...] neither became true, but as a result of his mischance he grew up with a melancholy and irritable temperament such that belongs to men of ingenuity and depth, who, thanks to the one, are quick as lightning in perception, and thanks to the other, take no pleasure in shallow witticisms or falsehoods.<sup>50</sup>

This particular moment in Vico's self-narrative illustrates how he established a continuous connection between, again, many occurrences: first the fall that he suffered when he was seven years old and the surgeon's diagnosis. Second, with his adult temperament and third –this only becomes obvious further on in the narrative- with his life's work and the realization of the falsehood of one of his intellectual rival, Descartes. It is only the old Vico that is capable of establishing the connection between his early childhood, his adult temperament and his life work. Vico sutures what are, otherwise, random and scattered events into a temporal timeline that gives meaning not only to his narrative but also to his life. The connection that he establishes is only possible because he knew the outcome of his life, he knew that the diagnosis of the surgeon was wrong and that instead of becoming

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<sup>50</sup> Giambattista Vico, *Autobiography*, translated by Max H. Fisch and Thomas G. Bergin, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1944, p. 111.

an idiot, he turned out to have an insightful mode of thinking that resulted in the critique of Descartes' thought and the writing of his major work, "The New Science".

Burckhardt's and Vico's examples make evident that in social and individual narratives, the event that occurred at  $t-1$  comes to stand in different relationship to events that occur later on.<sup>51</sup> As Danto holds, these possible relationships can only be established after  $t-1$  has occurred. Occurrences are only revealed to be significant from a later time, and it is only from there that we can set out to establish a meaningful relationship between them. In other words, by establishing continuity in time among separated events, these authors are creating, as Mink pointed out, a story.

In other words, Burckhardt's explanation of the emergence of the Italian State and Vico's explanation of his adult temperament and life work can only be fully understood when placed in a correlation of earlier and later events. In historical narrative, one learns that dependence on coherence entails that "historians identify the relationship between what explains and what is to be explained

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<sup>51</sup> Arthur Danto, "Narrative Sentences", p.155.

retrospectively.”<sup>52</sup> What the past “contains” depends on the capacity of the historian to first, ask questions, but also to establish a *retrospect* and *prospect* that is coherent and continuous. The historian is the one that constructs the time relation in the narrative. She sutures different events to produce a meaningful continuity.

Furthermore, continuity, and therefore the possibility of providing meaning to past experiences, is only possible by the hermeneutic context<sup>53</sup> in which the historian is inserted and by her own moral and political stands. The concepts that she can access, the questions that she ought to ask, the information that she might have, are dependent on her own historical time. Hence, there is no “view from above”, the way of providing descriptions and imposing a continuous time will

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<sup>52</sup> P. Roth, “Analytic philosophy of history” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, Volume 37, Issue 2, 2016, p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> By ‘hermeneutic context’ I am referring to what Gadamer argued in his classic work *Truth and Method*: “Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event.” (p.299) What I take Gadamer to mean is that the production of meaning is never innocent or made in a vacuum. Meaning and the possibility of understanding something is always tied to the circumstances one is placed in. Concepts, ideas, categories are dependent on the historical circumstances that produce them. Therefore, these concepts, ideas, and categories are not fixed and determined, but changeable always in relation to the context that produces them. To complicate things even further, this context is, of course, never neutral, but charged with what Gadamer calls ‘prejudices’: That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.” (p.278)

vary depending on who does the constructions and when that narrative is being constructed. Another profound implication that this plurality of interpretations engenders is that these different meanings actually create new ways of seeing the past.<sup>54</sup> The cognitive function of narrative “is not just to relate a succession of events but to body forth an ensemble of interrelationships of many different kinds as a single whole.”<sup>55</sup> This ensemble of experiences, put together under a descriptive continuity, allows us to rewrite the past by presenting actions under a new set of descriptions and connections.

So far, we have argued that the principle of continuity in narrative comes as a particular way of structuring time, of giving a sense of meaning to past actions and determining what counts as past, present, and future. It is in this continuity that the subject matter is being temporally placed and constructed. Additionally, I have suggested that imposing continuity involves providing an interpretative meaning to experiences by relating them to one another. Description of those

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<sup>54</sup> I. Hacking, *Rewriting the soul. Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 243.

<sup>55</sup> L. Mink, “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument”, p. 218.

relationships ought to establish different possibilities of continuity, and this has a profound implication, that of changing the past.

Furthermore, if the principle of continuity allows one to construct the subject matter and its development, it is also creating a meaningful- undetachable- whole that provides us with a construction of an interpretative view about occurrences and their relationships. What is placed as a starting point and how that is set to have a relationship with other parts is what establishes a sense of continuity in narrative. In other words, the thought and development about the past is a result of how we structure the relationships between parts. Now let us move on to the second principle of organization, proximity and similarity.

### 3.3. Proximity and Similarity in Narrative

The wider the range of human activities which is accepted as the legitimate concern of the historian, the more clearly understood the necessity of establishing systematic connections between them.  
E. Hobsbawm

What counts as proximity in historical time? Is it events that are proximal in chronological time? But how proximal is proximal? Days? Months? Few years? A Decade? Furthermore, what counts as similar

in historical experiences? There are no colors, shapes or sizes that we can compare here, so what is it exactly that we are to make similar?

As Koffka pointed out, it is not easy to formulate the law of proximity or similarity in visual perception. Recall that one of the reasons for this complication is that “the law” of proximity is dependent upon the similarity of the parts in proximity. I believe this is the case with narrative as well. It is interesting to note that the separation between the principles of continuity, similarity, and proximity can become very blurry. One can even think that continuity is not possible if events are not seen as similar or proximal to each other. Let us for a moment go back to Burckhardt and Vico's example in the previous section. We saw that disperse elements were sutured into a cohesive continuity. Both authors established a relation between events that might not, at first sight, seem to have a relationship. They constructed a "historical cause" and its "historical consequence" by establishing proximity and a similarity among distinct events. Burckhardt established similarities between the Spanish, French and English feudalism; he constructed proximity between the rivalry of the German kings and the Pope with the emergence of the state in Italy. Vico, on the other hand, made

proximal his fall, his melancholic character, and his life's work. He saw them as having a similar connection that resulted in his particular worldview. It seems that in narrative explanations the imposition of continuity is interrelated with the way you establish a relationship of proximity and similarity among those events.

Be that as it may, for purposes of clarity, I will try to illustrate two central roles that the principle of similarity and proximity have in historical narratives. The first one is the establishment of proximity between separated epochs and the second one is the establishment of similarity by construction and application of concepts to historical occurrences.

When we apply the principle of proximity and similarity in historical narrative we do not necessarily think about events that are proximal in chronological time—although this can always be the case. What these principles are responsible for is establishing an interpretative relationship between events that are not necessarily proximal to each other in chronological time. In this sense, as suggested with the principle of continuity, narrative creates a new temporality that relates by making proximal and similar events that do not obviously have a

relationship either in space or time. By making occurrences proximal and similar to each other we are, in fact, constructing meaning. In other words, by connecting separated epochs or by applying a specific concept to a set of occurrences we are organizing them in a particular way that signifies those occurrences.

Let us now look into two different ways in which the principles of proximity and similarity are playing an essential role in narrative. The examples that are presented below illustrate two instances of their function and aim to present some cases in which one can see the principles of proximity and similarity working “autonomously” from continuity. This is not to say that this is always the case, as we saw with Burckhardt and Vico, or that finding this autonomy is the key in understanding the place that each principle has in a narrative. They only aim is to show with more clarity how it is that proximity and similarity are actually present in narrative explanations.

*1) Establishing proximity and similarity between epoch a and epoch b.*

To illustrate this first instance, let us look at Koselleck’s presentation in his opening chapter of *Futures Past*. Koselleck explains that in 1528 the Duke William IV of Bavaria ordered a series of historical paintings.

After careful research the artist Albert Altdorfer portrayed the Battle of Issus, “which in 333 B.C opened the epoch of Hellenism, as we say today.”<sup>56</sup> The painting reconstructs the entire course of the battle, including the number of dead, captured, combatants, etcetera. Koselleck remarks that, when you see the painting, you think you are seeing the last knights of Maximilian of the Battle of Pavia that occurred exactly when the picture was being painted (1528). Koselleck interprets this painting as two separated time events that were linked in a particular narrative<sup>57</sup>, establishing not only a similarity between both events but also, as Koselleck points out, *eliminating the temporal difference between the two*, in other words, making them proximal. Even when Koselleck, does not work with the principles of organization – nor Altdorfer for that matter– he understands this relationship as one that brings together the present and the past<sup>58</sup>, and merges time to see the proximity in meaning that these two events have with each other.

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<sup>56</sup> R. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> Koselleck interestingly points out that in the time when the picture was painted, the word *historie* meant both image and text.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

What this example allows us to recognize is that the start of the Hellenistic age was at once portrayed by the artist as “historical and contemporary”. He merged the battle of Issus and the battle of Pavia producing a “generational unity” to give a political and cultural meaning to his time. This link between epochs is not an innocent link. It aims to make a statement about a particular historical time. The battle of Issus opened up an epoch that was philosophical, artistically and politically significant for western culture. By placing this similarity and proximity between the battle of Issus and the battle of Pavia, the historian is stating that that moment, his moment, is as key in western culture as the beginning of Hellenism was. This relationship gives special meaning to what would otherwise be just another battle of the sixteen century. This particular way of relating things that might not be related at first glance is set out to give an explanation as to how can we understand this historical occurrence by looking into other historical occurrences. This specific way of establishing explanations of certain experiences reveals to be an artifice, the product of the

historian's imagination that establishes connections that are not found but constructed.<sup>59</sup>

So far, we have recognized that the principles of proximity and similarity work very closely with the principle of continuity. Nevertheless, we provided an example in which the historian constructs what would seem to be a time tunnel between epochs that links past and present by making them similar and proximal to each other. In a sense, we can see the principles working "autonomously" from continuity and providing narrative with a particular meaning. Let us now look into a second instance.

2) *The use of concepts.*

There is something about historical narratives and the use of concepts that sheds a light on another way in which the principles of proximity

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<sup>59</sup> We can establish as a hypothesis that the possibility of relating one set of events to another set can also respond to a particular style of reasoning that is able to see and establish connections that were not established before. In an interview in 1913, Proust argued that style, "is in no way a decoration as some people believe; it is not even a matter of technique; it is—as color is with painters—a quality of vision." (Cited in P. Gay, *Style in History*, in *The American Scholar*, vol. 43, No.2, Spring 1974) This quality of seeing, or having a style, conforms not only to the form of the content of what is said, but it also structures the content of the form. In other words, this particular way of seeing will determine the connections, the similarities, the proximities and closures that the historian will bring to her narrative, revealing a particular way of interpreting how did so and so came to be.

and similarity are used in historical explanations. While this point needs a more detailed analysis, for now I will only enunciate how these principles appear to work in the use of concepts in historical explanations. The use of concepts, or formal categories—e.g., revolution, democracy, state, civilization, populism, which are essential in historical explanations—requires establishing similarities between heterogeneous events. Every historical event is unique, but there are similarities that are established throughout a diverse set of events that not only specifies their singularity, but they also indicate, as Koselleck clearly shows, their structural potential.

The fact that we name the events that happened in 1789 in France as *Revolution* and having that same concept to name the events that happened also in France in 1848 and in Mexico in 1910, in Russia in 1917 and in Egypt in 2011, reveals that we establish a sense of similarity between these heterogeneous events to understand them. By establishing such a concept relative to these occurrences, we are making them clearer or less strange. This is not to say that we are homogenizing them, as Roth argues, "later concepts do not

standardize events, but re-order material in new ways, bringing out relations previously unobservable."<sup>60</sup>

The principle of similarity seems to be central in the use of categories that allow us to give meaning to otherwise scattered and disorganized occurrences. On the one hand, concepts allow the historian to order her material by becoming part of her theoretical framework. On the other, concepts not only allow the historian to construct their theoretical framework, but they also allow them to use them as an epistemic tool. Questions such as: was this a revolution, a civil war or a coup can only be answered by comparing other events to the one the historian is trying to understand. In this sense, as Koselleck pointed out, "what actually [...] occurred in history in the long term remains an academic construction, viewed in social-historical terms; evidence for it depends on the plausibility of the underlying theory."<sup>61</sup>

So far, we have argued that the principles of proximity and similarity are present in the construction of historical narratives in what seems to be two different ways. The first one is by establishing a connection

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<sup>60</sup> P. Roth, "Analytic Philosophy of History", p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> R. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, translated by Todd Samuel Presner, California, Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 33.

between epochs that aims to construct a temporal tunnel in which we give meaning to epochs by making them proximal and similar to one another. The second one is the use of concepts, which seems to construct similarities within a theoretical framework in which occurrences can be granted with meaning. In other words, the historian organizes different events into a single whole that in turn establish a similarity with other sets of occurrences.

Now let us move on to the last principle of organization, closure.

#### 3.4. Closure in Narrative

[i]n the configurational comprehension of  
a story the end is connected with the  
promise of the beginning as well as the  
beginning with the promise of the end.  
L. Mink

The notion of closure, end or conclusion is not something new to narrative theory. Since Aristotle the importance of "the end" in a story has been long debated. The general idea is that in any narrative, the conclusion constitutes a powerful gravity point. Everything that is

exposed in the explanation is set out in that particular way because it is being pulled by the *telos* of the narrative. As W. Martin argued, “it is the end of the temporal series—how things eventually turned out—that determines which event began it: we know it was the beginning because of the end.”<sup>62</sup>

In “The autonomy of historical understanding”, Mink argues that very differently from scientific explanations where conclusions are detachable, the conclusion in historical explanations cannot be detached from the narrative, “not merely their validity but their meaning refers backward to the ordering evidence in the total argument.” Mink continues to argue that “the significant conclusions, one might say, are an ingredient in the argument itself, not merely in the sense that they are scattered through the text but in the sense that they are *represented by the narrative order itself*.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, closure in historical explanations has the particularity of being, on the one hand, something that is non-detachable from the explanation that the narrative provides. Take for example the conquest of America. The endpoint is

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<sup>62</sup> W. Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative*, Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 74.

<sup>63</sup> L. Mink, “The autonomy of historical understanding”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1966, p. 39.

in fact, the conquest. The historian therefore needs to exhibit how did we get to that point. In other words, the outcome that calls for an explanation and the occurrences that are the material to explain that outcome, turn out to be part of the same package.

As a consequence of this non-detachability<sup>64</sup> feature of closure, the end in a historical narrative is, usually, not something that surprises us. Historical closure has the particularity of being known from the beginning of the narrative construction. The historian has in mind where is it that she wants to get to, therefore, the way she sets out her explanan is not to lead us to an unpredictable outcome or closure, but to a promised and expected end. In this sense, the principle of closure is playing an essential role from the beginning of the historical explanation. It is constantly informing us and giving meaning to the narrative as a whole.

In E.P Thompson's *The making of the English working class* one knows from the title of the book what is it that is going to be explained. The closure principle, the endpoint, guides Thomson's history in a certain

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<sup>64</sup> More about the non-detachability feature in historical explanations see P. Roth *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2020.

direction. He establishes continuity between events that, at first sight, might seem unconnected and “disparate”: The popular traditions that influenced the Jacobin agitation of 1790; The experiences of group of workers and the new industrial work discipline during the Industrial Revolution; The influence of the Napoleonic wars; The configuration of a plebeian radicalism; The role of the Methodist church; The articulation of a political consciousness, etcetera. These occurrences are exhibited in a way that allows us to see how he answers the question that was posed from the start. Building a historical explanation is the capacity of having the conclusion in mind and artfully constructing, by retrospect, how did that conclusion came to be. Thompson’s story is not surprising because of the conclusion he reaches, but because of how he grasps into a whole thing that were not experienced together. He brings to light how through a multiplicity of relationships, social interactions and historical conditions, the English working class came to be.

In short, closure is non-detachable because it is intertwined with the explanation. It plays a necessary role every step of the narrative. It allows us to keep in mind the notion of the whole while we understand

how the parts are coming together to articulate that whole. We understand significances, meanings, and orderings because we are aware of where we are heading. As Mink has argued, the achieved conclusion could not have been what it was without the particular ordering that the narrative has displayed as a whole. In this sense, the meaning of the conclusion comes as a fundamental ingredient that demonstrates the particular ordering that the narrative, as a constructed continuity, was set out to explain.

Another example where we can evidently see closure playing a necessary role in the construction of a narrative is in Huizinga's ending of his *Waning of the Middle Ages*. This example is significant because, differently from Thompson where the end paragraph is not necessarily where we experience the sense of closure, in Huizinga's final paragraph we come to experience the sense of fulfillment of the narrative in the final moment:

Profound pessimism spread a general gloom over life. The gothic principle prevailed in art. But all these forms and modes were on the wane. A high and strong culture is declining, but at the same time and

in the same sphere new things are being born. The tide is turning, the tone of life is about to change.<sup>65</sup>

This ending as one can tell closes what Huizinga had laid out since the title of his book. Again, it is not that the end paragraph surprises us. On the contrary, it is what we have been expecting. The way Huizinga's entire narrative was constructed, how he established connections between occurrences, the melancholic tone in which the whole book is written and the pessimism of the era that he portrays, is pulling the reader towards an ending that has been constructed throughout the entire narrative: the waning of the middle ages. It becomes clear that narrative explanations "create the explanandum event"<sup>66</sup> by establishing a meaningful temporal whole that is identifiable as such because of the imposition of a closure point.

In this sense we go back to our two central points of the cognitive aspects of narrative:

- 1) It creates order and organization in a vast and complex reality that is no longer present. It establishes and creates meaning of past

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<sup>65</sup> J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, London, Edward Arnold Publishers, 1955, p. 308.

<sup>66</sup> P. Roth, *The philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, p. 69.

occurrences by establishing and imposing a structure that makes the distal proximal, the dissimilar similar, the discontinuous continuous, and the unclosed closed. The past, therefore, does not appear as a collection of diverse and unconnected facts, it is particularly organized by an assembly of parts and wholes that grants signification to it. In short, one key cognitive value here is that narrative gives form and unity to what otherwise does not naturally have it.

- 2) It reveals that this particular way of organizing narratives serves not only as the possibility of explaining one particular event but other events as well. The middle ages, the Renaissance, the French Revolution, etcetera. The cognitive function of narrative organization seems to guarantee that by being able to organize single kinds into wholes we produce inferences that possibly secure our understanding of other occurrences.

It is worth pointing out that these two ideas point to an additional important cognitive consequence. We have argued, so far, that the cognitive value of narrative organization plays a central role in the creation of the description and construction of the subject matter. But we can now note that this organization is not only essential in the

creation of the narrative, but it is also fundamental to how the reader follows the narrative.

The value of recognizing narrative organization is central because it allows us to understand how historical explanations are constructed and why they are constructed in that particular way. The writer produces understanding and meaning of a historical event by being able to organize information, and the reader is able to understand it because of that organized structure.

#### 4. Conclusion

With these organizing principles now in place, we can return and reflect on their significance for understanding historical explanations. Hayden White argued that “[i]n the absence of a genuinely scientific analysis of the modes of relationship obtaining among the elements of the historical field, tropology is the only conceptual protocol we have.”<sup>67</sup> This chapter has outlined a new understanding of narrative organization, one unanticipated by White and hinted at but

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<sup>67</sup> Hayden White, “Historicism, History and the Figurative Imagination”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Dec.1975, p. 64.

undeveloped by Mink. These principles suggest a new *conceptual protocol* that provides the philosopher of history and the historian with a new framework for understanding narrative structure and its cognitive value. This, in turn, suggests new normative standards that can help the historian reflect on her constructive process and, in consequence, enhance her ability to craft historical explanations. In other words, this account is not only to be read as describing a process in which historians engage with, but it points out that by becoming aware of this process, one can sharpen the efficacy of historical explanations.

Additionally, I argue that recognizing the principles of organization in narrative can allow us to understand narratives not only as a *process* of construction, but also as a *product*. Understanding that there is a process of construction in a narrative that produces different ways of understanding the same set of events about the past goes against the ontological realist claims that holds on to the idea that there is such a thing as reconstructing the single “God-eye-view” about the past. As Danto recognized, “the full description of events cannot be definitive.

The multiplicity of interpretations allows the event to become richer “without the event itself exhibiting any sort of instability.”<sup>68</sup>

If we take these principles of organization as the way in which historians transform events into stories, it follows that these principles do not only explain the historian’s intellectual endeavor of communicating something, but they also allow us to explain the different modes of combining information and, therefore, the inevitability of producing different historical interpretations about the past. Since the cognitive process of organizing and recombining information is both a necessary and unavoidable feature of the historian’s intellectual role, it follows that the idea that there could be *just one* possible re-construction of how we got from A to B has no plausibility.

Finally, my account promotes the idea that narrative represents its own particular kind of explanatory form. In this sense, we do not displace—as Kuukkanen does— narrative as a non-rational/descriptive activity, but rather we reclaim the rational status of narrative and, at the same time, we point the way to a normative standard that can provide us

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<sup>68</sup> Arthur Danto, “Narrative Sentences”, p. 155.

with an evaluative criterion. Narrative evaluation will need to relate to those conditions implied by those used to establish a narrative. In this instance, the criteria of discovery and those of justification cannot come apart; the principles that allow a historian to “discover” the organizational structure are part and parcel of the cognitive operations that justify that structure. Criteria that is external to narrative, such as scientific evaluation (a la Hempel) or non-evaluation at all (a la Hayden White) prove to be, in the first case ill fitted to the explanatory structure of narratives, and in the second case simply unrelated to the epistemic/normative concerns of philosophers. In this sense, by focusing on the rational principles that govern the construction of narrative, my account creates the possibility for rationally assessing and evaluating narrative explanations.

## *II. Historical Aspects*

Abstract:

The existence of multiple interpretations of an historical event, is a given in the historical discipline. Explaining the persistence of diversity has been an ongoing question in the philosophy of history. In this

chapter I illustrate two possible answers and argue that neither offers a satisfactory resolution. On the one hand, the realist view holds a metaphysical commitment to the past that, as I will show, precludes it from fully recognizing the legitimacy of variability of historical interpretations. This view takes the multiplicity as a problem rather than as natural state of the discipline. On the other hand, Ankersmit's representationalism seeks to overcome the realist view by introducing the notion of *aspects*. Nevertheless, I contend that this latter position ultimately proves indistinguishable from the sort of realist commitments it claims to avoid. For according to Ankersmit, aspects are something found "in the past". However, Ankersmit has no answer to important questions such as: how many aspects do historical events or characters have and how do we know when we have identified them all? Further question also arise. Can there be radically different accounts of accepted historical facts? Can different accounts ultimately simply be aggregated without engendering any logical contradictions? In order to overcome these views and the related questions it generates; I argue that a new conception of historical aspects is needed. By developing a Wittgenstenien notion of *aspect perception* I provide a

novel account of aspects as applied to the case of historical explanation, one that provides a more philosophically satisfactory answer to the “diversity problem.” My account establishes that there are certain features of aspect perception that Wittgenstein highlights that are also shared with historical narratives. Of particular note here are the qualities of interpretation, organization and non-aggregation. These similarities prove key to answering the diversity “problem” by way of rationalizing a non-realist framework. Yet my account requires no specific metaphysical view of the past. Rather, *the past inevitably emerges as something constructed* and shaped from within a particular own historical milieu.

## 1. Introduction

One of the central claims in the previous chapter is that there are certain cognitive principles that are constitutive of narrative construction. These principles function to organize experience as information in particular and unique ways. In this sense, chapter one challenges one tenet of realism that holds that historical narratives are

found and not constructed.<sup>69</sup> The challenge to realism arises because identifying the principles reveals one fundamental way that the mind of any historian actively creates and organizes narratives, as opposed to just “finding” a narrative that was in some sense already there. In other words, *chapter one illustrates how construction precedes a coherent narrative*. Thus, writers of histories provide “the past” with a particular meaning—a coherence and structure not had by atomic facts—by virtue of using certain organizing principles.

In this second chapter, I introduce the idea of *historical aspects* as a way of referring collectively to the principles illustrated in chapter one. Furthermore, I explain the epistemic value of such aspects and their role in constructing historical narratives by using the notions of *interpretation* and *organization*. One of the questions that the notion of aspects aims to explain is, precisely, that of the multiplicity of historical explanations. It also reveals that multiplicity or diversity is not

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<sup>69</sup> A.P Norman, for example, argues that “A second virtue of the plot-reifier’s account is that it seems to explain how historical narratives can be true. A story about the past is true, on such account, when it accurately maps the real narrative structure of the lived past.” A.P Norman, “Telling it like it was”, in *The History and Narrative Reader* Geoffrey Roberts (ed.), p. 185.

something that we should worry about or label as a problem, but rather it is intrinsic to narrative construction itself.

In what follows I will present two different accounts that try to explain the idea of diversity. The first account I call *The Correspondence Realist Theory* and the second *The Representationalist Theory*. This chapter will make evident that neither of them actually acknowledge the idea of construction. Rather, these views choose to cast away the constructive activity of the historian by embracing a metaphysical commitment to a pre-existing order of things that can be re-presented instead of constructed. In this chapter, no stand will be taken with regard to the legitimacy of historical realism in its various guises. The primary concern is with those epistemic principles in play when a historian attempts to construct a narrative. At the very least, the principles of narrative reason underdetermine the choice of narrative, i.e., there remain empirically equivalent and logically incompatible accounts with no apparent way to “break the tie.”

Let us now look into both of the proposals.

1.1) The Correspondence Realist Theory.

As J-M Kuukkanen has stated, the realists

believe that there has been a past that they should ‘copy’ as well as they can in the language they use for writing about it. All that they *say* about the past should have its exact counterpart *in* the past itself – and language should not add anything to this. For that would be a distortion of the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen* [...] <sup>70</sup>

What Kuukkanen describes is a type of correspondence theory of truth in historical explanations which holds a *strong metaphysical commitment to a perceiver-independent existence of a determinate past*. But in the case of histories, it must always be kept in mind that the “correspondence” in question is *not* to this or that specific state of affairs—“The cat is on the mat” if the cat is on the mat—but to a causal/sequential development, i.e., a narrative. That is, in the case of historical explanation, the claimed “realist” correspondence *is between a written narrative and causal sequence in the world*. This view, as Kuukkanen stresses, aims to depict the preexisting order of things without any sort of “interference” on the historian’s part. In short, historians do not interpret or organize, they just record a preestablished order of things to make their way from The Past to the present.

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<sup>70</sup> Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, “Representationalism and Non-representationalism in Historiography,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 7, 2013, p. 456 (my emphasis)

In what follows I will categorize the main claims that the realist commits to. This will allow us to recognize the fundamental problems of such view as well as trying to give an alternative account to such perspective. I identify three commitments as central to the realist view:

1) For the realist there is an ontological commitment to a specific structure of the past –a commitment to there being just one Past. If the past is contained and undisturbed in primary sources, then the historian ought to be able to reveal it without any prejudice. The historian can simply remove the information from the vessel where it is stored and let it speak for itself. As Gene Wise puts it, the historian “sees *what is* and *all* of what is, because his vision has no existential grounding and is thus broad enough to encompass the whole.”<sup>71</sup> This supposes that the historian can be wholly freed from particular interests, desires, cognitive frameworks, etc.

2) This ontological orientation is also attached to an epistemic commitment. If the past is already set and contained in primary sources, then it is possible to provide faithful *representations* of that

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<sup>71</sup> Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations*, University of Minnesota Press, 1980, p. 27.

organized past. To continue with the vessel metaphor, the historian's job is to open up the vessel and expose the contents of what already exists inside by being an impartial judge. As in a courtroom, the historian tells the truth and nothing but the *whole* truth.<sup>72</sup> Knowing the past becomes a matter of identifying and detecting a structure rather than constructing it.

3) Since the past exists as a contained entity, and since the historian is at least in principle able to "perceive" this, the realist enterprise goes on to maintain that natural language offers the resources to *mirror* The Past. Language allows the historian to present again that which was thought long gone. Language not only facilitates the re-appearance of the past but is the perfect candidate to accomplish the first and second commitment of this list.

Ultimately, these three principles that realists take to heart fail to explain the fact that there exist multiple accounts regarding historical events. The only attitude that the correspondence theory can hold with respect to the multiplicity of historical accounts is that historical events have a fixed meaning—that is, there is only one truth to be uncovered.

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Furthermore, different accounts about e.g. the Renaissance, if correct, *must* be able to aggregate to one story about what happened. This sum of narratives would contribute to understanding “the one” and only totality of the past.

The realist may recognize that there have been many different voices in the past—say a proletarian voice, a woman’s voice, an aristocrat’s, etc.— One could be tempted to call this *diversity* and suggest that the realist actually embraces it. But one need to be careful here. The realist will hold that there is only one possible way to faithfully portray what those voices said. So even when they recognize the diversity of voices, they will not recognize the diversity of interpretations that such voices can lead to. There would only be one account of the proletarian, woman or aristocrat voice that is true. Some question may emerge from this commitment: of the diverse account that exist regarding the Renaissance, are only some of them actually correct? By what criteria could one determine that any one of these represented the cultural, economic, political and social parts of the Renaissance in a neutral, faithful and mirror-like way? *But more importantly, why even assume that*

*there exists only one right way to understand the past? Why must there be just one correct account?*

The answers to these questions cannot be found by adopting the realist proposition because they assume, as Eugene Zelenák points out, that the “texts written by historians should depict the preexisting order of things. They should neither distort it nor add anything to it that did not exist in the past.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, the text is supposed to mirror an independent organized reality. This metaphysics persists even though no method can actually determine which of a set of historical accounts is the truthful version. Thus, for the Correspondence Realist Theory, diversity becomes a problem that needs to be solved. But at the very least this view falls short in explaining why there are different causal accounts of the same historical event and how can we actually evaluate one over the other.

#### 1.2) The Representationalist Theory.

The philosopher Frank Ankersmit has been identified as a central figure in arguing against the Correspondence Realist Theory. One of

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<sup>73</sup> Eugene Zelenák, “Two versions of a constructivist view of historical work”, *History and Theory*, 54, May 2015, p. 211.

his central claims goes against the third point in our list of realist principles, viz., the idea of the correspondence theory and the mirroring of reality. Ankersmit's approach has been categorized as a representationalist view because while he agrees with the realist claim that historical narratives are representational, he argues that they wrongly understand this representation as a straightforward correspondence to reality. Instead, Ankersmit proposes a new theory of representation that he calls the *substitution theory*. It has been argued that his work can be included in the constructivist agenda. But this view alongside with Ankersmit's proposal, will be challenged in this chapter.

With an intent to construct a different notion of representation, Ankersmit asserts that instead of thinking of representation as a correspondence to reality, we need to think about it in terms of a *substitution* of reality. According to Ankersmit's "substitution theory,"

[...] both the represented and its representation belong to the (inventory of) the world-there is no ontological hierarchy between myself and the solicitor representing me in a lawsuit. Similarly, Marcus Aurelius and the statue at the Piazza del Campidoglio representing the Emperor both belong to the inventory of the world, regardless of the fact that one of the two

is (or, rather, was) of flesh and blood and the other of bronze. Consequently, the relationship between the represented and its representation—a world-to-world relationship—could never be modeled on the relationship between world and language.<sup>74</sup>

Therefore, representations have a way of making present (again) what is no longer there. Representations such as the statue of Marcus Aurelius are surrogates for “the actual character”. Hence, the only way to understand “the actual thing” is by what stands in place of it. And this representation is not to be understood as a faithful representation of reality according to Ankersmit, but rather as a suggestion of a particular “point of view” which brings to mind the absent thing.

Just here Ankersmit introduces the notion of *aspect* to explain what this particular “perspective” or “point of view” refers to. He claims that the historian’s representation is always a representation of an *aspect* of a particular event or historical character. His account holds that different narratives of the French Revolution or Napoleon are to be understood as presenting different *aspects* of the French Revolution or

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<sup>74</sup> Frank Ankersmit, “Danto on Representation, Identity, and Indiscernibles”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 37, No. 4, Theme Issue 37: Danto and His Critics: ArtHistory, Historiography and After the End of Art, Dec., 1998, p. 52.

Napoleon.<sup>75</sup> Even when the representations are dramatically different from each other, Ankersmit holds that they have to be understood as presenting different aspects of this event or that character. What is interesting to problematize here is the way that *aspects* relate to each other and to reality. This question forces us to consider whether Ankersmit truly breaks with the realist claim regarding the metaphysical commitment to the existence of a single past –that is, can we really call Ankersmit a constructivist?

In *Meaning, Truth and Reference*, Frank Ankersmit proposes to redefine representational truth as “*what the world, or its objects, reveal to us in terms of its aspects.*”<sup>76</sup> He contends that it is misleading to “associate ways of looking at x with our own attitudes towards x rather than with x itself or any part of it.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, for Ankersmit different aspects of historical narratives are a matter of what part *of reality* the historian focuses on. *Aspects* are not about the *attitude* of the historian. They are a matter of what the historian seems to notice *in* the sources, for

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<sup>75</sup> Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference in historical representation*, Cornell University Press, 2012, p. 71.

<sup>76</sup> Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference*, p. 107.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.76.

“presented [in a narrative] is an aspect of (*part of*) *the world*. Next, both thinghood and generality are embryonically present in the presented aspect already [...] This gives us the *ontological truth* of representation. Truth here is a property not of language but of the world and its things.”<sup>78</sup> And although Ankersmit has argued against the correspondence theory of truth throughout his whole career<sup>79</sup>, this quote clearly reveals a realist commitment to the notion of an aspect and so to Ankersmit’s view in general.

To see this, simply notice that the quote starts by reaffirming that an *aspect* is in fact part of the world. He stresses that the part of the world presented in a narrative—that is, the *aspect*—is a thing in and of itself, as well as part of a more general whole. Representation, in this sense, turns out to be a matter of “*self-revelation of the world*.”<sup>80</sup> The past is brought to life by means of that part of it that *appears* to the historian. Hence, logically speaking, if the aspect contains some part of the truth of the whole to which it belongs, then for Ankersmit historical

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, (my emphasis), p. 109.

<sup>79</sup> Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, “Representationalism and Non-representationalism in Historiography,” p.456

<sup>80</sup> Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference*, p.109.

narratives must be a faithful representation of *the* past. Aspects might not reflect or capture the whole in any one narrative, but they do mirror some part or parts of a given whole.

For Ankersmit the question regarding multiple interpretations in history would be answered in the following manner: different representations of Napoleon—e.g., by David, Baron Gros, Girodet-Trioson, and Gillray—all highlight distinct aspects of Napoleon *himself*. They are not, he insists, *attitudes* towards Napoleon, but aspects of Napoleon. This implies that if adding together all the different possible aspects of Napoleon, one would get “the whole” picture of the man. In other words, Ankersmit’s view implies that aspects must “sum” to create a more “complete” representation of x. But this is no different than the realist commitment to there existing a single, determinate picture of the past. Further, this also entails a commitment on Ankersmit’s part that historical accounts just correspond—or substitute—some independent prior reality, a reality not just of this or that fact, but a reality consisting of, *inter alia*, who the person Napoleon “really” was. In this sense, diversity is not necessarily a problem for Ankersmit and the Representationalist Theory.

Differently from the Correspondence Theory, the Representationalist Theory allows for a kind of diversity. One that *reveals* different sides of the same character or event. In this sense, Ankersmit's realism is, let's say, "pluralistic". It allows for multiple views of the same event, but these views are to be integrated into a whole. This integration, or aggregation, would presumably stand in place of the actual past. Truth about, e.g., who a person was emerges as a feature of Ankersmit's theory. Thus, there is something to be substituted in the first place, something that has a structure of a determinate set of aspects.

But is this plausible? In order to comprehend an historian's narrative, does the reader need to have many or all other aspects in mind? If so, which ones? Are there some aspects that are more important than others?<sup>81</sup> One may also ask: what counts as noticing all of the aspects that an event or character has to offer? How do we know when we have the complete picture? Is this in fact different from assuring the existence of an Ideal Chronicler that can see and notice all that reality

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<sup>81</sup> Ankersmit argues that "there are some aspects that are more revealing of the world than others (a person's profile will generally reveal more about that person than a depiction of the back of his head) *Meaning, Truth and Reference*, p.108. Be that as it may, he never gives or suggests a normative account on what aspects in historical narratives (or even paintings for that matter) are more important and why.

has to offer? In the end, Ankersmit's preservation of the language of representations, "inadvertently returns to us the realist 'language game' of mirroring [...]"<sup>82</sup> His theory of aspects relies on the idea that the more descriptions we have regarding x, the closer we are moving towards getting the essence of x.

On an interesting note, Ankersmit insists that the notion of aspect that he works with is quite different from that of Wittgenstein's. He states that his focus is "on the relationship between an aspect and the object that it is an aspect of" while in Wittgenstein, "the focus is instead on one aspect being potentially an aspect of different objects."<sup>83</sup> While I do not quite agree that this captures Wittgenstein's complex notion of aspect perception, this quote reaffirms the idea that for Ankersmit, an aspect reflects that of an ontologically determinate object.

Given that realist notions of the past turn out to be embedded in Ankersmit's account, I propose that a different account of aspects is needed, one compatible with a constructivist commitment to historical

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<sup>82</sup> Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of historiography*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 57.

<sup>83</sup> Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference*, p.68.

narratives that allow us to answer the question about the multiplicity of interpretations in historical narratives.

Within the constructivist agenda we can recognize a variety of positions. But in general terms, instead of committing to the three realist presuppositions that we listed above—neutrality, faithfulness, and language mirroring reality— the constructivists argue that: 1) there is no evident way for the historian to be an impartial judge. Rather, historians are best understood as having an active and creative role in understanding the past. They select information— and discredits other— and gives meaning according to particular epistemic, moral and artistic criteria. The past(s) emerges as a product of this construction.

2) Along the same line, constructivists claim that historical narratives have to be understood as historical creations themselves. The idea of faithfulness is criticized by arguing that historians can understand and look at the past only through the lenses available in their own historical time. Thus, faithfulness—understood as representing things “just as they were”— presupposes what it needs to prove because to provide a faithful and truthful image of the past would imply detaching the historian of her own historical framework. Realism presupposes a

“view from nowhere” or from “everywhere” and yet the metaphysics offers no clue as to when or how this view is to be achieved.

3) This historical framework necessarily involves language: the way we refer to and talk about things, our use of concepts, particular meanings that we give to actions, etc. As language changes with time and so new frameworks are created to understand and make sense of particular events—e.g. the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the concept of Revolution, etc.—then this makes even more mysterious any claim that the linguistic categories employed provide a good resource by which to mirror of “what actually happened.” In any case, those inclined to realism owe an argument that establishes that the language used imposes a set of categories and perspectives that necessarily correspond to the “faithful reconstruction” of a given time.

Think about it this way. If the job of the historian is to recreate “precisely and faithfully” what happened in Italy during, for example, the 1400s through the 1600s, then the use of the concept such as *Renaissance* would be viewed as an anachronism. The historical agents of that time did not necessarily recognize their own time as a re-birth. Although many of them studied and engaged with classical thinkers to

critique their own historical time by appealing to classic authors, e.g. Lorenzo Vallas, Erasums, etc., the term Renaissance was established only after their contributions.<sup>84</sup> It was in the nineteenth century that the name was introduced as a way of making sense of certain temporally near occurrences. Thus, even if all the data and all the information about that time could be “inserted” into a narrative to “faithfully reconstruct” the period, this would not capture what the term ‘Renaissance’ does, or at least not under any unifying concept. This is because historical narratives, “cannot be a mere chronicle, the barking of unrelated truths.”<sup>85</sup> Throwing data around without making sense of it does not provide the narrative with the power of being “better” than another one that instead imposed a concept unavailable at the time. It is only by establishing an explanatory construction in

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<sup>84</sup> Koselleck remarks that the “the triad of Antiquity, Middle Ages, and Modernity had been available since the advent of Humanism. But these concepts became established for the entirety of historical time in a gradual manner from the second half of the seventeenth century. Since then, one has lived in Modernity and has been conscious of doing so.” (*Futures Past*, 2004, p.17) But Modernity is not the same as Renaissance. This latter concept only started to be used to refer to that historical time in the nineteenth century.

<sup>85</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness, An essay in Genealogy*, Princeton University Press, 2004, p. 172.

which actions of the past are unified from the standpoint of the present that we bestow a narrative with explanatory power.

To add to this third point, Richard Rorty has claimed that “language [...] is an exchange of marks and noises, carried out in order to achieve specific purposes. It cannot fail to represent accurately, for it never represents at all.”<sup>86</sup> There is no such thing as a description that precisely “matches” or reproduces what happened exactly in a certain time and place. In any case, as Rorty holds, “there are as many different useful tools as there are purposes to be served.” Thus, the idea of “betterness” is also relative to such tools and purposes. In this regard we can recognize that there are better narratives or explanations than others according to certain purposes. Truthfulness in narrative is typically a matter of making something that seemed at first sight unintelligible<sup>87</sup>, intelligible. And this intelligibility is not a matter of including ever more data, but a matter of making sense of the data.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin, 1999, p. 50.

<sup>87</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness, An essay in Genealogy*, p. 172.

<sup>88</sup> The realist could argue that every narrative, even a fictional or false one could be a history if the criterion of truthfulness is “the making sense” part and not “the datum” part. To this point Williams offers two very interesting counter-arguments. The first one is that the historian is not a lonely knight fighting the darkness of the past. The historian is part of a community that constructs standards and holds historians accountable. Further, historians

In any case, “factivism” cannot function as a normative criterion. As Catherine Elgin holds, “any theory that is committed to a single truth is committed to infinitely many truths; for from one truth infinitely many others logically follow. So, assuming they both contain at least one truth, *Theory A* and *Theory B* contain exactly the same number of truths.”<sup>89</sup> Elgin illustrates this point arguing that Kuhn contended that the Ptolemaic alternative was as accurate as Copernicus's theory. Presumably, she argues, that means that the two were committed to equally many truths. But Elgin stresses that “we would not want to say that the two provided equally good understandings of celestial motion.”<sup>90</sup> What Elgin makes clear is that counting truths is not a promising strategy to evaluate one theory over the other. Even if we could figure out how many truths are present in Theory A and in

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want to retain the virtuousness of “truth tellers”, so falsifying data or creating completely false facts is simply not in line with the historian's virtue. The second argument that he develops is that historian does not create “detached fictions”: “As Clemenceau famously said at Versailles to a German who had wondered what future historians would say about all this, ‘They won't say that Belgium invaded Germany.’ With history as with some everyday narrative, every statement in it can be true and it can still tell the wrong story. The problem is not whether truths, and to that extent the virtues of truth, come into it, but how far they take us.” (p. 178)

<sup>89</sup> Catherine Elgin, “Making Progress”, work in progress.

<sup>90</sup> *Idem.*

Theory B, we would still want to assess their practical utility and significance.

Within this framework, I undertake that task of providing a new understanding of aspects and of the diversity phenomena in the historical discipline. To accomplish such task, I will engage with Wittgenstein's notion of *aspect perception*. This allows the development of a view that avoids the metaphysical commitment to the past as an existing entity and to the historian as a neutral a-historic narrator. Furthermore, by using the notion of aspects in a Wittgenstenien way we come to understand that different interpretations of the same event cannot be understood as accounts that can be aggregated. “Aggregation presupposes that all events could belong to some one narrative, an implied unifying perspective.”<sup>91</sup> *Instead I propose that historical aspects should be understood as cognitive standpoints that the historian supplies to make sense of otherwise undetermined material.* I will argue that aspects are not something that the historian finds or detects in the past.

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<sup>91</sup> Paul Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, Northwestern University Press, 2020, p.14.

Rather, they need to be seen as epistemic activities that allow the historian to organize the material.

Aspects so conceived are not a-historical knowable properties of events or characters. Rather, they are impositions that bring consistency, integration and coherence to the past. As Paul Roth holds, “‘the past’ cannot as a result exist as a static object about which one may hope to know more and more [...] For nothing now licenses an assumption of ‘The Past’ conceived as an untold or partially story, but always, nonetheless the same story, a human past narratable *sub specie aeternitatis*.”<sup>92</sup> It then follows that each historical perspective *may be* unique and exclusive of others. Roth's position, in other words, offers an account of constructivism that rationalizes the inevitability of conflicting accounts of the past. If not metaphysically determinate set of past events, then no reason to expect some one history.

So far, I have shown that the claims of both the Correspondence Realist Theory and the Representationalist Theory, cannot account for multiplicity by recognizing the constructive endeavor of the historian. The first theory regards diversity as a problem that needs to be solved

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16-17.

by appealing to the idea of Truth. But there's no satisfactory explanation as to how to choose one interpretation over another based on "truth". In this sense such theory fails to recognize that diversity is actually not a problem, it is just part of our epistemic situation. The second theory holds that the sum of diverse interpretations recreates a past that is still there to be presented. In a way, this view recognizes diversity but the problem here is that it does not give us an answer towards how to choose between two contradictory interpretations of the same historical event.

In what follows I will first explain why the realist idea of "faithfulness" to the past through a God's-eye view does not make sense in historical explanations. I will then introduce two features of the notion of aspect in Wittgenstein to show how we can construct a new understanding of historical aspects in a way that does not commit to a realist or representationalist metaphysics.

2. There is no god eye view: the world is in many different ways. There is another version of the constructivist approach that denies altogether the notion of representation. The non-representational

position, “dismisses the view that there is the past playing the role of epistemic foundation for historical works. It rejects the claim that the point of historical works is to capture their putative object: the past.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, for non-representationalists such as Kuukkanen and Roth, “the past” should not be understood as a fixed object that remains there (here?) to be discovered. Rather, they understand the past(s) as being open and changeable. However, this does not imply that no past exists. As Bernard Williams has stated “there must be some recognizable happenings that we are interpreting.”<sup>94</sup> Consequently, the argument here is that the structure that provides meaning to specific happenings is undetermined, and it is only retrospectively that one finds organizing themes and patterns of significance.

In other words, there is no way that the past *is*; all human history is a view from somewhere. The tendency to think of historical narratives as true in terms of mirror or faithfully reproduce what happened in a certain time and place has to be conceptualized in a completely different way. Accounts of the past should best be thought of as

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<sup>93</sup> Eugene Zelenák, “Two versions of a constructivist view of historical work”, p. 224.

<sup>94</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, p. 178.

hypotheses instead of as representational copies. Indeed, prior to a narrative construction, there is nothing (no organized, settled and fix thing) to represent. Narratives constitute a particular perspective that provides a structure for what is past and do not “recapture” or “re-present” a past seen from the eye of God.

Thus, for non-representationalists, historical narratives are constitutive frames for events. This entails that historical events have multiple ways of being seen. *For the non-representationalist, there is no diversity problem –not because there is no diversity– but because diversity is simply the way we engage with the world.* Since this idea is the central focus and contribution of this chapter, I would like to take some space to clarify and specify what I mean by this. Towards this end, consider Goodman’s *Languages of Art*. Goodman explains that there is a view–the realist view–that defends the idea that the quality of a “good representation” is its ability to *imitate* something as faithfully as possible. In his words: “To make a faithful picture come as close as possible to copying the object just as it is”. Nevertheless, Goodman attests that this is a simple-minded injunction and that such perspective baffles him.

[F]or the object before me is a man, a swarm of atoms, a complex of cells, a fiddler, a friend, a fool and much more. If

none of them constitute the object as it is, what else might? If all are ways the object is, then none is the way the object is. I cannot copy all these at once; and the more nearly I succeeded, the less would the result be a realistic picture.<sup>95</sup>

Goodman's point is that there *is* no exclusive way things are. On this account, artistic creations are never an epistemically innocent act. They always come "obsessed by their own past and by old and new insinuations. They are regulated by need and prejudice. They select, reject, organize, discriminate, associate, classify, analyze and construct."<sup>96</sup> In short, we *choose* to see and portray it in a particular way. It would be impossible to do so with *all* that something *is* and say that is a "real representation". Cubism, for example, experimented with precisely this. It tried to represent all angles, all sides and all the dimensions of an object. But we can honestly recognize that the picture that we are left with is by no means a "realistic" one.

As we have seen with the discussion of Ankersmit's position, this same idea—of re-presenting *everything there is to an object*—has also been played

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<sup>95</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1968, p. 6-7.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

out in historical narratives. To further illustrate this point, Arthur Danto developed a very illustrative fictional character that he called the Ideal Chronicler (I.C). This figure would be able to know everything that happens the moment it happens, even in other minds. He also, Danto stresses, “has the gift of instantaneous transcription: everything that happens across the whole forward rim of the Past is set down by him, as it happens, the *way* it happens.”<sup>97</sup> In a way, Danto’s I.C would be able to describe the man in front of Goodman as *everything that he is*. Whatever the man is thinking the I.C detects. He is able to portray him as a friend, as a conglomerate of atoms and as a fiddler and much more. *He is able to capture, in Ankersmit’s terms, all of the aspects that the man has to offer.* One might think that the I.C’s report would contain everything that the historian would need to know. What a gift! Nevertheless, Danto recognizes that the “ideal report” is not enough. The description that the I.C could give is “complete in the way in which a witness might describe it, even an Ideal Witness.” There is a sense in which an event can never be completely witnessed, even by

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<sup>97</sup> Arthur Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 149.

the Ideal witness, due to the fact that it may continue to be influenced by future events. In other words, even if the I.C were able to record everything that happens the moment that it happens he would always be missing facts that are not true at that time, but that will become true later. To use one of Danto's examples, it was true of Aristarchus that once he had hypothesized a heliocentric system, he anticipated Copernicus. However, not even the I.C. could have recorded that fact during the lifetime of Aristarchus. So, to return to Goodman's example, if the man in front of him becomes a traitor the day after the I.C recorded everything that there was to record, his description would be, in fact, missing something. Historical narratives are in this sense, not true because they are able to regurgitate every single move, thought, smell and even bodily sensation of agents in a certain time and place. Knowing these facts will not tell the historian everything there is to know about that particular event. As Danto carefully stressed, "[t]he whole truth concerning an event can only be known after, and sometimes only *long after* the event itself has taken place, and this is part of the story historians alone can tell."<sup>98</sup> There are just some class of

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, (my emphasis), p. 151.

descriptions that naturally escape the IC's sight, and these descriptions are just not enough to articulate a history. The imposition of a certain order that guides us through actions and agent's intentions is only something that the future historian is able to do.

Goodman and Danto make clear that the idea of having the whole picture of a particular event is simply impossible. Danto's thought experiment extends Goodman's point very nicely because even if we could actually see, record, sense, think and transcribe everything that could possibly be perceived, it would still not be enough to establish all that was true of any historical moment. Danto presses that there is no view from above that can give us a total, prejudice and epistemically free account of the past. Historians always impose on the past concepts, perspectives, and ways of seeing that were not available in the past. They choose to focus on particular events and see them from a cognitive standpoint that places an event in relation to others, and so to having its mean understood as a function of that relation. It is impossible to portray or *represent* every single aspect that the past "has to offer" because we simply cannot know every single aspect that our present reality has to offer! "The past" has, simply put, infinite

possibilities. To represent all aspects of the past is to actually deny that historians are historically tied subjects that bring their own framework to bear upon the past.<sup>99</sup>

Thus, as stated at the beginning of this chapter we need to understand historical narratives as distinct ways of understanding the past. In particular, historical understanding consists of presenting different points of view and angles that enrich and enable a more complex perspective about a particular event, one that includes the history that a maker of any representation brings to that endeavor.

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<sup>99</sup> In this respect, the problem outstrips the one imagined in Borges' "Funes the Memorious" Funes, one of Borges' fascinating characters, illustrates in a very vivid manner what I think would entail Goodman's "realistic representation" and Danto's I.C. Borges writes: "Funes perceived every grape that had been pressed into the wine and all the stalks and tendrils of its vineyard. He knew the forms of the clouds in the southern sky on the morning of April 30, 1882, and he could compare them in his memory with the veins in the marbled binding of a book he had seen only once, or with the feathers of spray lifted by an oar on the Rio Negro on the eve of the Battle of Quebracho. Nor were those memories simple—every visual image was linked to muscular sensations, thermal sensations, and so on. He was able to reconstruct every dream, every daydream he had ever had. Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day; he had never once erred or faltered, but each reconstruction had itself taken an entire day. "I, myself, alone, have more memories than all mankind since the world began," he said to me. But even Funes will not remember all that is true of a day, since what happens later will make truths of that moment not knowable at that time.

Take for example what occurred between 1519 and 1521 between a group of Spanish men and various civilizations in central Mexico. Historians refer to this set of events as the “Conquest of Mexico.” But even when they agree on the consequence of such events—The Conquest—one historian can frame the causes as a military disadvantage. Another historian can understand it as a religious quest. A third one can place the cause in the political strategies and intrigues that the Spaniards used against the Mexicans. The thing that one needs to be careful to understand is that it is not as if there were no military, political or religious activities. Rather, the issue here concerns the role of the historian who characterizes events as military, political or religious activities and then further frames them as a disadvantage, as an intrigue, or as a quest, as well as saying that it was *because of* that disadvantage, intrigue, or quest that the Spaniards conquered Mexico. By placing certain things in the foreground, the narrative, and therefore the event, acquires new significance. What was once an undetermined set of events—that include experiences, meetings battles, alliances etc.—becomes determined and coherent in the narrative. The richness of historical narratives, or better said, the richness of history as a

discipline is precisely this. To use Goodman's sharp statement, "[...] no one of these different descriptions is exclusively true, since the others are also true. None of them tells us *the* way the world is, but each of them tells us *a* way the world is."<sup>100</sup> In other words, every historical narrative is unique in presenting a type of organization that frames events in a particular way.

*It is also important to note that these narratives cannot be aggregated to form a larger, more complete narrative.* If one frames the cause of the Conquest as a military disadvantage, then how can one also attribute causal significance to political intrigue and as a religious quest? To explain it in one way can preclude explaining it the other way insofar as a particular factor is presented as causally determinative. As Bernard Williams has stated, "one cannot superimpose them [historical narratives] or attend to both at once, but one can acknowledge them as equally acceptable representations of the scene."<sup>101</sup> To say it in a slightly different way, to impose one type of organization, framework or aspect, often involves not accepting as causally significant some

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<sup>100</sup> Nelson Goodman, "The Way the World Is", *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Sep., 1960, p.55.

<sup>101</sup> Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, p. 189.

other one. And this is by no means a claim about one narrative being “more truthful” than another. It is simply recognizing that even when the same data is being used, the “making sense” part will always be subject to interpretation. This by no means entails that “anything goes”. The notion of construction here is taken seriously. One constructs historical narratives *with* information, data, occurrences, archives. But what this information comes to signify will be different depending on the aspect that each historian chooses to frame this information with. The information proves to be undetermined; it is the historian’s job to transform this.

To try and make this point clearer, take Stacy Friend’s argument about scientific models. She holds that there will always be a sort of indeterminacy in model systems:

A specification of the Lotka- Volterra model may be silent as to the species of the predators and prey. Some scientists may imagine them to be sharks and fish, foxes and rabbits, or what have you. Although there is indeterminacy, *it is not the case that anything goes*. Given that this is a model of predator- prey

interaction, scientists are not authorized to imagine that the predators are rabbits and the prey sharks.<sup>102</sup>

Same thing applies to historical narratives. Historians are restricted by the prompts that the information provides. Allowing an absolute free play of the imagination that leads to denying or falsifying the prompts, cannot be counted as a historical narrative.

Interestingly, thinking of historical narratives as *ways of seeing* connects in suggestive ways to Wittgenstein and his well-known idea of *seeing-as*. In different parts of his work Wittgenstein became especially concerned with trying to understand why it is that we are able to see a single image as a number of different images. The classic figure of the duck-rabbit –and others of the kind– puzzled Wittgenstein and led him to classify the experience as *aspect seeing*. To sum up, the duck is an aspect of the image as well as the rabbit and when we see the image as one or the other, we say that we have seen an aspect. There have been many debates, suggestions, questions and irresolvable issues in trying to figure out the basic qualities and features of what it entails to notice an aspect and what exactly Wittgenstein meant by this.

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<sup>102</sup> Stacy Friend, “The fictional character of scientific models” in *The Scientific Imagination* Edited by Arnon Levy and Peter Godfrey-Smith, Oxford University Press, p. 114, 2020.

This chapter will not be concerned with discussing these issues or in trying to illuminate what Wittgenstein wanted to accomplish by exploring this notion. Rather, I will focus on two central ambiguities that Wittgenstein remarked upon. Mainly, these concern how *interpreting* and *organizing* are involved in aspect seeing. I will deploy issues raised by Wittgenstein to unravel a particular quality of historical narratives. I claim that these features of interpreting and organizing are basic notions that historical aspects reveal. This in turn will prove relevant to construct a version of historical aspects that does not rely on any realist commitments.

One important caveat that needs to be acknowledged is the difference that some examples of aspect perception have with historical narratives. Although the famous ambiguous figure of duck-rabbit example serves its purpose nicely in recognizing that aspects cannot be aggregated—if one sees the duck one cannot, at the same time see the rabbit—it falls short in conveying the richness that “the past” entails. This ambiguous figure—like others of the kind—contains two possible ways of being seen: duck or rabbit. As I will show in this chapter, historical narratives are not restricted in this way. There is an openness

of interpreting the past that is not constraint in the same way as the duck-rabbit image is. As Hayden White argues in his *Politics of Historical Interpretation*<sup>103</sup>, the past is sublime in the Kantian sense: It is infinite in its possibilities.

### 3. Looking into Wittgenstein's Aspect Perception

#### 3.1. Seeing-as: clothing<sup>104</sup> with interpretation.

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<sup>103</sup> Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Sep., 1982, p. 113-137.

<sup>104</sup> Wittgenstein used the term *clothing* to try to illustrate some instances where the phenomenon of aspect perception required interpretation. If one thinks about this, the idea of clothing entails an action of covering something that is otherwise bare or uncovered. It can also entail a sense of style and of making someone or something presentable (to others). I think that this metaphor is actually pretty significant and revelatory when talking about historical events. The historian covers, arranges and styles historical events to make them presentable to others.

One of the central debates regarding the notion of aspect perception is whether aspects are seen or interpreted. Wittgenstein himself was not entirely clear on which was the correct answer to this puzzle because the experience of aspect perception itself involved a variety of phenomena.<sup>105</sup> Janette Dinishak's answer to this ambiguity is that noticing an aspect "resists neat classification."<sup>106</sup> There are multiple cases of this phenomenon and trying to encapsulate it into *just* seeing or *just* interpreting makes the experience lose richness. Dinishak states that although not always clearly distinguishable there are in fact examples where "optical aspects" and "conceptual aspects" are somewhat distinguishable when analyzed on a case-by-case basis. She

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<sup>105</sup> This debate is still current among Wittgenstein scholars. In his paper "A tale of two problems", Severin Schroeder exposes some of the key arguments and examples in Wittgenstein that advocate for understanding aspect perception as seeing or interpreting. His conclusion is that "visual aspect perception may well be called 'seeing', although it is often more concept-laden than seeing just shapes and colors." (p.362). In short, Schroeder's answer is that yes, they are seen, but they are not seen as color and shape because they depend on the use of concepts. In another effort to answer the same question, Malcolm Budd argues that the phenomena of aspect perception cannot be reduced to purely sensorial or purely intellectual paradigms because the use of the concept of seeing has a "polymorphous character" (p. 17) Sometime we use it to refer to things that we actually see, sometimes we use it to refer to things that we place an action upon.

<sup>106</sup> Janette Dinishak, "Wittgenstein on the Place of the Concept 'Noticing an Aspect'", *Philosophical Investigations* 36:4 October 2013.

argues that purely optical aspects ““make their appearance and alter automatically, almost like after-images’ while conceptual ones are ‘mainly determined by thoughts and associations.’”<sup>107</sup> In other words, conceptual aspects require “something more” than just noticing color or shape. They require bringing some sort of explanation or interpretation into the experience.

On this note, let us look into §9 of RPP, where Wittgenstein states that,

[i]n different places in a book, a text-book of physics say, we see the illustration:



In the accompanying text what is in question is one time a glass cube, another a wire frame, another a lidless open box, another time it’s three boards making a solid angle. The text interprets the illustration every time. But we can also say that we *see* the illustration now as one thing, now as another. Now how remarkable it is, that we are able to use the words of interpretation also to describe what is immediately perceived!

I would like to bring attention to two points that this quote seems to be making. The first one is the centrality that Wittgenstein gives to the connection between seeing and interpreting and how it is that in some

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

instances we interchange the use of these two concepts. This idea is key to this chapter because historical events are, obviously, never seen. The historian cannot reproduce them in a lab or travel back in time. The only way they *see* is by *interpreting* them, by “bringing something” else into the equation that is not there. There are of course documents, monuments, and archives. But these are an undetermined set of “stimuli”. One needs to establish connections and organize the material to make sense of the information. To *see* a set of facts as an event the historian needs to *clothe the facts within an interpretation*.<sup>108</sup> The epistemic success that the verb “to see” entails is taken here to mean that connections and associations are established. But the “establishing” can only be a conceptual act. In this sense, interpretation takes place.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, RPP, §33.

<sup>109</sup> This is similar to the idea of Ekphrasis (literary description of a work of art) found in literature of the classical period. Simon Goldhill argues that “Most ancient ecphrases, indeed, as Philo suggests, circulate as pieces of verse (or prose) separate from the object they describe, and which indeed often paradigmatically describe objects which do not have a separate existence in the world, such as Achilles’ Shield or the Gates of Carthage.” Simon Goldhill, “Forms of Attention: Time and Narrative in Ecphrasis” *The Cambridge Classical Journal*, vol. 58, 2012, p. 91.

The idea here is that sometimes Ekphrases, as historical narratives, are not describing a retrievable object, rather they are separated from the object they describe. They are both constructions of something that is no longer

The second point that I want to bring attention to is the idea that the same image can be *interpreted* in multiple ways. Wittgenstein imagined how a physics textbook uses this same image to convey a variety of meanings. The image has not changed, but yet we *see* it differently depending on what the text tells us to see. Ray Monk develops this idea further by arguing that one can “see a mathematical proof not as a sequence of propositions but as a picture” or one could “see a mathematical formula not as a proposition but as a rule.”<sup>110</sup> The different understandings of the image, the formula, or the proof have to do with the associations and connections that *are outside of the image itself*. The image does not “contain” the aspect of box, wire frame or set of angles. Rather, this is a conceptual association that the viewer makes. She imposes an aspect or follows an interpretation that provides her with an aspect so she can make sense of these stimuli and use it for a particular purpose.

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accessible, and, in that sense, they are both perspectival analyses that give us the sense of wholeness and completeness. Furthermore, the historian constructs a description of a historical event that is now there to be seen and appreciated by the readers. Historical narratives and ekphrases make visible what can no longer be seen.

<sup>110</sup> Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The duty of Genius*, Penguin books, 1990, p.514

Furthermore, as Wittgenstein himself explained, “if the seeing of an aspect corresponds to a thought, then it is *only in a world of thoughts* that it can be an aspect.”<sup>111</sup> In short, in such cases it makes sense to say that aspects are conceptualized. They do not necessarily “inhere” in “the world” of stimuli, images or formula but are instead a product of “the world” where conceptual connections and associations are made. Thus, it might seem that in this particular case, seeing an aspect involves a cognitive perspective or standpoint that allows us to interpret something differently.

To go back to Goodman’s example and illustrate this point even further, we can see a person as a friend, as a conglomeration of atoms, as an instance of life, as a fool, etc. But do we actually observe these aspects? Well, no. A person, as in Wittgenstein’s example of the cube, remains unchanged and we do not actually observe the atoms or the foolishness of that person; thus, the change seems to be one of interpretation. Seeing likeness and establishing relations that are not necessarily “contained” in the image/object itself seems to be one of the many key points that this *queer* phenomenon entails.

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<sup>111</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, RPP, §1029. (my emphasis)

It is important to recognize that seeing the picture as a glass cube or as a wire frame; or seeing the mathematical proof as a sequence or as a rule; or seeing a person as a friend or as a fool, entails two very important things. For one, if we see the picture as a glass cube, we are excluded from seeing it, *at the same time* as a wire frame. The same thing happens with the mathematical proof and with Goodman's character; to see it as x excludes it from seeing it as y. A particular remark that Wittgenstein makes throughout his notes on aspect perception is precisely this. When seeing an aspect of an ambiguous figure one is not able to see *all of the aspects* at the same time. If one sees the duck, one cannot at the same time see the rabbit. For this to occur, a peculiar *switch* needs to happen. Secondly, it allows us to recognize that the same set of stimuli can be interpreted in many different ways. That does not mean that to see it one way is "more correct" than seeing it in some other way. In this sense, "seeing an aspect" involves seeing literally different things and not features of a common object; the aspect constitutes, in these cases, what object is seen, and so what features it has, features that it does not possess if seen differently.

So far, I have established one feature of the “motley collection of phenomena” that aspect perception entails. The idea here is that there are some instances of aspect perception where conceptual connections and associations are more obviously integral. By making this argument I do not mean to claim that seeing aspects can be reduced to interpretation in all cases, nor do I claim that the ongoing debate about whether aspects are seen or interpreted has been settled. I merely aim to highlight that there are cases where interpretation plays a central role in noticing aspects. This, in turn, will prove fundamental in using the term *aspect* to talk about a particular quality of historical narratives.

### 3.2. Seeing as: clothing with organization.

Another key feature of aspect seeing that is central to this chapter has to do with organization. In PP §131, Wittgenstein gives the following example:

I suddenly see the solution of a puzzle-picture. Where there were previously branches, now there is a human figure. My visual impression has changed, and now I recognize that it has not only shape and colour, but also a quite particular ‘*organization*’.—My visual impression has changed- what was it like before; what is it

like now?– If I represent it by means of an exact copy– and isn't that a good representation of it?– *no change shows up*. (my emphasis)

Here Wittgenstein points out to a different–but related–quality of aspect seeing. Against Köhler and the Gestalt school<sup>112</sup>, he asserts that organization is not akin to color or shape. Organization may not necessarily be something that is “out there”, rather it requires an exercise or activity to see something in what is otherwise, a meaningless maze of lines. It requires grouping, taking certain elements of the visual impression together, seeing foreground and background, etc. In this quote Wittgenstein remarks that when seeing we also impose an organization, and although the visual impression has changed, the representation of the picture that is now seen is not different from the initial maze of lines.

Severin Schroeder points out that, “[t]he colour and shapes in the visual field can always be represented by an image, whereas ‘organization’ cannot: sometimes it can only be represented by further means of expression [...] perhaps a description of what is seen in terms

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<sup>112</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, PP §134.

of concepts that are not literally applicable to the object.”<sup>113</sup> Schroeder continues to hold that sometimes, seeing organization entails “surrounding the object with some fiction”, involving the imagination of the spectator in noticing this or that particular image. One brings into the equation a particular order that allows us to take lines together, make them similar or dissimilar, close them in a particular way. In the duck-rabbit image, for example, if someone switches from seeing the figure as a duck to seeing it as a rabbit, the lines that formed the duck bill now form the ears of the rabbit. “That is, the duck and rabbit aspects are distinguished by using “duck,” “rabbit,” “bill” and “ears” in the verbal descriptions and cannot be distinguished by reference to colour and shape (Form) alone.”<sup>114</sup> The verbal expression that one uses to describe the aspects that are seen, is a way in which one provides an image with meaning.

Furthermore, as Dinishak remarks, noticing an organized figure within the maze also seems to demand the familiarization that we have with such figure. By alluding to Wittgenstein’s *Zettel*, she notes that “we can

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<sup>113</sup> Severin Schroeder “A tale of two problems”, p. 361

<sup>114</sup> Janette Dinishak, “Wittgenstein on the Place of the Concept ‘Noticing an Aspect’”, p. 328.

call the human face a solution “[b]ecause it represents a kind of object that I am very familiar with: for it gives me an instantaneous impression of familiarity, I instantly have all sorts of associations in connection with it; I know what it is called; I know I have often seen it; I know what it is used for; etc.”<sup>115</sup> Hence, to see a particular organization one needs to be familiar with the framework that one is using to see “something else” in the stimuli. As Wittgenstein himself suggests, one cannot organize the ambiguous figure into x if one does not have a grasp of or is unfamiliar with x.

Up until this point I have stated two important features of aspect seeing. By saying that some instances of aspect perception require interpretation, (1) I intend to bring attention to the fact that historical events can be understood in different ways. These different ways, in some cases, have to do with associations that are not necessarily “contained” in the sources. We establish links and connections that allow us to recognize something and see likeness and similarities between it and something else. The possibility of these connections will of course vary. But the takeaway here is that one performs an

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<sup>115</sup> *Idem.*

action that, in turn, allows us to give a different set of meanings to the same event.

But now (2), the idea of organization allows us to understand that aspect seeing requires discrimination and order. We notice an aspect because we establish a cognitive standpoint that frames the world with a particular order. To see a face in the maze we bring things to the foreground while we leave others in the background; we make certain lines continuous and similar to each other; we close off open structures to see the already familiar aspect of a face. The quality of organization allows us to recognize that the way an ambiguous set of stimuli is *ordered* proves to be central to how we come to understand the world.

#### 4. Historical Aspects

One may wonder what it is exactly about aspect perception that can help us recognize and explain a certain feature of historical narratives, specifically that of diversity. In particular, how is it that interpretation and organization are involved in constructing a history? And why choose to hold on to the notion of *aspect*? The idea of aspect and in

particular Wittgenstein's reflections on aspect perception, allows us to recognize three key features that historical narratives share:

1) The idea of aspects allows us to talk about *interpretation* and *organization* as activities that are essential for providing meaning to a historical narrative. Commonly, the notion of interpretation is fairly discussed in the philosophy of history literature while organization is merely suggested but never actually problematized. Here I want to hold that both activities are needed to structure and frame events under a particular aspect. On the one hand, and retrieving from the previous section, interpretation allows us to talk about the connections and associations that do not "belong to the image (or events)", these are key in making sense of what is otherwise an ambiguous set of stimuli. In short, interpretation adds to perception. On the other hand, talking about organization acknowledges the elements that we bring to the foreground; the way we make things continuous and similar, and how we close off open structures. This show that there is a necessary imposition of order in noticing aspects. If interpretation adds to perception, organization focuses it.

2) By alluding and engaging with the importance that organization and interpretation have, the notion of aspects will also allow us to preserve and, as I will show in this next section, understand the multiplicity of perspectives in history. The idea of aspects in history provides us with an account that can help us explain that there is no exclusive way that historical events are, but rather that there are different ways that we can frame, interpret and organize historical occurrences.

3) The phenomenon of aspect perception shares a very particular feature with historical narratives, that of the non-aggregative<sup>116</sup> relation between aspects. As with the case of the physics textbook image or the mathematical formula, there are cases in historical narratives where framing certain events under a particular aspect excludes or blocks us from seeing it under a different one. There is a sense of incompatibility in interpreting and organizing a historical event as being two different things at the same time. Take as an example Christopher Columbus setting foot in America. One cannot interpret that historical event, at the same time, as “the discovery of America” and as “the invention of

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<sup>116</sup> This term is used by Paul Roth in the *Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*.

America”<sup>117</sup>. Seeing it in one way necessarily excludes you from seeing it in the other way.

My claim is that historical narratives share these three features with Wittgenstein’s reflections. In this next section I will show how historical narratives involve organization and interpretation. I will also illustrate that historians work with ambiguous or undetermined sets of data, and therefore diverse meanings can emerge from them and, finally, I will provide examples of cases where historical aspects cannot aggregate. For these reasons I will use the term “historical aspects” to understand and explain how the qualities of interpretation and organization; diversity and non-aggregative feature in historical narratives.

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<sup>117</sup> The Mexican historian Edmundo O’Gorman published in 1958 his book “The Invention of America.” The central thesis is that America *could not have been discovered*, but rather the idea of the discovery of America was something that was invented later on. As R. Lazo argues “O’Gorman seeks to undo the myth of the valiant sailor who bravely embarks on a transatlantic crossing to discover a new continent. O’Gorman reminds us that Columbus set out to find a route to Asia and ended by believing he had accomplished that. Because Columbus never realized where he had landed, he did not discover what came to be America.” (“The Invention of America Again: On the Impossibility of an Archive.” *American Literary History*, vol. 25 no. 4, 2013, p. 751-771)

The main claim here finds support in Gene Wise's *American Historical Explanations*. Wise asserts that what we experience "is not reality unmediated—the facts of the matter—but reality as filtered through our mind-pictures of it, pictures of how things connect one with the other." Furthermore, we always perceive from certain locations, "and to call our perceptions 'biases' is merely to admit that we humans see through filters, never without them. We are not downright liars [...] we just don't see everything, and we don't take full account of what we can see."<sup>118</sup> Wise's eloquent quote affirms what has been already been suggested in this chapter. Historical aspects are not going to be understood in terms of Ankersmit. They are not a part of *a* whole that belongs to the Past. Rather, they are a matter of purpose, of an intention that the historian has with a particular set of information. Historical aspects are our filtered standpoints; they are a way in which we "clothe" data in order to allow it to appear in the guise of meaningful associations. This clothing can be the usage of a novel concept that allows to reframe certain information. It can also be posing an original question that opens up the possibility of new

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<sup>118</sup> Gene Wise, *American Historical Explanations*, p. 8

answers and, therefore, new meanings, e.g., new sets of associations. Historical aspects are not constrained to one type of methodological exercise. But rather, they are a cognitive possibility that takes the attribution of meaning as its central task.

Following this argument, the idea of providing meaning to the past becomes primordial. Since the past is not contained, discovered, or detected, there is no intrinsic meaning to it. One has to provide information with meaning. It is this fundamental action of giving meaning that the historian imposes upon the diverse set of knowledge that she has access to. The historian conveys understanding by interpreting, organizing, connecting, making similar, closing. Establishing connections is not something that the information does by itself. As Hayden White argued, “[t]hat we have monuments, traces, remain relics from the past still at hand in the present does not tell us about ‘The Past.’”<sup>119</sup> By using the concept of “aspects” I underscore the idea that every historical narrative is a perspectival analysis. As I previously suggested, it is not only guided and constructed by

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<sup>119</sup> Hayden White’s archive at UCSC: *Historical Research as Penance*, Box 3:19 on Historical Perspective.

concepts, but also by a wider understanding. Aspects allow us to include not only the recognition of certain conceptual features that guide the construction of a particular story, but also how it is that these concepts relate and interact with other concepts and even with experiences that haven't even been categorized as such. It allows us to understand "the past" as constructed and plastic.

Historical aspects are, thus, *cognitive* standpoints because they organize, choose, select and recognize what is otherwise an undetermined set of information. As the art historian E.H. Gombrich recognized, thinking and perceiving are alike in that in both we learn to particularize, to articulate a distinction where before there was only an undifferentiated mass. To see a shape apart from its interpretation, Gombrich stresses, is not really possible.<sup>120</sup> The historian directs attention to certain evidence that she organizes in a particular way. She creates meaning by

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<sup>120</sup> Ernst Gombrich exemplifies this argument by using different interpretations given to the same group of stars. The constellation of the zodiac, he argues, which the ancients called the Lion provides a good example: "If you approach it *with the appropriate mental set* (my emphasis) you can read a lion, or at least a quadruped, into that group [...] Indians of South America react differently. They do not see a lion shown sideways because they disregard what we would call the animal's tail and hind legs and make the rest a lobster seen from above." E.H Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A study in the psychology of pictorial representation*, Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 106.

establishing specific connections and associations that are not contained in the archive or primary sources. Thus, paraphrasing White, organization is an aspect of story elaboration.<sup>121</sup>

White also recognized that organization is necessary “because historical events are not as such openings or closings of processes or even immediately recognizable as transitions.”<sup>122</sup> He gives the example of the death of the Roman emperor Diocletian. Although this event is unquestionably a closing event in the emperor’s life, it “is as a historical event, *either* an opening or a closing of a process, depending on how the individual historian chooses to use it. It might serve as part of a closing motif in history of pagan Rome or as part of an opening motif in a history of Medieval Christendom.”<sup>123</sup> In short, depending on what the historian aims to explain, this particular event will serve different purposes, or maybe even no purpose at all.

#### 4.1. Historical Aspects: Interpreting and Organizing

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<sup>121</sup> Hayden White, “The structure of historical narrative”, *Clio*, T.1, N.º 3, June 1, 1972, p. 121.

<sup>122</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>123</sup> *Idem.*

To elaborate and clarify further the notion of historical aspects and the two central features of interpreting and organizing, consider how the historian Carlo Ginzburg recognizes the complications and difficulties that his subject-matter entails. In the preface to his classic book *The Cheese and the Worms* he explains that at some point in his career he wanted to understand what witchcraft in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries meant to its protagonists, the witches and sorcerers. But the available documentation, he explains (trials and especially treatises of demonology) “served only as a barrier, hopelessly preventing a *true grasp* of popular witchcraft. Everywhere I ran up against inquisitorial concepts of witchcraft derived from sources of learned origin.” Nevertheless, not all was lost. He acknowledges that “the discovery of a current of previously ignored beliefs connected with the *benandanti* opened a breach in that wall. A deeply rooted stratum of basically autonomous popular beliefs began to emerge by way of the discrepancies between the questions of the judges and the replies of the accused—discrepancies unattributable to either suggestive

questioning or to torture.”<sup>124</sup> Ginzburg’s anecdote allows us to recognize the significance of the connections, associations and order that the historian gives to the sources. Even when Ginzburg’s language suggests a realist commitment (ideas such as ‘true grasp’, ‘emerge’ or ‘discover’), one can recognize that the information that was available to him was constructed not by the protagonists that he was interested in but by the dominant culture that sentenced and judged them.

Ginzburg, like every historian, performed an action, a creative action that uses the sources in a particular way. He started to pay attention to the trials and the responses that the accused gave at the trials. He started to focus on beliefs and the culture of the *benandanti* that were previously ignored. He connected and made similar information that was not interpreted in that way before. Furthermore, Ginzburg shows us that he focused on something that was previously ignored. He brought to the foreground the idea of what it meant for a “witch” to be a witch. To construct the answer to this puzzle, he ordered the material in a particular and unique way that directs our attention to the

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<sup>124</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, *The cheese and the worms*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, p. XIX. (my emphasis)

materials thus ordered in such a way. We see then the solution to the puzzle thanks to the order that he imposed. He was interested in using the sources in a particular way to understand the conception of witches as witches. But this standpoint is not something that the sources contain in and of themselves. He identified an aspect that he was interested in: the recognition of a subject as part of a specific category. This is a cognitive standpoint that allowed him to start making connections and associations that were not necessarily made before. The case of Ginzburg allows us to illustrate how historical aspects are a way of clothing information with a particular meaning that started by asking a new and original question. It is not necessarily clothing the information with a particular concept (as I will now show with Hacking) but with a set of questions, motivations and relationships that bring out connections that were not necessarily seen or acknowledged before. He framed the information with a novel question, and in return he interpreted and organized the sources in a unique and previously untold way.

Take now another example that differs from the one we just saw with Ginzburg. Ian Hacking shows that the legal notion of “child abuse”

only came into the literature around 1960 and has continued to be molded until the present day by “incorporating previously indifferent acts into bad ones.”<sup>125</sup> If we choose to elaborate a history of child abuse, we are choosing to impose an aspect that was not available in *our* terms in times past. In this case, *aspects* seem to be more relatable to the usage of a concept instead of the framing of a particular questions as with Ginzburg.

The historian needs to establish connections and associations that are evidently not *in* the sources because the legal idea of child abuse didn’t even exist before 1960. But not only that. The historian is taking a particular perspective by establishing the aspect of “child abuse” as the central theme of her narrative. Events such as marriages between older men and young girls –which were routine for centuries– or child labor will receive particular attention that, for example, the historian of the Royal Court would probably mention but not necessarily take it to be a central problem. With this example we can recognize that historical aspects integrate multiple concepts and their connections, particular

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<sup>125</sup> Ian Hacking, “The sociology of knowledge about child abuse”, *Noûs*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1988, p.54.

experiences, political and moral perspectives, etc. They are not found in the data, but they are something that the historian brings to make sense of the data. They are a comprehensive position that the historian uses to create a narrative. Furthermore, they are not a neutral standpoint. They bring epistemic, practical and aesthetic judgements into the selection and organization of the sources.

In archival or bibliographical work, there are cases where certain “occurrences” and information remain the same.<sup>126</sup> As with Goodman’s example, the person in front of us seems to not have changed physically when we choose to see her as a friend or as a conglomerate of atoms. Or with Wittgenstein’s example of the maze, we do not represent the solution to the maze by drawing it again, but by giving a verbal explanation of the connections that are being made. With historical information something related seems to be happening. The archives, monuments, photographs, paintings, and so forth, don’t necessarily change throughout time. Nevertheless, each historian sees

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<sup>126</sup> Although, sometimes, this is not even the case. As Ross Hassig states in the beginning of his *Mexico and the Spanish conquest*: “Unfortunately, these accounts [first-hand accounts, legal testimonies, histories written by nonparticipants, and Indian accounts] frequently conflict, even in such apparently objective facts as numbers, dates and sequences of events. I have found no satisfactory way to reconcile them.” (p.3)

them differently depending on the aspect that they are imposing upon that information. To reiterate, *historical aspects are a cognitive standpoint that serves as an organizing principle of the narrative as a whole.*

But even further than that, there are cases where sources also change, and new innovative material is incorporated into the narrative as an important foundation for the particular story that the historian wishes to tell.

Similarly to Ginzburg, Saidiya Hartman in her book *Wayward Lives* argues that,

every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor.<sup>127</sup>

To tell the history of a group of black women at the turn of the twentieth century, Hartman not only performed an action to the “journals of rent collectors; surveys and monograph of sociologists; trial transcripts; slum photographs; reports of vice investigators; social

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<sup>127</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, W.W Norton and Company, 2019, p. XIII.

workers and parole officers; interviews with psychiatrists and psychologists; and prison case files”<sup>128</sup> –all of which, she remarks, represented her historical subject as a problem– but she also “pressed the limits” of the archive by going beyond it. In other words, Hartman not only interpreted the archive in a particular way, but because she decided to focus on a new aspect –the everyday lives of black women in the beginning of the twentieth century– she expanded the “stability of the archive” to include material that was not previously seen as evidence. Hartman talks about the importance of “critical fabulation” when constructing histories that go against the dominant discourse of the archive. This, she argues, allows the historian to make educated guesses that can tell stories from a new and interesting standpoint.

Hartman details, for example, how her search to find photographic evidence of what “living a meaningful, free life involved for black women and girls in the wake of slavery” led her to follow in their footsteps and recreate parts of their peripatetic journeys.<sup>129</sup> The street

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<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, p. XVI.

<sup>129</sup> Isaiah Matthew Wooden, Review of *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, by Saidiya Hartman. *Theatre Journal*, vol. 71 no. 4, 2019, p. 537.

journey and Hartman's recreation of the footsteps of her historical subjects also became part of her sources. She saw the streets that thousands of people walk every day in a meaningful and historical way. She made educated suggestions about the journeys and encounters that these women ran into in their own time. Hartman constructed a history that was informed by the archive, but she pressed the limits of it by using an educated imagination that allowed her to expand and give new insights of her subjects. In this sense, it is interesting to suggest that new aspects stand revealed because one is now open to seeing material as evidence that before was not taken as such.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> In her article "Venus in Two Acts", Hartman expands on the limits of the sources by arguing that the archive is inseparable from the power of dominant voices that subjugated certain historical subjects. There are times when archival information, she argues, brings us no closer to understanding the subaltern subjects that certain historians are interested in. Therefore, the intention in Hartman's article "isn't anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible. This double gesture can be described as *straining against the limits of the archive* to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration." (p.11)

The idea here is that subaltern histories, such as Hartman's, not only interprets and organizes the sources in accordance with an aspect that opposes itself to predominant ones. But by recognizing new aspects these types of histories expand the limits of what can count as a source. In other words, sources are not static, they can change and emerge depending on the aspect that the historian chooses to see. By incorporating new material, new modes of historical thought and methods of research also emerge.

To this point, this chapter has illustrated different examples where it is evident that the historian performs a meaningful action upon sources. They either pose novel questions that allow them to make new connections or associations, like Ginzburg or Hartman did. Or they use a novel concept to understand certain events under new categories, as Hacking did. Moreover, Ginzburg, Hartman and Hacking's examples make us recognize that historians impose a cognitive standpoint and this in turn, permits them to interpret and organize the material with a particular meaning. Furthermore, as Hartman clearly showed new aspects allow us to broaden our sense of focus and take new material as an important source, transforming what we take traditional sources to be.

#### 4.2. Historical Aspects: Diversity

For this section, the event referred to as the Conquest of Mexico serves as a paradigmatic example. Innumerable interpretations have been written regarding this event. The question that the majority of these texts start with is usually posed in the following matter: how is it that 500 Spanish men conquered a well formed, militarily strong civilization that surpassed half a million inhabitants? The question asked in this

way invites a focus on the technology, the “military advancements” and the political skills of the conquistadors. In 1951, for example, D. M. Poole wrote: “Consider the conquistador, mounted on horseback and sword in hand. He was indeed a new figure in Mexico, where the horse on which he rode was as unknown as the cattle and donkeys that were soon to follow. Again, his steel sword which did so much to spread his power was a cutting instrument superior to any the Indian possessed.”<sup>131</sup> In 1972, Maurice Collis gave reasons to believe that one of the causes of the Conquest was the identification of Cortes with Quetzalcoatl, a central god in the Mesoamerican tradition that, according to the myth, was supposed to eventually return. According to this view, Cortes was a visiting god that won the battle without much difficulty because of his divine status. The Mexicans, especially their leader Moctezuma, surrender without much fight accepting the mythological telos of the returning god and the end of an era. In the beginning of the 80s, Tzvetan Todorov wrote that the main cause of the conquest of the Spaniards over the Mexicans was the advancement

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<sup>131</sup> D. M. Poole, “The Spanish Conquest of Mexico: Some Geographical Aspects”, *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 117, No. 1, Mar., 1951, p. 27-42.

in the “symbolic technology” that the former had. Todorov's central claim is that the Pre-Columbian native society rested on three interrelated notions that ultimately explain the Conquest and defeat: 1) a concept of time which was almost completely past-oriented, 2) a profound social conformity, and 3) a cultural stasis which rendered change nearly impossible.<sup>132</sup> Thus according to Todorov, the Spanish victory had little to do with the military technology or the alliances that the conquerors established with other indigenous groups and more with the Spanish realizing these “symbolic weaknesses” and taking advantage of them.<sup>133</sup>

These three versions aim to answer the same question and yet bring different aspects to try to solve the puzzle. In the first case it is “technological advancement” that made a huge difference in the defeat of the Mexicans. Pool organizes and construes a narrative where the weapons and artillery constituted the essential breakthrough that

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<sup>132</sup> Deborah Root, “The Imperial Signifier: Todorov and the Conquest of Mexico”, *Cultural Critique*, No. 9, Spring, 1988, p. 197-219

<sup>133</sup> It is important and interesting to add that Todorov’s interpretation was, at first, perceived as having interesting and novel semiotic inputs, but with the emergence of critical race theory this changed completely. With this new conceptual theory his view was rightly evaluated to have profound racist commitments.

consolidated the Spanish victory. The second example articulates the narrative around the divine and mythical aspects of the Mexicans. Collis' argument concentrates in the religious tradition of Mesoamerica and in the cosmology of the Mexicans. From his perspective, the Mexicans surrendered before even starting the battle with the conquistadors. Their time had come, their destiny was written, and it was time for it to be fulfilled. The third view concentrates on the so called "symbolic advancement" from the Conquistadors' side. This allowed them to "truly" understand "the other" in order to finally defeat them.

By starting off with different aspects that try to answer the same question, each of these versions gives the Conquest a whole different meaning. The result in all of the narratives is obviously the same: The Conquest. But how that event came to be is what makes each of these narratives completely unique. They concentrate on different aspects and this, in turn, organizes the narrative in a very particular way. Occurrences, characters, alliances, battles, meetings are given a completely different weight depending on what conducts the narrative.

Bringing Ginzburg, Hartman, Hacking and the examples of the Conquest into this chapter makes clear how the historian is not “empty handed” when it comes to understanding what happened in a certain time and place. On the contrary, what all of these examples allow us to recognize is that the historians are never neutral. It is because they always bring a filtered standpoint that “the past” actually makes sense. Having this view in mind makes the so-called aspiration of “making the past speak for itself” an everlasting nostalgia. “Re-constructing” what was once there by rescinding oneself from any role in doing so, is still something that needs to be clarified and fully explained by the realist and the representationalists positions. “To be faithful” to a past seems to mean to not “contain” our ways of understanding the world, our knowledge of what happened after event x, and our basic cognitive activity of establishing connections and associations. In other words, “being faithful” means to cease to exist as historical beings ourselves.

#### 4.3. Historical Aspects: non-aggregative.

What I would now like to make more evident is the idea of “non-aggregation” and how it is that historical aspects reaffirm this

commitment. This in turn will prove to be important because it will show that aspects are not summable and therefore they are not composing an absent whole as Ankersmit suggested. As Mink maintained, “instead of the belief that there is a single story embracing the ensemble of human events, we believe that there are many stories, not only different stories about different events, but even different stories about the same event.”<sup>134</sup> We need to understand historical aspects as proposals or hypothesis that do not belong to a unified perspective. The idea of totality or, as Mink also criticized, the idea of a Universal History loses all meaning in this scenario because there is no universality or totality to re-present.

To add to this point, let us go back to Wittgenstein. In various examples (RPP §23, PP §118, §152) he suggested that when one sees a figure as x one cannot see it, at the same time, as y. If you see the rabbit in the duck-rabbit picture you cannot, at the same time, see the duck because you organize certain features of the image in a particular way that excludes you from seeing it as a duck. The same thing happens

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<sup>134</sup> Louis Mink, *Historical Understanding*, Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 193-194.

when we take a different stimulus that is not necessarily a two-way ambiguous figure like the duck-rabbit image. When one chooses to see Goodman's person as a friend one cannot, at the same time, see her as a conglomerate of atoms. Again, one way of seeing excludes the other. Different from the duck-rabbit example where the image seems to contain only two ways of being seen, with Goodman's person, as with historical events, the situation is even more complicated. First this is because there are more than just two ways of seeing a historical event. *As previously showed, the possibilities when seeing a person or a historical event are vastly more complex than the dual duck-rabbit image.* With the example of the Conquest we see three different interpretations of what happened, and this is only a sample of the multiplicity of accounts that try to answer the historical research question.

Second, to think that these vastly complex perspectives can be aggregated is to think that there is a complete set of qualities that the person or historical event entails. In other words, there is a totality that needs to be completed. On this note, Koselleck asserted that "anyone who attempts to integrate the sum total of individual histories into a single total history is bound to fail. This can only be attempted if and

when a theory has been developed that would make a total history possible.”<sup>135</sup> So far, there is no theory that allows us to sum perspectives and give us a complete god’s eye view picture. Ankersmit proposed such a view, but it can be shown that his theory simply falls short. There are cases in historical narratives where one cannot simply aggregate views. This is what I will now make clear with the following examples.

Let us take as a paradigmatic case the example that was used in chapter one to explain the foreground and background principle in historical narratives. As noted previously, Marx revolutionized the understanding of the capitalist system by taking as a central concern the idea of surplus value. Differently from his predecessors Smith and Ricardo, Marx understood the development of capitalism as a system based on exploitation and saw the history of humankind as the history of the struggle between two main social classes. He came to this conclusion by placing the aspect of surplus value as a problem rather than as an innocent consequence of capitalism. On the opposite side,

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<sup>135</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *The practice of conceptual history*, Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 117.

Smith and Ricardo positioned the capitalist system as a creator of value and social organization. The idea of surplus value was seen by them precisely as a consequence and not as a problem internal to the system itself.

This example is very useful because it makes plain that if one sees the idea of surplus value as a problem as Marx did, then there is no way that one can, at the same time, see it as a harmless consequence of the production system. Marx allowed us to reconceptualize the idea of capitalism by providing a new *gestalt*. He ordered information and interpreted certain features of that information in a very particular and unique way. His political interpretation—we even call his view “political economy”—revolutionized our understanding and framed things through a historical aspect that allowed us to see and organize things very differently. But what I really want to stress here is that neoclassical theory and the Marxist views are obviously on opposite sides. If one chooses to see the development of the capitalist system through the eyes of Ricardo and Smith, one cannot at the same time see it in Marxist terms. One necessarily excludes the other. The idea of aggregating these perspectives is simply a logical contradiction. There

exists no possibility of adding Smith+Ricardo+Marx and coming out with a “complete” picture of the history of capitalism. In this sense, any history is a product of a necessary perspective that imposes aspects to make sense of particular developments. Marx, Smith, and Ricardo had a cognitive standpoint that allowed them to produce a unique narrative of the capitalist production. But these standpoints cannot simply be added up. If we choose to see the capitalist system in Marxist terms, we are excluding the neoclassic organization and vice versa.

Alongside the interpretations and perspectives of the capitalist system, we can also see the non-aggregative argument in the idea of the Renaissance. Both Michelet and Burckhardt are known for using the term “Renaissance” to talk about a rupture between what was accepted as the Middle Ages. They both termed this specific time the Renaissance to convey a certain break with a past and the “reinvention” of cultural views that dated back to Greek and Roman cultures. Nevertheless, on closer inspection we see that Michelet’s work presented the Renaissance as the result of a clash between two cultures. Jo Tollebeek explains that Michelet presented the Renaissance as “the shock which had arisen on the invasion of Charles

VIII in 1494, between the 'leaden world' of a France which mentally still lived in the fourteenth century and the brilliant world of an already fully sixteenth-century Italy.”<sup>136</sup> For Michelet it was the coalition between two different cultures—one delayed in time and the other one ahead of it—that provoked a particular cultural rebirth. The framework and the primacy of the French culture in Michelet’s account seeks to explain this particular historical time not only as an Italian revolution, but also as a French one.

On the other hand, Burckhardt holds that “it was not the revival of antiquity alone, but its union with the genius of the Italian people, which achieved the conquest of the western world.”<sup>137</sup> He insists that maybe “elsewhere in Europe men deliberately and with reflection borrowed this or the other element of classical civilization”, but he really emphasizes that “in Italy the sympathies both of the learned and of the people were *naturally* engaged on the side of antiquity as a whole, which stood to them as a symbol of past greatness.”<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Jo Tollebeek, 'Renaissance' and 'fossilization': Michelet, Burckhardt, and Huizinga, *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3, September 2001, p.360.

<sup>137</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, translated by S.G.C Middlemore, Batoche Books, 2001, p. 135.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, (my emphasis) p. 137.

Both Michelet and Burckhardt are using the same historical aspect to talk about a particular phenomenon that they are both characterizing as the re-emergence of Greek and Roman culture. But even when they agree to understand this particular set of occurrences under this aspect, they disagree on the causes of the event. The French historian Michelet defends the centrality of the clash between France and Italy. The Swiss historian Burckhardt holds the uniqueness and individuality that Italian civilization had in the rebirth of Greek and Roman cultures. If one chooses to see the spark of the Renaissance in Michelet's terms, then that excludes the idea that there was something unique about the Italian civilization. Michelet can agree with Burckhardt that yes, maybe there was something special with Italians, but it was only the clash that produced the re-birth. Similarly, if one chooses to take Burckhardt's perspective on the uniqueness of Italian civilization, then one needs to exclude the participation of the French to spark anything.

Bringing attention to the history of the capitalist system and the idea or the Renaissance allows us to understand that historical aspects understood in this way cannot be aggregated, and therefore it makes evident that the assumed existence of a totality cannot hold.

Ankersmit's perspective would maintain that Marx as well as Smith and Ricardo were looking at different aspects of the capitalist system. Furthermore, his view would also argue that Burckhardt and Michelet's perspectives represent different angles of the same phenomenon. *But as it has been shown in this chapter, this conflicts with the fact that we are given contradictory perspectives.* We have agreed that there is no exclusive way the world is therefore, there is no exclusive interpretation of how things came to be. The failure to be able to aggregate even in principle underscores both the plausibility and the need to take narratives as providing us with a cognitive standpoint. The structuring principles, in short, function as epistemic constraints as well, and thus need to be interrogated from this perspective. But to really press on the idea of non-aggregation and finally show how Ankersmit's notion of aspects is not logically possible, one need only reflect on how these conflicting accounts cannot be distinct aspects of some metaphysically prior and ontologically independent object. Instead, if one understands historical aspects as imposing perspectives that make information useful according to certain perspectives and purposes, then the

Wittgensteinian notion of aspects elaborated as an alternative to Ankersmit better accounts for what historians actually do.

## 5. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have provide reasons for why the realist and representationalist claims offer no epistemic purchase or insight. The first criticism was against the three realist commitments—neutrality, faithfulness and language mirroring reality. I claimed that these principles simply do not explain a particular feature of historical narratives—that of multiplicity. Second, while acknowledging that there is an effort by representationalists such as Ankersmit to move past these realist commitments, I demonstrated how this view simply presupposes realist commitments, one so makes the notion of aspects unable to explain narrative multiplicity. In the positive account of this chapter, a different notion of historical aspects was developed. I provided examples to illustrate how this explains the role that interpretation and organization has in historical narratives and how it aligns with the constructivist commitments. Finally, and also in

opposition to Ankersmit's view, an important consequence of the account I have sketched is that histories cannot aggregate.

### *III. Epistemic Normativity in Historiography*

Abstract:

We can identify at least three main positions within the philosophy of history that try to establish a normative account regarding historical narratives. Although these are not exhaustive of the historiographical panorama, they are representative of the current state of affairs. First, we have what I will call the Narrative Realist account. This position argues that there is a correspondence between the past and the narrative about the past. Thus, the criteria for normativity will be one that takes the accumulation of facts and information as a worthy and sufficient standard for goodness. The “more complete” picture must be the better picture since there is by hypothesis just one complete picture. Second, we have the complete opposite. I will call this position Narrative Antirealist. The antirealists reject the “one picture” correspondence theory and, therefore, deny that the accumulation of facts can suffice as a criterion for normative evaluation. Within this second approach we can recognize two central positions. On the one hand we have the literary antirealists who deny that epistemic evaluation is even possible in historical narratives. On the other hand,

we have Kuukkanen's proposal of a Tripartite Theory of Justification that tries to create, within an antirealist framework, a system for epistemic evaluation. In what follows I will explain and critique each of these three proposals. I will argue that none of the three provides a satisfactory normative account regarding historiography. In other words, considering the view about historical narratives that has been developed throughout this dissertation, none of these suggestions proves to be an effective guide for providing a reasoned basis for preferring one narrative over another. Therefore, in this chapter I will propose a new standard for historiographic normativity, one that takes the concepts of *understanding* and *reorganization* at its center.

## 1. Introduction

As we have seen throughout this dissertation, the realists believe in an isomorphic relation between a particular narrative and the past. They hold that history exists as a “determinate, untold story until discovered and told by the historian.”<sup>139</sup> As Adrian Kuzminski argues in defense

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<sup>139</sup>A.P Norman, “Telling it as it was: Historical Narratives on Their Own Terms,” *History and Theory*, 30, 1991, p. 183.

of this view, for a history to be true, “either there is or there is not *a correspondence* between the facts portrayed in the statement and what relevant evidence testifies did or did not happen.”<sup>140</sup> He further adds that “a true story is one that actually occurred; *it directly correlates* (if we know it is true) not only with the imaginations of author and readers, but also with certain public evidence.”<sup>141</sup> In other words, there is a mapping relationship between what happened in the past—sequence of events— and what the narrative tells us that happened. The narrative should contain every detail, piece of information, and data of what *actually causes* to happen to happen in a particular time and place. This thesis, and the significance of “the relevant evidence”, as we have discussed in the previous chapters, becomes not only an epistemic thesis i.e., evidence for or against a hypothesis, but also a metaphysical one, i.e., corresponds to what actually caused what happen to happen. As William Dray stated, for the realist “it might be preferable to speak of there being unknown narrativizable configurations—tellables—

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<sup>140</sup>Adrian Kuzminski, “Defending historical realism”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Oct., 1979, p. 317. (my emphasis)

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346 (my emphasis)

already there for the discovering.”<sup>142</sup> That is, the sort of “instable-openness” of the past gets replaced by a “stable, closed-fixity” that reassesses a one “true meaning” that is found rather than something that is constructed and articulated by the historian. Thus, the narrative realist view holds a position in which the casual connections between events are to be found in the sources. As seen in chapter two, this type of realism holds that there is *only one* possible way of providing a correct interpretation of what happened. As Nozick recognizes, “Truth is one, not perspectival.”<sup>143</sup> For this type of realist, the disagreement about different meanings that historians provide facts with can only be settled methodologically. According to this view, a scrutiny of the primary and secondary sources alongside a precise division of what counts as “objective facts” and “subjective information” in the sources can discern which narrative is the correct one. Although since the nineteenth century intents have been made to clearly define this surgical methodological model, there is still no settled agreement on

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<sup>142</sup> William Dray, *On history and philosophers of history*, New York, E.J Brill, 1989, p. 162.

<sup>143</sup> Peter Nozick, *That noble dream*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 2.

one of the most basic questions that is, what actually counts as an “objective fact.”

One of the repercussions of this view, as we have seen in the past two chapters of this dissertation, is that “the historically contingent nature of the particular historical representation is considered to be valid for all time and with this other possible historical understandings or representations are closed.”<sup>144</sup> But as Kleinberg holds, *the fiction of a stable past can only signify the fiction of a stable present*. Historical interpretations change because the past is something constructed from the present. New concepts, frameworks of understanding and new questions organize the data in ways that will provide different meanings to past occurrences. *This entails that the views about the past are never closed*, rather they can be opened and reframed depending on the demands and circumstances of the present.

Having sketched out the realist perspective it is now worth asking, what is a good criterion to evaluate narratives according to this view? To answer this question let us explore a view in epistemology that

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<sup>144</sup> Ethan Kleinberg, “Interview: Theory of History as Hountology” by André da Silva Ramos, *História da Historiografia: International Journal of Theory and History of Historiography*, n. 25, dezembro, 2017.

might correspond and reflect some realist normative criteria. Catherine Elgin has argued that there is a view in epistemology—the dominant view—that holds that progress or growth in knowledge is the acquisition “of new (justified or reliably generated) true beliefs.” A person, according to this view, “learns a hitherto unknown but properly grounded truth and smoothly incorporates it into his epistemic corpus. On this picture, information comes in discrete bits, and the growth of knowledge is cumulative.”<sup>145</sup> What Elgin describes here is a view that the realists would take to inform the ideals for narrative evaluation.

The standard for a good historical narrative according to the realist view would entail a factive accumulation of knowledge that generates true statements about the past. Thus, for this type of realism, a good historical narrative is one that can actually re-present all of what the past has to offer. The amount of detail, truths, and data are seen as epistemic normative standards for a good narrative. *Aggregation of information becomes an important factor here. If we are able to have more data*

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<sup>145</sup> Catherine Elgin, “Art in the Advancement of Understanding” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Jan., 2002, Vol. 39, No. 1, p. 2.

*about a certain occurrence, then we are able to “re-construct” and “re-present” what the past is all about.* The realist, therefore, affirms that there exist practice-internal standards that are realistically constructed. This account presupposes that there is in fact, a story to be discovered rather than truths that become relevant only after the occurrences have taken place. In other words, it presupposes that a story, for whatever magical reason, weaves together separate images and conceives unfulfilled hopes, plans, battles and ideas as things to be found rather than retrospectively constructed.<sup>146</sup>

Nevertheless, this seems to be too restrictive or even misguided. Usually, when we have two seriously competing historical narratives, the amount of data, sources and facts that each contain are basically the same. Unless there is a discovery of new documents or vestiges that provide drastically new information, there is not much that this normative criterion can tell us about why historians prefer one narrative over another. But even when there is new information to incorporate, the key is not how many facts, truths or details are

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<sup>146</sup> Louis Mink, “History and Fiction as Modes of comprehension”, *New Literary History*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Spring, 1970, p. 557.

embedded in the narrative, but how the new information is understood and how it coexists with the old one. As Elgin stresses, cognitive progress is not always a matter of learning something new, but rather of making sense of what we already have. Questions such as: “What is worthy of notice? What should be overlooked, marginalized, or ignored?”<sup>147</sup> become central to what she calls *critical epistemology*<sup>148</sup>. In other words, what is worth noticing and paying attention to is not how many new facts are thrown into the narrative, or how much information and detail a narrative contains. Instead, it is how the author organizes, presents and interprets the information that we already have. In short, normative success *cannot* be measured by noting the number of facts, rather it should be measured by how these facts are connected.

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<sup>147</sup> Catherine Elgin, “Art in the Advancement of Understanding”, p. 2

<sup>148</sup> We are going to understand critical epistemology as a view that questions the idea that knowledge is the central thing to consider when we talk about epistemological advancement. Critical epistemology will take the concept of understanding as a much better fit when discussing epistemic progress. Knowing a new fact does not necessarily create “fruitful consequences” or “new ripples”. The central claim of critical epistemology is that understanding differs from knowledge because it is not a passive-absorbing task, rather it entails the reassessment of the information at hand. This allows us to ask questions and further our inquiries. In short, knowledge can stay put, understanding is a never-ending task.

As argued before, the realist normativity focuses on the amount of facts that a work of history contains instead of focusing on the *understanding* such facts. I am using the notion of understanding here as connected to the way in which we *organize* and *interpret* inchoate information.<sup>149</sup> Elgin's critical epistemology, I will argue, will prove to be a much better tool for building a standard for historiographic normativity. In other words, instead of focusing on the amount of detail, volume of data, or number of facts (knowledge), we should focus on how these pieces of information are brought together into a coherent whole (understanding). Since Danto and his thought experiment of the I.C –discussed in the previous chapter– it has become evident that: 1) Having the complete account about a particular event is simply impossible: and 2) Even if that is possible, historians do *not* need some “complete” record of facts. That would still not be enough to helpfully evaluate a historical narrative that understands and constructs, retrospectively, a historical event.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Catherine Elgin, “Understanding and the facts”, *Philosophical Studies*, Jan., 2007, Vol. 132, p.39.

<sup>150</sup> This does not mean that the historian does not need facts at all. Historians need evidence, archives, monuments, etc. But the idea here is that having the god-eye view becomes simply impossible. There will be events that only become clear or meaningful once they have occurred. Thus, having the god

The second normative position is what I call Narrative Antirealist. Within the literary approach of the antirealist framework, we have people such as Hayden White, Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow.<sup>151</sup> One thing that the literary antirealists argue against is the correspondence theory that the realists defend. What matters for the antirealist is not how many facts, details, or information historians incorporates into their narrative, but rather, how the literary devices that are involved in narrative construction allow them to give structure and make sense of those facts. Another way that we can understand the antirealist enterprise is to compare it to Elgin's account. In a way, the literary antirealists, in particular Hayden White, revolutionized the historical field by changing our focus from facts/evidence to understanding. The whole idea of narrative was determinative on how

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eye view of a single point in time becomes pointless when truths are retrospectively constructed.

<sup>151</sup> To see more about the literary-antirealist position, look at Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking history*, London, Routledge, 2008. Jenkins argues that there are neither epistemological nor empirical grounds to choose one narrative over others, "all historians' construction are equally arbitrary" (p. 64) See also Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007. He argues that "it is the function of the reader to determine for herself why some views of the past are plausible, satisfactory and convincing and others are not." (p.116) As Kuukkanen notes, (*Postnarrativist philosophy of history*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, p.152-153.) for Munslow there are no rational judgements and corrections that go beyond the individual's tastes and preferences.

the facts are understood. That is, the facts stopped to “speak for themselves” and they were now subject to the historian’s work-process. *In short, in this proposal, there is a shift in focus from the data to the meaning-making process of the data.*

Nevertheless, the literary antirealists have argued that the organizing criterion in narrative is aesthetic in nature and because of that, *there are no epistemic grounds* to evaluate one narrative over the other. What the antirealist ends up doing is divorcing the aesthetic from the epistemic realm. But even further than that, it is not entirely clear how within the aesthetic realm one can actually evaluate one narrative over the other.

In “The Burden of History” White states that,

The historian [...] thus be viewed as one who, like the modern artist and scientist, seeks to exploit a certain perspective on the world that does not pretend to exhaust description or analysis of all of the data in the entire phenomenal field but rather offers itself as one way among many of disclosing certain aspects of the field. As Gombrich points out in *Art and Illusion*, we do not expect that Constable and Cezanne will have looked for the same thing in a given landscape, and when we confront their respective representations of a

landscape, *we do not expect to have to choose between them and determine which is the "more correct" one.*<sup>152</sup>

One could argue that “more correct” does not mean “better than”. The idea of correctness could refer to a notion of history that relates more to the realist account. To evaluate *p* as being “more correct” than *q* is to say that *p* contains “more truths, information or accuracy” than *q*. Nevertheless, White’s position— also developed in a number of his papers<sup>153</sup>—is that *there are no epistemic standards for historiographical evaluation*. This not only means that there is no criterion to establish which narrative is “more correct” than others, but he goes further than that and holds that there is no epistemic criterion to determine which narrative or explanation is *better* than another.

What the literary antirealists are denying is that facts are not sufficient for determining which history to prefer, and furthermore that facts cannot serve this function because there is no “one true narrative” to be discovered. The literary antirealist argues that by shifting narratives

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<sup>152</sup> Hayden White, “The Burden of History”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1966, p.130.

<sup>153</sup> Hayden White, “Politics of Historical Interpretation”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Sep., 1982, pp. 113-137.

one shifts which facts matter and so the epistemic weight of certain facts also shifts. In other words, the view of what matters for the narrative dictates what is considered correct and thus the coincidence of the “facts” with the mode of emplotment leads to the success or failure, the correctness or incorrectness, of said narrative.

As with Constable and Cezanne, White holds, we are not expected to have to choose between historical narratives. Because they are aesthetic constructions there is no clear criterion that can tell us how to choose between different historical accounts. As Paul Roth notes, White's account promotes a view in which internal rational evaluation becomes impossible.<sup>154</sup> I follow Roth in suggesting that, in other words, for White et.al, there is no logical standard for normativity. The consequence of this suggests that narrative construction is “purely an aesthetic act” with no type of logic behind it.

Different questions come to mind with the literary antirealist approach, but particularly, why is it that the aesthetic and the epistemic realms are divorced, particularly in the field of history? Furthermore, *even if we*

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<sup>154</sup> Paul Roth, “Hayden White and the aesthetics of historiography”, *History of the Human Sciences*, February 1992, p. 18.

*accept that the evaluative criterion is not epistemic, and that the aesthetic and the epistemic are divorced, then, what type of aesthetic normativity can we follow to choose one narrative over the other?* The literary antirealists are silent on this point. Thus, they do not give any straightforward answer that can help with narrative evaluation.

The third and final normative account is Kuukkanen's Tripartite Theory of Justification (TTJ). In his book *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, Kuukkanen develops an antirealist normative account that seeks to overcome the literary "absent normativity" without necessarily falling back into pure realist commitments. He seeks to present, among other things, an internal and external epistemic criterion for historiographical evaluation. In what follows I will explain and offer a critique of Kuukkanen's view.

The first critique that I offer is of his own skeptical approach to narrative. I argue that his view on narrative impedes him from recognizing its epistemic value. The second critique focuses on his particular evaluative system. I will argue that, although he tries to incorporate internal evaluative criteria, in the end his account is not entirely clear on how the internal and external criteria are separated.

In his book, Kuukkanen argues that “the concept of narrative mischaracterizes the nature of knowledge production in historiography, which in actuality, results in something more structured than just a set of descriptions of singular events.”<sup>155</sup> As discussed in chapter 1, Kuukkanen is not comfortable with the idea that historiography is a narrative. In his view, narrative and the use of reason are divorced when conceived of in this way. In short, for the TITJ this is the fundamental problem that narrativism has. Kuukkanen argues that the framework of rationality is different from the narrative-descriptive accounts.<sup>156</sup> In a sense, he follows the literary antirealist by saying that the aesthetic, i.e., the narrative, is divorced from the epistemic, i.e. the rational. Nevertheless— as mentioned in chapter one— different from the literary antirealist, Kuukkanen’s goal is to move away from narrative altogether. For him, the main goal of historical accounts is to present a thesis or hypothesis and the reasons to accept it. It is because of the separation between narratives and rational

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<sup>155</sup> Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015, p. 87.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

construction that they “cannot provide an epistemological or otherwise cognitively meaningful evaluative framework.”<sup>157</sup>

This claim is, of course, counterintuitive to what we have been arguing throughout this dissertation. Chapter one is dedicated to explaining the cognitive value of the principles that are involved in narrative and how they represent the logic of narrative construction. Chapter two explains how these principles work as a whole to provide aspects that frame events under a particular light that is epistemically chosen by the historian. This is a fundamental disagreement that this work has with Kuukkanen and why his evaluative framework fails to appreciate the epistemic dimension of narrative construction and so the possibilities of evaluating them. In my account, narrative is not divorced from rational construction. On the contrary, narratives are an important epistemic practice that reveals, *inter alia*, the marriage between the aesthetic and the epistemic.<sup>158</sup>

But even further than that, Kuukkanen’s theory has important limitations. The T\*J normative account has three central pillars. 1) The

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>158</sup> In this sense, my view is closer to thinkers such as Hegel, Cassirer, Langer and Noë.

*epistemic dimension*, in which Kuukkanen includes virtues such as good exemplification, coherence, consistency, scope, comprehensiveness and originality. 2) The *rhetorical dimension*, where specific forms of argumentation and persuasion are involved. He argues that this “refers to internal textual and argumentative qualities of a text, as if the text formed an autonomous unit of rationality.”<sup>159</sup> 3) The *discursive dimension*. This last aspect of the evaluative framework involves “something external, because it refers beyond the text itself to the historiographical argumentative context [...] The argumentative context itself has been shaped by various kinds of intellectual, political, and other interests.”<sup>160</sup> In other words, the work will be evaluated depending on its contribution to that field.

There are at least two things that become problematic with Kuukkanen’s evaluative framework: 1) It is not entirely clear how the *epistemic dimension* operates to evaluate contending accounts. The example that Kuukkanen gives to illustrate how his epistemic dimension works is the use of the *colligatory concept* of “The Thaw” to

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>160</sup> *Idem.*

explain the period of de-Stalinization under Khrushchev. He shows how different historians make use of this concept and how it works to exemplify and create coherence in a historical discourse. He also argues that the use of the term is original since it not only captures social transformation and change, but also a change in emotions, “from repressed feelings to a new openness and the expression of love.” Once that is recognized, there seems to be no clear way to evaluate under the epistemic domain one narrative over the other. If two contending views, as Kuukkanen shows, are using the same concept to articulate their narrative, how can we determine *epistemically* which one is better? Is it that by using the same concept they are fulfilling the epistemic dimension successfully? Are they all exemplifying and being original in the same way? Aren’t there different ways to accomplish such virtues? Again, Kuukkanen is not exactly clear how it is that evaluation occurs in this domain. He might argue that if two narratives exemplify and give coherence using the same concept, then the other two domains of his TITJ may have to do the evaluative part. But if that is the case, then why have the epistemic domain in the first place? His explanation of the use of colligatory concepts in historical narratives

seems to be describing something that historians do rather than something that is useful in the evaluative process.

2) The view is also problematic because Kuukkanen does not explain if these three realms stand in some sort of hierarchy. What if one work of history succeeds in the epistemic dimension but fails in the discursive one, and another has a great discursive dimension but a weaker epistemic one. Can his criteria work to determine between these two historical narratives? Kuukkanen does not indicate how he would answer such questions.

Furthermore, as Paul Roth conveys, the three evaluative criteria “quickly become clouded as one examines just how they might be actually distinguished.”<sup>161</sup> Kuukkanen makes an important effort to try to establish a clear and distinguishable tripartite ground for historical evaluation, but the effort to keep each of these three realms separated becomes difficult to follow. Moreover, he argues that these three domains are equally important, but that does not seem to be the case.

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<sup>161</sup> Paul Roth, “Back to the future: postnarrativist historiography and analytic philosophy of history” *History and Theory*, Vol.55, n.2, 2016, p. 279.

For example, when he evaluates contending views on the Great War— in which he only uses the *rhetorical* and the *discursive dimensions* to do so— he argues that “success depends on how new argumentative intervention manages to pinpoint weakness or insufficiencies in the existing accounts or add something new to them.”<sup>162</sup> Thus, it seems that the important thing to consider is the *discursive dimension* and how the arguments provided in the *rhetorical* part prove to be a contribution to the literature on the topic. If that is the case, then why keep them as different dimensions? It seems that the internal and external differentiations collide here. Even more, if new argumentative interventions are the measure of success, why exactly do we need the epistemic domain? The [T] sometimes favors one criteria and sometimes another, but yet, it never makes it clear why or when to favor one over the other in a consistent way. Kuukkanen’s account seems to demand attention to many points that he leaves underdeveloped or unclear. The view, in short, just leaves many important questions unanswered.

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<sup>162</sup> Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*, p.165.

So far, we have reviewed three normative accounts regarding historical narratives. The realist, the literary antirealist and the antirealist [1]. The first one holds on to the notion of correspondence and therefore it values factivism as a normative criterion. The second one denies that there are any epistemic norms whatsoever and it is not clear on the aesthetic side what criteria we should follow to determine which narrative is better than another. The third one ultimately seems to be more of a descriptive enterprise rather than a normative criterion. It seems to describe the levels of analysis that go into understanding a historical narrative. Nevertheless, this descriptive examination falls short when trying to transform it into an evaluative method. Finally, it is not clear how the tripartite account is supposed to work if it does not have a hierarchy among the dimensions. The account leaves us with many unanswered questions that are central to understanding the view as a whole.

Now let us investigate the idea of *understanding* to start to build what my alternative account is all about. I will argue that the notion of understanding developed by Catherine Elgin and the idea of reorganization explored by Alva Noë will prove key in narrative

evaluation. The idea is that a narrative that improves our understanding by calling our default assumptions into question will be considered better than one that simply reasserts them. Furthermore, my view allows us to pair the idea of understanding with the idea of reorganization. This pairing provides us with a framework that makes it possible to recognize and evaluate new ways that information can be reframed. Understanding and reorganization are thus, the basis of my normative criterion for narrative.

## 2. Art, History, and Philosophy as instances of Understanding.

Let us expand on the notion of understanding and the importance that the contrast with knowledge has for this project.<sup>163</sup> I will argue that in

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<sup>163</sup> The literature on the philosophy of understanding is incredibly vast, particularly in the field of philosophy of science. One of the central debates that the concept of understanding brings about is the difference that it has with knowledge. Some authors that engage in this debate are Michael Strevens, Kareem Khalifa, Henk W. de Regt, Jonathan Kvanvig, John Greco, Catherine Elgin, etc. There are, at least, three different approaches regarding this debate. Greco, for example, favors the idea that understanding is simply a type of knowledge (“The Value Problem” *Epistemic Value*, Oxford University Press, 2009). Others such as de Regt (“The Epistemic Value of Understanding”, *Philosophy of Science*, 2009) and Elgin (“Understanding and the facts” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 2007) hold that knowledge is not a type of understanding. They argue that knowledge is propositional and factive and understanding is not. Kvanvig (“Understanding” *Oxford Handbook on the Epistemology of Theology*,

the concept of understanding developed by Catherine Elgin, we can find a normative criterion that can help us begin to evaluate contending historical narratives.

In the beginning of her “Art in the advancement of understanding” Catherine Elgin notes that “human beings seem to gather information as squirrels gather nuts.” Bit by bit, she continues, “we amass data and store it away against future needs.”<sup>164</sup> In a way, we seem to be prone to entertain and accumulate a wide variety of continuously changing facts. By no means one would want to deny that this is a way of constructing knowledge of certain things about the world. Knowledge, Elgin notes, “is usually taken to pertain to discrete propositions. An

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2017), Khalifa (“Philosophy of Understanding” in *Understanding, Explanation, and Scientific Knowledge*, 2017) and Strevens (“Varieties of Understanding” Talk given at the Pacific APA, 2010) hold that there are different types of understanding and different types of knowledge. Thus, knowledge is not exclusively factive and understanding can sometimes have some factive constraints. Kvanvig, for example, talks about *propositional understanding* (I understand that X), *understanding-why* (I understand-why X), and *objectual understanding* (I understand X). In this chapter I opt for Elgin and de Regt’s position which recognizes a special kind of skill in understanding and clearly marks it as non-factive. I argue that the understanding that goes into constructing a narrative is different from knowing, let’s say, the capital of a state. It involves a particular skill that one cannot learn in a textbook. It requires the ability of seeing things together.

<sup>164</sup> Catherine Elgin, “Art in the advancement of understanding”, p.1.

epistemic agent knows that *p*.”<sup>165</sup> Knowledge, therefore, seems to be granular, directed at atomic propositions: Julia *knows that* this button turns the phone on, or Carlos *knows that* plants need water to survive. But the idea is that understanding is not granular nor propositional. It is something different. Take the same examples that were just mentioned but substitute knowledge for understanding: Carlos *understands that* plant need water to survive, and Julia *understands that* this button turns the phone on. It seems that when we interchange the concept of knowledge for understanding we are referring to something different, something that is not just the statement of a fact, but some sort of deeper level of comprehension that the word knowledge does not capture.

Understanding, in this sense, is “an integrated, systematically organized account of a domain.”<sup>166</sup> Understanding is a way of making cognitive progress, but it is not necessarily by collecting new facts or learning something new, it is about developing a sort of skill that allows us to integrate such knowledge, to see how it “hangs together.”

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<sup>165</sup> Catherine Elgin, *True enough*, MIT press, 2017, p. 14.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

To exemplify Elgin's point let us look to Henk W. de Regt. In "The epistemic value of Understanding", de Regt notes that

[a] student may have memorized Bernoulli's principle and have all background conditions available but still be unable to use this knowledge to account for the fact that jets can fly. The extra ingredient is a skill: the ability to construct deductive arguments from the available knowledge.<sup>167</sup>

De Regt continues to argue that this special skill is epistemically relevant because it allows us to *evaluate* how different theories apply to certain phenomenon and why. The idea here is that having more facts or knowing more about  $p$  does not automatically entail that one understands  $p$ . Knowledge and understanding are not necessarily the same thing. De Regt remarks that knowledge can be something that we learn or acquire in a textbook, whereas understanding requires practice.

Take this other example, one can learn in a textbook or *know* that the Mexican Revolution started on November <sup>20th</sup> 1910; that president Madero was assassinated in 1913, and that Zapata and Villa met in

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<sup>167</sup> Henk W. de Regt, "The Epistemic Value of Understanding", *Philosophy of Science*, 76, December 2009, p. 588.

Mexico City in 1914. For some, these are new pieces of information, for others they are old facts. The point is that knowing these pieces of information does not imply that you *understand* the main twists and turns, the central characters, the social and political climate of Mexico at the time. It does not even entail that you understand the concept of Revolution. This just means that you *know* an isolated fact and that you can state it. Learning more facts about this particular event may be helpful, but still this does not entail that you *understand* the Mexican Revolution. To do so you need to do something to the information that you have; you need to weave, organize, discriminate and interpret the different pieces. Telling a story is not necessarily something that a textbook can teach you, rather it is something that you develop as a skill. Telling a story implies the understanding of the facts: you know what to foreground, what to leave in the background, what to make proximal and similar, continuous and how to give closure. This provides us not only with knowledge about certain events, but it also provides us with an additional resource which is how these facts are connected and how does it all make sense.

Thus, thinking about both of our examples, understanding seems to entail on the one hand, a practical use and, on the other a matter of “seeing things together”. In our first example—understanding Bernoulli’s principle and the dynamic of fluids— allows the student to take that knowledge and apply it to a particular event like the flying of a jet. This shows that the students has *knowledge* of certain concepts and physical laws, but it also shows that she can use it to explain different types of phenomena. We can say that she *understands* the information that she is working with because she is able to apply it to different sets of instances.

In our second example, understanding not only involves a practical skill— i.e, applying the term revolution to particular set of events— but it also requires a matter of “seeing things together”, of being able to take different pieces of information and construct a coherent meaning out of them.

From another perspective, but with the same philosophical insight regarding the separation between knowledge and understanding, Louis Mink argues that “we know many things as unrelated facts—Voltaire’s full name, the population of Rumania in 1930, the binomial theorem,

the longitude of Vancouver.” But comprehension, or understanding, he argues, “is an individual act of seeing-things-together, and only that.”<sup>168</sup> Therefore, the separation between knowledge and understanding in historical narratives seems to be not only important but particularly interesting because it is what differentiates the mere regurgitation of facts with the ability of constructing a history with such facts. There is an important wedge here between factual information/evidence and understanding. Knowing that p, where p is just some statement of fact, is often not knowing much. Take a police detective who has a lot of information but cannot solve the crime. Collecting more facts does not necessary represent knowledge worth having.

Elgin’s critical epistemology, as we have argued, aims precisely at shifting this point of focus. It aims not only at including knowledge as an example of epistemic success but also encompassing the concept of understanding. The significance of this is very important to history and historical understanding. The very value of historical narratives is not the mere statement of fact after fact, but the mooring of such facts. I

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<sup>168</sup> Louis Mink, “History and Fiction as Modes of comprehension”, p. 553.

reiterate, this is an essential activity that the historian performs. The sequence of events—and therefore the meaning making of the event—is not to be found in the sources, rather it is to be found in the action of providing congruence and organization to what is otherwise an isolated cumulation of facts.

There are, of course, different ways that the tying of events can come together. We can see this as *organizing* the material that we already have. This organization is, in fact, an instance of understanding. There can be different ways that the facts can be arranged, and each arrangement potentially provides us with different understandings. Understanding, thus can be linked to action, and different ways of understanding can provide us with different opportunities, it provides us with change. As Elgin recognizes,

*reorganizing* a domain in terms of different kinds, highlighting hitherto ignored aspects of it, developing and deploying new approaches to it, and setting ourselves new challenges with respect to it are among the ways we increase our understanding.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Catherine Elgin, “Art in the advancement of understanding”, (my emphasis) p. 3.

Reorganization improves our understanding because it calls default assumptions into question. It develops, entertains, and invokes alternatives to them that may expand our understanding of a subject better.<sup>170</sup>

In this regard, many authors have identified art as an instance of understanding. This is an important pairing because, in a way, it grants art with an epistemic and cognitive value that the literary antirealist did not exactly recognize. The claim is that rather than providing knowledge—mere statements of facts—art is closer to providing us with understanding, which is part of the cognitive and epistemic value of art itself. Jukka Mikkonen, for example, claims that the cognitive value of literature relies on the fact that it “lies in the works of ‘advancing’ or ‘clarifying’ readers’ *understanding* of things they already know, ‘enhancing’ or ‘enriching’ their existing knowledge, ‘entrenching’ their ways of thinking, or helping them to ‘acknowledge’ things, to see concepts contextualized in concrete forms of human engagement.”<sup>171</sup>

What Mikkonen stresses about literature is obviously in tune with

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<sup>170</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>171</sup> Jukka Mikkonen, “The cognitive value of literature”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Summer 2015, p. 274.

Elgin's claims. A value of literature is its capacity to allow us to understand in new ways what we already know but we may not yet understand. That is, one of the primary cognitive values of literature is operating on the knowledge that readers already possess, not necessarily supplying them with new knowledge.

With the same philosophical insight, Alva Noë's *Strange Tools* argues that we are organized in a certain way as human beings. Breastfeeding, having a conversation, driving, walking, and even seeing are examples of organizational activities. He maintains that we are always captured by structures of organization, "this is our natural, indeed our biological, condition. It is a basic fact about us."<sup>172</sup> Furthermore, Noë claims that we invent certain tools that make evident how our lives are organized. A door handle, for example, organizes our private vs our public space. A telephone, emails or now zoom have organized the way we communicate and converse with people afar. We create tools that are a manifestation of this biological organizational condition.

Thus, certain tools and actions organize our life, but there are also particular tools, *strange tools*, that aim at reorganizing it. Noë argues that

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<sup>172</sup> Alva Noë, *Strange Tools*, Hill and Wang, 2015, p. 10

art and philosophy are an example of disciplines that produce these strange tools. Actually, Nelson Goodman and Wittgenstein, also defended the view that the visual arts and philosophy, respectively, can teach us how to look at the world, “discovering aspects of it which we had previously overlooked.”<sup>173</sup> It is in this vein that Noë focuses particularly on how choreography is a form of inquiry that brings into the open,

something that is concealed, hidden, implicit, or left in the background, namely, the place of dancing in our lives, or our place in the activity, the self-organized complex that is dancing [...] Choreography makes manifest something about ourselves that is hidden from view because it is the spontaneous structure of our engaged activity.<sup>174</sup>

What Noë argues here is the importance of art as a research practice that allows us to understand how the knowledge, experiences and observations we possess hang together and can be reorganized.

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<sup>173</sup> Berys Gaut on Goodman *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, p. 438. Wittgenstein argues in §129 of the *Philosophical Investigations* that “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.) Their real foundation of their inquiry does not strike people at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck them.—And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.”

<sup>174</sup> Alva Noë, *Strange Tools*, p. 16

Dancing allows us to feel movement, to play with the positions of our own bodies. But choreography researches movement and pace themselves and the result of that, Noë stresses, “isn’t positive knowledge, or settled agreement, as such.” Rather, the result is something like *understanding*, where this means roughly, knowing your way around and recognizing how things hang together.<sup>175</sup> Let us make a pause here and take some time to unfold what has just been said and see how that connects with historical narratives.

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<sup>175</sup> Idem p. 17. Noë’s point is also useful to understand not only art but ethnographies as well. Take for example the classic ethnographical study of Clifford Geertz “Deep play”. After a very careful analysis of cockfights in Bali, Geertz was able to put different pieces of information together: “In the cockfight, man and beast, good and evil, ego and id, the creative power of aroused masculinity and the destructive power of loosened animality fuse in a bloody drama of hatred, cruelty, violence and death.” Geertz further explains that loosing a cockfight is not only about loosing money, it is about “loosing one’s pride, one’s poise, one’s dissipation, one’s masculinity.” The observation and careful study of different behaviors and social attitudes allowed him to take unrelated facts and produce a special kind of coherence of a particular practice in Bali. By doing so, Geertz explains, he was able to gain access to the interpretations and symbolic gestures that are not necessarily evident to the naked eye. We can indeed add that after understanding this particular play and social interactions, Geertz knew the unspoken rules and interactions that the cockfights entailed. In other words, he was able to know his way around a new and unfamiliar environment. His analysis proves that this unfamiliarity was transformed. By producing a particular analysis and organization of these social interactions, Geertz made the unfamiliar, familiar.

Noë's account allows us to recognize many things about art and its connection to understanding. Let me point out and take two things that I believe are central to how our normative criteria will be developed. First, both art and philosophy are *research practices or forms of inquiry* that, among other things, aim at making evident the ways that we have organized ourselves. Accomplishing this recognition requires taking what we already have, what is common and even trivial to us and making it strange again. Doing so allows us to bring out and exhibit the ways that we find ourselves naturally organized. "We start out by not seeing what is there. But by looking and interrogating and challenging, we come to see it."<sup>176</sup> In this sense, I agree with Noë in that researching the quotidian is what allows us to see things anew. But I take myself to expand on his view by arguing that it is not only by taking isolated movements or facts and making them strange, but rather it is only understanding the relationships between events or movements that one can make them strange or anew. Studying a movement in dance and making it strange in a choreographic setting only makes sense when the movement that one is focusing on, is

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<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

placed in relation to what came after and what follows. This is the same with facts. It is not necessarily that one can make a fact strange by itself, but rather one makes it strange by putting it in relationship to other facts. For example, take the US elections of 2016. We can agree that the result was a surprise and a strange turn of events for many of us. One of reasons this event was strange in the context of US history, was that Trump was the first president to be elected without any political or military experience whatsoever. If one simply looks at that without the relationship to other elections and historical characters, it may not strike us as strange. It is only the relationship between events that can transform and give the strangeness to them.

Second, I take myself to also expand on Noë's account by arguing that this exercise of seeing how things "hang together" has cognitive value. That is, to see how we have been organized and offering us a chance to reflect on that is already a cognitive reflection. We learn things about ourselves that were previously ignored or left in the background. These research practices such as art and philosophy, provide us with the possibility of reorganizing ourselves in new and insightful ways. My argument here takes the same philosophical insight that Noë has about

art and philosophy but expands it to the historical practice. A good historical narrative, I will argue, aims at reorganizing our thinking. It seeks to provide new and insightful ways of understanding the relationship between events that challenge our previous and default assumptions about those events. By doing so we learn to investigate ourselves and incorporate new ways of understanding.

Take for example therapy—as an instance of personal history. One can understand the therapeutic practice as a process in which an individual learns to recognize the ways that they have been telling the story of themselves. It aims at making evident the meaning that the individual has granted to past experiences and how that impacts their present. But the therapeutic practice is not only about realizing how one has been telling one's story. *It also aims at reshaping it so one can relate to one's past, and therefore modify one's behavior in the present, in a better way.* Again, it is not as if there is new information, rather the individual takes what is familiar to them and gives it a new meaning by reorganizing the same events and their relationship into a different structure.

Thus, I argue that we can notice three main activities that history engages in: It (1) researches and makes evident how we are organized,

(2) It has cognitive value because it allows us to reflect on this organization and (3) it has the potentiality to reorganize the relationship between events. What I will argue next is that it is in the third point noted above that the normative standards plays an essential role. In other words, a good historical narrative is one that reorganizing the material that is already there. It seeks to research and make strange the knowledge that we have, but it also aims at reorganizing the material to present new possibilities of understanding.

### 3. Historical narratives as understanding.

When we talk about historical narratives, one wishes to encounter much more than just pieces of information that do not relate to each other. When historians construct a history of the Mexican Revolution, for example, they do not intend to do so by simply regurgitating fact after fact—even if they are true! To see the following data—and nothing more—in a history book would be reasonably disappointing:

1910 Madero commands the insurrection.

1911 President and dictator Porfirio Diaz escaped the country.

1912.

1913 Murder of Madero and the Vice-president Pino Suarez by Huerta.

1914 Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa enter Mexico City.

Instead of a historical narrative this would count probably as a chronology or even as an instance of some annales. In any case, they lack organization, narrative coherence, a central subject, closure, etc. As Elgin notes, “disciplinary understanding is not an aggregation of separate, independently secured statements of fact; it is an integrated, systematically organized account of a domain.”<sup>177</sup> Thus, any historian would seek to convey a coherent narrative, a particular organized whole that portrays meaning to independent statements of facts. In other words, a historian aims at generating connections between facts that provides the reader with a retrospective understanding of how such and such came to be.

The fact that on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1910 the Mexican Revolution “started” can lead to many different ways of understanding the event. Different questions can guide the focus of the narrative: Where did the event take place? In the main cities? The fields? What antecedents are going to be taken into account? What characters are going to be

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<sup>177</sup> Catherine Elgin, *True Enough*, p. 13.

involved? Is it going to be a history of the main leaders? Of the common people? Etc.

The takeaway here is that the historian organizes information to convey a particular meaning, and this, in turn, provides us with ways of *understanding* the event. Depending on the aspect that the historian chooses to clothe the event with the organization will be different. If someone construes the Mexican Revolution under the aspect of peasant revolution, then certain information will be more valuable than other. If, on the contrary, a historian understands the same event as an urban revolution, then different information will have more weight. Again, this is the job of any historian, to organize and give a coherent meaning to otherwise scattered pieces of information. One can even leave the facts unchanged and yet vary the causal relations, or one's view of what facts turned out to be causally significant. This, in turn, can have policy implications. People who study battlefield tactics and strategies, for example, do not worry about more facts, but what the causal impact of different decisions were. But the important thing to recognize here is that organization is always present in narrative

construction. Chapter one and two of this dissertation have already made this clear. Organization is necessary and unavoidable.

In this sense, historical narratives seem to also be a *strange tool* that recognizes and portrays organization, but it also has the potentiality to reorganize human action and experience through time. Coming up with new ways of framing information—or as discussed in chapter two, new aspects—is sometimes much more valuable than simply collecting facts, since reorganization makes visible new ways of understanding. Interestingly, what reorganization fundamentally does is to make connections that were previously unnoticed and by doing so, it converts what we thought we knew into something mysterious again. In short, we make something strange by giving it a new organization. But this new organization aims at making the event comprehensible in new and interesting ways and thus, less strange.

I suggest that it is within this framework that we can find a normative account for history. New questions, frameworks or aspects that reorganize the material that we already know in interesting and insightful ways will prove key in understanding this normativity. To illustrate this, let us take as our case study “the discovery” of America.

I will analyze two different approaches to the subject. One that uses the traditional aspect of “discovery” to talk about what happened on October, 1492. The other actually takes into question the notion of discovery and aims at giving a different understanding of the occurrence. What is important to recognize here is that the first narrative under analysis takes as the central question: “why did Columbus, rather than someone else, discovered America”. This first account *foregrounds* the figure of Columbus and the interaction of this character with an entity called America. In our second account the question is “Why use the idea of discovery to understand Columbus’ actions?” As one can see the emphasis is different, the foreground is not the character of Columbus and his interaction with an entity called America, rather the central concern is with understanding the aspect of discovery and how the entity of America was constructed. Both of the narratives make use of the same set of classic sources and material. And they also make use of the organizing principles discussed in chapter one. Nevertheless, their focus and questions lead to rather different interpretations of the material. In other words, both accounts are trying to understand a particular encounter that happened in 1492,

neither of the accounts disagrees on the facts that the primary sources inform, but they will interpret and organize the facts in relation to their different foregrounds.

In the following analysis, I will not only go in depth into the differences between each of these accounts, but I will also establish a normative framework that can allow us to evaluate them epistemically and determine which narrative is better than the other

#### 4. The debate about a certain encounter: discovery or invention?

##### 4.1. The discovery

The first book that I will examine is *The European Discovery of America. The southern voyages* by Samuel Eliot Morison. This book was published in 1974 by the Oxford University Press and is the second and final volume of his series of the same title. The first volume is concerned with voyages to Canada and the Northern United States during the 500-1600 A.D. The second volume deals with southern voyages from 1492-1616. The central figures, or the foreground of his second book are the different characters that traveled and led the voyages into the “new world” since 1492: Columbus, Magellan, Drake and others. The

first nine chapters are dedicated to Columbus and his “discovery”. Morison’s narrative revolves around the following: 1) Columbus: a) his character/personality and b) his navigational skills 2) The idea of discovery.

1.a) We can argue that Morison’s presentation of the discovery is a very traditional one in historiography. He chose a main character and followed his every documented move. Where Columbus goes, the reader goes. What Columbus thinks, the reader knows. The reader becomes a sort of silent observer of the four voyages, traveling with a secure compass alongside the “Admiral of the Seas”. Morison’s account is filled with details about Columbus’ life. His childhood, his education, his influences and his contact with sailing. Furthermore, he gives a very detailed account of every one of the four voyages: who was in each ship, their nationalities, what the weather conditions were and how the crew managed them. The narrative provides an exhausting and exhaustive number of facts, insofar as Morison attempts to portray Columbus’ every move and spirit throughout these four trips.

The foreground of Morison's narrative is, as we have mentioned, about how this main character achieved something great. But not only that. Throughout the narrative, Morison conveys the idea that this trip and the "discovery" of "new land" was something that seemed to be waiting for Columbus. Thus, establishing a clear image of the main leader of the story becomes essential. It is only by knowing Columbus' character and personality that one can clearly picture him as the carrier of the discovery enterprise.

Morison portrays Columbus as a man devoted to god, with a mission that was set upon him. He also establishes a comparison—or in other words, he makes similar—the character of Columbus and the story of Saint Christopher. According to Morison, the name of Christopher "made Columbus baptismal name far more significant to him than his patronymic." The story of the Saint becomes relevant to Morison because as the Saint, Columbus "conceived it his destiny to carry the word of the Holly Child across the ocean to countries steep in heathen darkness."<sup>178</sup> Morison's imposition of this similarity between

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<sup>178</sup> S. E. Morison, *The European discovery of America*, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 9.

characters is quite significant and will prove to be important in the narrative as a whole.

Morison argues that Columbus was man “tempered in the fire of adversity”<sup>179</sup>, a man that was “proud and sensitive”, one who made the best of every situation and possessed a strong will. Before the first voyage, in 1476, Morison narrates how Columbus joined a fleet to protect a quantity of Chian mastic being shipped to Lisbon, England and Flanders. This trip, Morison continues, “*played into de hands of destiny* by casting him [Columbus] up on the shore of Portugal.” Columbus leapt into the sea, “grasped a sweep that floated free, and by pushing it ahead of him and resting when exhausted, he managed to reach shore.”<sup>180</sup> These types of anecdotes are not chosen arbitrarily. Morison is choosing to give continuity to such adventures to construct a character that is strong in will and spirited. But he is also appealing to a notion of destiny and I think this should not be taken lightly. As with Saint Christopher, Columbus had the purpose of extending the word of God beyond land and sea. “Columbus could have asked for

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<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

anything he wanted “castle in Spain, title, pension or endowment [...] he was not this kind of a man. He must see that the island he discovered were settled by Christians [...]”<sup>181</sup>

But the destiny that Morison is concerned with is the one that has to do with Columbus being “the one” to “discover new land.” In the narrative, there is a sense of fulfillment when Columbus finally reached this land. This fulfillment is not about the “divine” enterprise that concerned Columbus. It is about the character that has been constructed throughout the narrative that outlived adversities and that had the correct amount of knowledge to carry out the discovery. Morison continues to remark that Columbus had a fine presence and an “innate dignity that impressed people of whatever estate [...] Success always seemed to be just around the corner.”<sup>182</sup> Destiny, good fortune and the presentation of Columbus as a “figure of light” is always in the discourse as if there was indeed a story awaiting in Columbus’ future.

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39-40.

Morison construes a character with a mission that no one else would seem able to accomplish. All of the misfortunes and occasional bad luck contributed to forge his character and prepare him for the voyage that will change the course of his life. But of course Columbus did not know this, it is only Morison that has the advantage of knowing Columbus documented life that brings these different episodes to convey such idea of destiny. But not only that, Morison will take Columbus' act as one as significant as the birth of Christ (again we see the principle of similarity playing a role): "With the fourth glass of the night watch, the last sands are running out of an era that began with the dawn of history. Not since the birth of Christ has there been a night so full of meaning for the human race."<sup>183</sup> The messianic tone in which Morison compares the discovery of America to the birth of Christ should not be taken as a random coincidence. The meaning of "salvation" that is behind both acts is pretty evident, more so if one considers that Columbus ending days were according to Morison particularly lonely. "The court sent no representatives to his funeral, no bishop, no great dignitary attended, and the official chronicle failed

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<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

to mention either death or funeral.”<sup>184</sup> So, as Christ saved humanity by sacrificing himself, Columbus for his part brought Europe to a whole different stage by sacrificing his life to the cause. As with Christ, Columbus is seen as a sort of martyr without whom America would not have been discovered and Europe would not have been saved.

1.b) Morison also constructs a narrative in which navigation becomes a guiding thread. As mentioned before, the weather details and sailing directions of each of the voyages becomes relevant in a story where the central character is constructed to be “The Admiral of the Seas”. Every sailing fact is important because it shows the skills and knowledge of the main character and his crew. On different trips as a young sailor, Morison argues, “Christopher learned to hand reef and steer, to estimate distances by eye, to make sail, let go and weigh anchors properly, and other elements of seamanship. He learned seamanship the old way, the hard way, and the best way, in the school of experience.”<sup>185</sup> He perfected his skills further along the way by being surrounded by people who could teach him “all he wanted to

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<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

learn”: mathematics, astronomy and celestial navigation. This construction is central to the narrative because we are following and navigating with Columbus. It is only a man as knowledgeable as him and with a strong will that can conduct us (readers) through a unique enterprise.

The next chapters, where Morrison describes Columbus’ subsequent trips, are charged with the same commitment with his main character. Columbus, Morrison continues, “had his faults, but they were largely the defects of qualities that made him great. These were unbreakable faith in God and his own destiny as the barer of the World to lands beyond the sea [...] *But there was no flaw, no dark side to the most outstanding and essential of all his qualities—seamanship.*”<sup>186</sup> In other words, not even bad weather, mutinies or unpredictable outcomes could overcome Columbus’ destiny and his knowledge.

When the crew finally reached land, Morrison describes the events as follows:

How typical of Columbus’s determination! Yet, even he, conscious of divine guidance, could not have kept on indefinitely without the support of his captains and officers.

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267. (my emphasis)

[Nevertheless], according to Oviedo, one of the earliest historians who talked with the participants, *it was Columbus who persuaded one of his captains to sail on [...]* The next day a trade of wind that blew fresher, sending the fleet along at 7 knots, and on the 10th the fleet made a record day's run. On the 11<sup>th</sup> the wind continued to blow hard [...] Now signs of land, such as branches of trees with green leaves and even flowers became frequent that the people were content with their commanders' decision, and the mutinous mutterings died in keen anticipation of making a landfall in the Indies.<sup>187</sup>

A day after, they reached land. Note that in this passage it is Columbus determination that kept everything in place. It is this particular trade of his character that allowed the crew to continue despite the bad weather and threats of mutinies. Another thing that one notes from this passage is that it is this determination that allowed him to reach good sailing conditions and finally, land. Everything seems to come together here. Columbus' character, the weather conditions and his skills, pile up to finally reach the destiny of the "Admiral of the seas." It is interesting to remark that Morison pays a great deal of attention on trying to map out every port and island that Columbus reached. He

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<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60-61. (my emphasis)

aims to identify on the current map of America the places and moves that Columbus made throughout his journey. In a way, marking these points in a contemporary map allows us to reiterate that Columbus did in fact reach and discovered places *in America*.

All of this information revolving around Columbus's skills, character, the distances and bad weather that they came across is set up in a way that tells a particular story. In this case it becomes a story of a destiny that needs to be accomplished. Morison organizes a massive amount of information in a way that portrays this particular meaning. The distances, knots and directions would not mean anything if they weren't organized under a particular foreground. In this case, the foreground is Columbus as a particular man, with a particular character and a massive amount of knowledge that changed the course of "the human race forever."

2) Morison's Columbus is the central carrier of the entire enterprise of the "discovery". It is important to note that the idea of discovery throughout the book is fundamental to understand Columbus' voyages. Morison is clear to note that from the beginning Columbus wanted to reach the Indies through a new route, one that did not

involve having to navigate the entire coast of Africa. Such enterprise also meant that if “new lands” came into view, these would be taken “as a divine gift to him and to Spain.”<sup>188</sup> Morison’s conception of discovery is one that is not necessarily questioned. It is taken as if Columbus found for the first-time new land. This view holds on to a European projection of a “new world” that could alleviate the grievances of the “old world” by granting endless richness. This discourse is not about the people that were in the land when Columbus’ arrived. *It is a discourse about the European imaginary and the projection of that imaginary onto the land.* Morison reassesses this imaginary by using the notion of discovery. In other words, Columbus only discovered something if we work under the framework of the European idea of the world in the fifteenth century. But even if we use that framework, Columbus only “discovered” a new route, not a new world. What Columbus thought he discovered is not even in the same ballpark as what Morison is touting as his discovery.

Organizing the narrative under these aspects (Columbus’ character, skills and the idea of discovery) conveys a very particular view of the

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<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

“discovery” of America. It is a view that is constructed from the European imaginary that revalidates the figure of Columbus as a man that had a purpose and a destiny to fulfill. In this sense, making Columbus similar to Saint Christopher is not a serendipitous act. Morison establishes this similarity in an effort to give a sense of a destiny that awaits the central character. What becomes more obvious towards the end of these first nine chapters is that Morrison’s narrative is an effort to establish Columbus as The discoverer.

Little by little, as his life receded into history and the claims of others to be the “real” discoverers of America faded into the background, his great achievements began to be appreciated [...] Now, more than five hundred years after his birth, when the day of Columbus’s first landfall in the New World is celebrated throughout the length and breadth of the Americas, his fame and reputation may be considered secure, despite the efforts of armchair navigators and nationalist maniacs to denigrate him [...] No navigator in history, not even Magellan, discovered so much territory hitherto unknown to Europeans.<sup>189</sup>

This passage condenses what I take is the central purposes of Morison’s narrative. He aims to establish Columbus not only as a

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<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

skillful sailor, but also as a man that should be remembered and appreciated for his great achievements as discoverer. This is the telos that guides the entire narrative, this is his closure, this is Columbus' destiny: to be the man that discovered new land. Note that Morison's narrative is bound to the idea of discovery as the central achievement of his main character even when Columbus himself had no idea—according to Morison—that he had in fact, reached new land. Morison's narrative is filled with data and facts. He is concerned with giving as much information as possible about Columbus' life, knowledge and the details of the voyages. The cumulative amount of data does not seem to question what everyone takes for granted, and that is the notion of discovery itself.

This is what Edmundo O'Gorman sets out as his primary aim. His book, *The Invention of America* was published in 1958 by the Mexican governmental publishing house *Fondo de Cultura Económica*. This book, published almost 20 years before Morison's book, presented as

Pietschmann argues<sup>190</sup> an important break in the historiography of the discovery and conquest of America. Our problem, O’Gorman argues,

is to question if the facts that have been understood until now as the discovery of America, should be kept understood in such a way. Therefore, we will not examine who, when or how America was discovered. On the contrary, we will examine the idea of the discovery itself and if it is an adequate framework to understand the events.<sup>191</sup>

The history that we get from O’Gorman is a very different one than we get from Morison. The latter is concerned with questions of origin: question of who, when and how America was discovered. It is because of this interest that Morison places Columbus as his central character and describes his adventures and misadventures. On the other hand, O’Gorman will not take Columbus as his central character. Rather, he will take the notion of discovery as his central focus, that is his foreground. O’Gorman remarks that the idea of discovery is itself an

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<sup>190</sup> Horst Pietschmann, “De la Inversión de America a la Historia como inversión.” *Historia Mexicana*

Vol. 46, No. 4, Homenaje a don Edmundo O’Gorman, Apr. - Jun., 1997.

<sup>191</sup> Edmundo O’Gorman, *La Inversión de América*, Mexico, FCE, 2006, p. 16 (my translation)

interpretation and as every interpretation it has its own history. Thus, the attention should be given to that history, to the when, why and how it was thought that Columbus discovered America and why is it still accepted. In other words, it becomes necessary to construct not the history of the discovery of America, but of the idea that America was discovered. In this sense and going back to the discussion of aspect perception in chapter two, by bringing something previously unnoticed into the foreground, O’Gorman is bringing a new aspect to our attention. The way he will interpret and organize the information will prove key in seeing a new meaning in the data that is already known.

#### 4.2. The Invention

We know that Columbus did not actually think that he had reached a new continent, so when, O’Gorman asks, was it first conceived that America was discovered by Columbus? The Mexican historian explains that 30 years after Columbus reached land, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo published a book where he states, for the first time, that Columbus discovered America. This statement, O’Gorman conveys, opened up a can of worms. After it the key was to prove that

Columbus was aware of the nature of what he “discovered”. In other words, the historiography after Oviedo’s publishing needed to provide evidence that Columbus *knew* that what he had encountered was in fact a whole new Continent and not a) a part of Asia nor b) a set of new lands.

After stating this important moment in historiography, O’Gorman analyzes different attempts that tried to provide an account where Columbus was aware of his discovery. He groups the attempts into three different stages. 1) The first stage of the historiographical attempts tries to prove that Columbus had the intention of discovering new land and that he was knowledgeable that the land that he reached was in fact a continent. Nevertheless, this thesis had to be dropped because it did not match with the empirical documentation. 2) The second historiographical attempt tried to show that Columbus did not actually have the intention of discovering new land but that once he reached it, his encountering of the land showed that he had in fact reached a continent, *even when he had no idea that that was the case*. However, this second attempt was also dropped because of contradictions with the empirical data but also because the theoretical

premise was simply faulty. 3) The third and final stage of the historiographical effort tried to show that Columbus actually discovered a continent by mere chance. No intention was made explicit nor fundamental to support the discovery thesis. In this case, O’Gorman argues, the interpretation offers serious difficulties. As with the second set of efforts this third one bares a fundamental contradiction. One cannot discover, O’Gorman argues, something that one is not aware of.

The analysis of these historiographical attempts shows that the idea of the discovery exhausted its only three logical possibilities and that in the end, it resulted in a *reductio ab absurdum*. Therefore, the framework of “discovery” falls short and it is even misguided. It also assumes, O’Gorman remarks, that America was a thing in itself, a thing with a discoverable entity and that making physical contact with such entity was enough to reveal its nature. According to O’Gorman, none of this makes sense and thus a new historiographical explanation is needed.

Therefore, O’Gorman will propose a completely new analysis and interpretation of the events that occurred in 1492 and during the subsequent trips of Columbus. The Mexican historian takes the four

trips of Columbus and analyses them not with the discovery aspect in mind but with the idea of finding a new answer to explain these set of occurrences. He argues that in all of the trips “Columbus does not only think that he has reached the limits of the *Orbis Terrarium*, but he actually believes it.” Because of this, Columbus “provided the lands that he encountered with a particular being”<sup>192</sup>, the being of belonging to what he already knew: Asia. O’Gorman maintains that instead of being open to changing his opinion in accordance with the new facts revealed to him by the voyage experience, Columbus held on to his prior notion of the Earth and adjusted his experience to this theoretical knowledge—Morison and O’Gorman definitively agree on this point. Therefore, O’Gorman states that “The historical and ontological meaning of the 1492 trip, consists in grating the land that Columbus encounter with the meaning of belonging to the *Orbis Terrarium*, granting it with the being of an a priori hypothesis.”<sup>193</sup> Having this information in display forces us, O’Gorman argues, to modify the notion of discovery. What other option is available then?

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>193</sup> *Idem.*

The option that the Mexican historian grants us with is the notion of Invention. But how exactly was America invented? O’Gorman argues that one should understand that when Columbus reached the set of land, he did not, properly speaking reach America. This idea—the idea of America— was something that came afterwards, it was something that was constructed. O’Gorman explains that the being of x, not its existence, is something that x does not have in itself, rather it is something that we concede or grant to it.<sup>194</sup> In this sense, America was granted with a being, a being that was imposed upon it only after Columbus’ achievements.

O’Gorman explains that the first set of interpretative actions that invented the being of America was the similarity that was established between it and Asia, Europe and Africa. These four parts were conceived as shares of the same whole. As the other parts, America was made similar in its physical structure, or in O’Gorman’s words, “they had the same body.” These different set of lands –America, Europe, Africa and Asia– had, all of the sudden, the same particular

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<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

nature. They were made physically alike. This is the first notion of invention: the physical invention.

In the same spirit, these four parts were also made morally alike,

We see then, notwithstanding that the oddness of the natural scenery, the physical elements were the same ones that in other explored parts of the globe. Furthermore, the people that inhabited these lands, whatever their costumes, had the same nature than Europeans, Asians and Africans. Or to say it in terms of the time, they also descended from Adam and Eve and could benefit from the sacrifice of Christ.<sup>195</sup>

We have, then, two ideas that were imposed upon the land and the inhabitants. Both the land and the people were made similar to what was already in the cultural framework of the time. This, of course, had political advantages. If the land was like the one that had already been colonized, and the inhabitants were also descendants of Adam and Eve, then the conquest and further colonization was justified.

O’Gorman also points that there is a third process of invention, and that is the historical one. Although physically and morally similar, these lands were made different in the sense of their history. America was made The New World. “It turned out to be, literally, an extension of

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<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

the old house [...] where the European forms of life could be transplanted.”<sup>196</sup> This gave infinite possibilities, the first one being establishing a new and improved Europe.

Thus, according to O’Gorman America was not discovered. There was nothing there to discover in the first place. The nature of the land did not have in itself the potentiality of being discovered. In any case, this was a meaning that was imposed upon the land and its inhabitants later on. Furthermore, Columbus had no idea that he had reached “the fourth part of the world.” Therefore, for O’Gorman, the idea of discovery does not describe what the sources informs us with, and it does not make justice to the being of a land which meaning was conveyed a-posteriori. Therefore, America was invented: physically, morally and historically.

Well then, we have two very different historical accounts. One that defends the idea of Columbus as a discoverer and the other one says that the notion of discovery itself does not work anymore. What to do? As argued in chapter two we cannot aggregate these accounts, nor can we hold both at the same time. As detailed in chapter two, one either

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<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151-153.

sees the rabbit or the duck but one cannot see both at the same time. The idea of discovery seems to be revealing or bringing to the open something new, while the idea of invention seems to be granting with a different meaning something that is already there. Thus, we cannot aggregate the notion of invention and the idea of discovery. So, how can we evaluate these two accounts? Which aspect is better: the discovery or the invention? Let's go back to the first part of this essay.

## 5. Normative Evaluation

As previously noted, there are three important features that philosophy, art and history share. The first one is that they are all research practices that try to make evident the principles by which we organize and evaluate certain practices. The second feature is that this is important in itself because it reveals that these disciplines have an epistemic value. They construct knowledge by revealing how we have been organized, and they allow us to reflect on such ways and improve on them in light of our goals and purposes. Thirdly, and related to the sense of knowledge just invoked, they have the potential to make

available to us new ways of understanding our action and the meaning of such actions in relation to others.

The two historical accounts that we have just reviewed share the first two features. Morison's narrative is evidently a research enterprise. He surveyed hundreds of history books and archives. He even traveled the same route and stopped at every point that Columbus did.<sup>197</sup> There is no doubt that we are in fact exposed to years of research about Columbus's voyages. Furthermore, as argued, Morison's research and narrative convey a particular organization. It presents a well-structured and coherent narrative that takes Columbus as the central character leading a discovery enterprise. There is also no doubt that Morison's narrative allows us to reflect about ways that we find ourselves organized. In that sense it has cognitive value because it conveys a particular way of thinking about a certain period in time. It makes us consider how life was structured in the sixteenth century: the

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<sup>197</sup> As Sidney G. Morse notes, "Morison's most firm conviction is that the historian should, as far as possible, go and see the places and things he writes about. This he has himself done, and the fruit for this book is not only a firmer grip on realities than some desk-bound historians achieve, but also a collection of photographs taken by land, sea and air." "The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages, A.D. 500-1600" *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4, Dec., 1971.

frameworks and knowledge that were available to sailors at the time and how that shaped their idea of the world; it also makes us reflect on the idea of destiny and how that can potentially organize the ways that we conduct ourselves.

In other words, Morison's narrative clearly fulfills points one and two of our shared list. But one important step that Morison is missing is the reorganization step, which is important because it fails to expand the ways in which we can further our understanding and inquiries about this specific topic. Morison's narrative never questions Columbus' character or his abilities. But furthermore, he never questions the enterprise as a whole. He takes for granted something that could be questioned and that is the notion of discovery.

Under the aspect of discovery and the character of Columbus, Morison displays an entire organization that does not really explore and questions the things that we take for granted. The feeling that we are left with after reading Morison's narrative is one that does not make anything strange or new. On the contrary, it is a work that adds to an already familiar theme in the literature, particularly the literature of "great man's history" where the motivation of the protagonist is the

prime mover. This also seems to be more revealing because Morison is writing in the 1970', a decade that opened new avenues for historical narratives, particularly subaltern studies, microhistory and critical theory, all of which are new frameworks that aimed to expand and change the prevailing paradigm of "great man's history". In this sense, Morison's narrative seems to rely on an aspect that reassess a type of history that had already started to be questioned because of its inability to capture new and different perspectives. In a way, Morison's narrative becomes epistemically obsolete because it keeps relying on a view of history that takes the impulse and motivation of one man to explain a complex and intricated relationship of events.

Edmundo O'Gorman, on the other hand, also checks the first two points of our shared list. His book is an examination that conveys a particular organization. He researches the traditional historiography on the subject of discovery and provides a narrative framework so that the reader can follow and understand the structure of analysis. But as we can all agree, what is really remarkable of O'Gorman's work is the reorganization part. His narrative does not value the accumulation of small details and facts as Morison's narrative does. What O'Gorman

values is the research of the aspect of discovery. He scrutinizes our well-known framework of discovery. O’Gorman will take Columbus’ voyages, his letters and the historiography written around it to look and interrogate it with the purpose of challenging it. O’Gorman allows us to take what we thought was common sense and given knowledge and make it strange again. He allows us to question the ways that we have organized the knowledge about a particular encounter. *His reorganization expands our understanding because 1) it calls default assumptions into question and 2) it allows us to create new epistemic frameworks.*

What we have after reading O’Gorman’s work is a new aspect that reorganizes the material in an interesting and novel way. It opens the past and creates a new meaning from the same available material. Even if one does not agree that the notion of “Invention” is appropriate, the work allows us to question our prior beliefs and think of new possibilities of reorganizing. It is important to remark that after reading the Invention of America one does not learn something new about the sources or about Columbus, rather we learn to see what we already knew in a new and original way.

Alva Noë recognizes that with philosophical discussions one is transformed. “One starts thinking what justice is, or personal identity, and at the end, having faced up to the manifest and evident shortcomings of any view that you or your interlocuters can come up with, realize that you don’t know.”<sup>198</sup> My argument is that this can also apply to historical works that aim precisely at making things strange or new. O’Gorman presents us with the challenge of questioning our own beliefs, of reflecting on the simple and well-known idea of the discovery of America. This makes his explanation more successful because it expands our understanding about this historical event. He allows us to start a dialogue and in the course of it realizing that what we thought we knew is actually something that we have never stopped to question or analyze. This type of historical work affords us with an opportunity “to catch ourselves in the act of encountering the world, and so to let us encounter ourselves in a way that we otherwise never can.”<sup>199</sup> As with art and philosophy, these types of historical works are incredibly valuable because they allow us to not only reflect on the

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<sup>198</sup> Alva Noë, *Strange Tools*, p. 138.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

world differently, but to find ourselves by calling our previous beliefs into question. In other words, historical works that reorganize information are valuable and epistemically interesting because they open the possibility for us to learn something new about the world and about ourselves.

It is important to recognize that this quality of reorganizing is something that historical narratives can entail. They make the past new by asking novel questions and opening interesting ways of interpreting and organizing the sources. These novel interpretations or organizations have the quality of being changed. What once was understood as a discovery can now be understood as an invention, but this too is subject to questioning. The notion of invention can be examined and by doing so it can push our understanding in an innovative direction. In this sense, reorganization always remains open. Furthermore, the opportunity of reorganizing information provides us with change. Understanding the encounter of Columbus not as a discovery but as an invention is not only a way to reflect on our epistemic beliefs but it also offers us *possibilities* of changing those beliefs.

If we now understand Columbus' voyages not as discovering something but as a starting process in which the idea of America became manufactured, then many epistemic consequences follow. Edwin C. Rozwenc, for example, argues that if we keep thinking of America as "simply being already present in a natural and geographical sense which could be discovered even accidentally by a man who had neither the purpose nor the realization of discovery *then we are likely to cut ourselves off from a significant dimension of historical experience.*"<sup>200</sup> The sense of invention brings to light the idea that America was intrinsically heterogeneous and not, as the framework of discovery entails, homogeneous. The question, of what is America after O'Gorman's book, Rozwenc continues, becomes one that needs to include in its answer an analysis and understanding of all the cultures and countries which are embraced by the term America.

In this same vein, Rodrigo Lazo, argues that people have never known America; they have just invented it. So, one of the things that O'Gorman's book provoked was a return to Latin American and US

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<sup>200</sup> Edwin C. Rozwenc, "Edmundo O'Gorman and the Idea of America", *American Quarterly* Vol. 10, No. 2, Part 1, Summer, 1958, p. 114. (my emphasis)

American studies in academia with a particular emphasis in the North-South hemispheric interactions.<sup>201</sup> What Rozwenc and Lazo are pointing at are some of the epistemic consequences that O’Gorman’s analysis contains. On the one hand, Rozwenc points that the basic question of what America is, must be answered in a way that incorporates the differences that the land and its inhabitant have. This opens the epistemic panorama in a variety of ways, one of them being understanding the multiple cultures, practices, and heterogeneity of the being that we now call America. Trying to answer such questions after O’Gorman’s work demands so.

On the other hand, Lazo’s argument is similar to Rozwenc but takes O’Gorman’s point to argue in favor of an analysis of the political division of north and south hemispheres, that allows us to explain in a different light the different shades that the American continent entails. These are just a couple of examples of the epistemic weight that the work of O’Gorman entailed. It really reframed the way that people in academia think about the notion of America and the way of studying

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<sup>201</sup> Rodrigo Lazo, “The Invention of America Again: On the Impossibility of an Archive”, *American Literary History*, Winter 2013, Vol. 25, No. 4, p. 752.

it. Thus, the virtue of O’Gorman’s work goes beyond his reorganization. It also shows that the value of his work completely expanded and reframed the ways that the academic community thinks about America.

In contrast, Morison’s account reassesses notions that the idea of discovery has that does not afford us the possibility to expand our understanding about the heterogeneous land that was America. In fact, it homogenizes it by suggesting a sort of unification under the sense of discovery, e.g., the people and the land were the same—different to the European— in every place.

It is difficult not to see the ethical implication of this epistemic approach. It is not that Morison has his facts wrong; he did not lie about the past nor is he omitting facts that might lead to an unreliable conclusion. What he did was to pose the question of “the encounter” in a way that positions Columbus at its center and foregrounds why it was him that “discovered” the entity called America. The meaning and organization that he provides the facts with leaves too many questions aside.

In his famous article “White Ignorance”, Charles Mills argues that

at the level of symbolism and national self-representation, then, the denial of the extent of Native American and black victimization buttresses the airbrushed white narrative of discovery, settlement, and building of a shining city on the hill. But the editing for white memory has more concrete and practical consequences also: [...] it enables a self-representation in which differential white privilege, and the need to correct for it, does not exist. In other words, the mystification of the past underwrites a mystification of the present.<sup>202</sup>

What Mills recognizes here is a very concrete consequence of portraying the encounter of America as a discovery. Organizing a narrative around this aspect *downplays* significant occurrences that, in the end, fosters a type of knowledge (or ignorance) that has racists and colonialists' connotations. In other words, the notion of discovery does not question fundamental beliefs, it rather reinforces a view of history that is obsolete. The epistemic and ethical weights that the idea of discovery has is always in relation to the consequences of such view. This is why the context of discovery and the context of justification cannot be parsed in historical narratives.

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<sup>202</sup> Charles Mills, "White Ignorance", *Race and Epistemology of Ignorance*, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (eds.), State University of New York Press, 2007, p.31.

## 6. Conclusion

The three evaluative models presented at the beginning of this chapter have important short comes. These present us with difficulties when trying to use them to evaluate contending historical narratives. The narrative realist aims at establishing a normative criterion that takes knowledge and the accumulation of facts at its center. The problem with this view is that the standard for epistemic evaluation is restricted to details and number of facts. This account does not take into consideration new and interesting connections that the historian can make with those facts. Therefore, the narrative realist falls short in providing a normative account that can accommodate noteworthy reorganizations of the historical material.

On the opposite side, the literary antirealists do not provide us with any sort of epistemic means for narrative evaluation. This proves to be unsatisfactory because it simply dismisses the capacity for rationally evaluating historical narratives. Finally, the antirealist [T] also fails because it aims at drawing distinctions between norms of presentation

that even Kuukkanen himself finds hard to respect and offers little by way of concrete insight into what makes a narrative better or worse. My account, on the contrary, takes the idea of understanding and reorganization as important concepts that can enable us to evaluate contenting historical views. It aims at recognizing new and insightful ways that the historical material can be reorganized to improve our understanding. There can be many ways to organize and reorganize historical material. What this chapter has showed is that we need to pay attention to how the reorganizational practice is conducted. In other words, how it is that historical accounts allow us to redefine the ways that we have traditionally understood certain past occurrences. As we saw throughout this chapter, the concept of understanding becomes key. It allows us to establish a condition that helps us evaluate one historical narrative over another and recognize the connections that historians make between facts. This standard of evaluation is not absolute. I do not wish to establish a universal criterion for rational understanding. Rather, one needs to see the concept of understanding as a criterion that emerges from a comparative analysis.

Furthermore, by paying attention to how the material comes together as a whole we can also see the practical implications that the view encompasses. The evaluative framework presented in this chapter not only brings into the open the idea of epistemic success through the notion of understanding. But it also forces us to face moral and political consequences that any historical view embodies.

One can identify that there is, in fact, an instrumental and an intrinsic value in historiographic narratives. The instrumental value would be one that appreciates if the historian has achieved the aims, goals and purposes that she has set for herself. In our particular study case, Morison and O’Gorman have created a narrative that fulfils the purposes that both authors set out from the beginning of their work. Nonetheless, what we really care about is the intrinsic value that each of these narratives possess. Meaning the impact that the own goals and purposes of each of these works have created.

After engaging with these two different narratives one can conclude that O’Gorman’s research has produced a more impactful line of research. It has—to use Kuhns’s words— revolutionized the field of American Studies, whereas Morison continued with the prevailing

paradigm. It is important to really make explicit that Morison and O’Gorman *do not* disagree with the facts, on the contrary, they both use and quote the same sources and materials, but they fundamentally disagree in the framing of the information. To say this in another way, O’Gorman can agree with Morison’s facts, but he fundamentally disagrees with his organization and interpretation of the facts. Ultimately, what proves to be unsatisfactory of Morison’s account is where he places the emphasis of his question: Why did Columbus, rather than someone else, discovered America? Posed in such a way, this view foregrounds the figure of Columbus and the aspect of discovery while leaving questions such as, why discovery as opposed to something else, in the background.

In this sense, O’Gorman opens the possibility of asking new questions, of creating new and different frameworks and inquiring the ones that we already have. One important way that we make epistemic progress, Elgin remarks, “is by structuring our inquiries [...] in such a way that current understanding can be leveraged to yield further understanding.”<sup>203</sup> In other words, epistemic success, or advancement

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<sup>203</sup> Catherine Elgin, “Making Progress”, work in progress, 2021, p. 1.

in understating becomes palpable when a person has the ability to form insightful questions, to construct and produce new and astute relations between experiences and offer them new frameworks of possibilities. This is precisely what O’Gorman accomplished.

#### *IV. Conclusions*

This dissertation has developed an account vindicating the place of narrative in historical practice by exposing and elucidating certain cognitive principles that are involved in narrative explanation. In doing so, it offers a novel theory of narrative construction and evaluation. It does this by unpacking in a broadly naturalistic fashion what Hayden White called “the structures of meaning that are generally human [...]”<sup>204</sup> This is not to suggest that this account answers all the questions regarding the structures of meaning of a narrative. Rather, this approach suggests that by recognizing the patterns of organization involved in the construction of a narrative we come closer first, to identifying the cognitive value of a narrative (how it is structured and how it provides an explanation) and second, to shedding light on how we both comprehend experience and bestow meaning on it. Furthermore, to recognize this structure of meaning in the principles of organization of Gestalt psychology also allows us to fill in the gap that Louis Mink left us with

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<sup>204</sup> Hayden White, “The value of Narrativity in the representation of reality” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No.1 Autumn, 1980, p. 5

regarding his notion of a “synoptic” vision, viz., how the transformation from events to stories takes place.

In this sense, this dissertation is similar to the Kantian and Whiteian projects because it seeks to expose/make explicit the psychological or conceptual “grid” that allows us to give meaning to the world. As Ankersmit argues in a recent paper, both Kant and White’s approaches are transcendental in the sense that they are trying to understand what conditions make knowledge possible. And in both cases, “there is an empirical content (sensory perception or historical data) waiting to be organized”<sup>205</sup> by this transcendental scheme. This dissertation takes the principles of Gestalt psychology precisely as a grid that allows us to structure and give meaning to historical evidence by transforming scatter pieces of information into a coherent story. In other words, it is an effort to recognize how we make sense of the historical world.

Thus, one basic contribution of this dissertation is that it has argued for a connection between the Gestalt psychological

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<sup>205</sup> Frank Ankersmit, “A Narrativist Revival?”, *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 2021, p.8.

processes and epistemology. It is important to make evident this connection because as Alvin Goldman recognized, after Frege's attack on psychologism,

Philosophical questions, especially epistemological ones, were viewed as 'logical' questions, and logic was sharply separated from psychology. Various efforts have been made of late to reconnect epistemology with psychology. But there is little agreement about how such connections should be made, and doubts about the place of psychology within epistemology are still much in evidence. It therefore remains to be clarified just how such links should be established, and what impact they would have on the direction of epistemology.<sup>206</sup>

This dissertation formulates a response to Goldman's challenge to indicate precisely how psychology can inform epistemology by understanding the underlying psychological tenets that are involved in the construction of a historical narrative. This further blurs the line between epistemology and psychology in a way that philosophers such as Quine have encouraged as part of the naturalizing project in epistemology. Furthermore, this dissertation

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<sup>206</sup> Alvin I. Goldman, "The Relation between Epistemology and Psychology." *Synthese*, vol. 64, no. 1, 1985, p.29.

also recognizes that there are different ways that explanations can take place. Formal logic is ultimately linked to and in the service of other organizing principles. Acknowledging that the principles of organization have an underlying epistemic component allows inclusion of narrative as a legitimate way of producing and conveying knowledge. What to foreground, what to leave in the background, what to make continuous, what to make similar and proximal, and how to close a narrative are all *choices* that the historian ponders and *must* make in constructing and conveying a particular story. *But these choices come from a particular way that we make sense and construct knowledge about the world and, in that sense, these psychological choices also become epistemological ones.*

This dissertation thus rejects the claim that narratives are simply a *descriptive* process lacking in any epistemic dimension. My account promotes the idea that narrative represents its own particular kind of explanatory form. Histories are not “merely presenting the results of a historical research”<sup>207</sup>, they are in fact telling a story and

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<sup>207</sup> Frank Ankersmit, “A Narrativist Revival?”, p.17.

thus, they are a way of thinking. In this sense, I do not displace—as Kuukkanen has—narrative as a nonrational/descriptive activity. Rather, I reclaim the rational status of narrative and, at the same time, point the way to a normative standard that can provide us with an evaluative criterion.

The organizing principles that chapter one engaged with bring to light our cognitive capacity that makes experience intelligible by fitting it into a systematic understanding of the world. We construct knowledge of past experiences by organizing parts into wholes and thereby giving meaning to what is otherwise a disconnected set of experiences. The principles of organization—as shown by my analyses offered of classic historiographical work—prove to be a prefigurative structure that allows us to recognize how the mind organizes experience. As developed through chapters one, two and three, these principles appear unavoidable inasmuch as they are integral to how people make sense of and come to know the world.

Interestingly enough, these principles prove to be present in the way we make sense of space and, as chapter one showed, time. In particular, chapter one provides a descriptive exercise inasmuch as

it explains and illustrates how these principles of organization are manifest in classic historiographical work. But the descriptive practice detailed in chapter one evolves in chapter two. By appealing to Wittgenstein's idea of seeing an aspect, these principles unfold as epistemological tools that interpret and organize the world in particular ways, accounting for one key method by which humans make sense of it. The historian too uses these principles to configure events with a particular interpretation. In this sense, these principles help make evident the ways in which historians group information and convert it into a particular story.

The idea of the organizing principles and the aspects that they reveal allow us to better comprehend the respects in which historical narratives are in fact constructions and not passively waiting to be discovered. In other words, the past is not like some static, retrievable object. Rather it is only through narrative construction that we can have a sense of how we, from the present, understand the past. Thus, these principles allow us to give structural meaning to events in time and by doing so they prove to be epistemically necessary in

constructing knowledge about events in time. In short, they prove to be an epistemic grid that makes time understandable.

The notion of aspects then developed in chapter two helps us recognize how historians give structure to an inherently unstructured set of occurrences. Scattered historical information presents itself as a puzzle to the historian, but once a unifying aspect is in play, the historian organizes and interprets the information to mold it into a particular shape. What once was scattered pieces of information now becomes an understandable figure. The central idea in chapter two is that historical aspects work to construct an organizing whole, and as such, they bring into the picture different ways in which we can make sense of particular events. Ultimately, what the notion of aspects helps us understand is how different pieces of information can be brought together under a unifying scheme—being that a concept or a new framework— that responds to a particular way of thinking about the past.

Wittgenstein's discussion of the notion of aspect perception allows us to recognize two central activities that the historian performs with respect to the sources. On the one hand, historians organize the

material in a certain way. That is, they decide the central guiding figure of their narrative, the events that will be linked together, and which ones will be left behind. On the other hand, they perform a conceptual act of interpreting the events in a certain way. They impose aspects that allows them to give meaning to events as a whole. What this ends up proving is that the organizing principles that chapter one engaged with are not only there to make descriptions of past events. Rather, these principles prove to be a cognitive perspective, one that not only describes events but actually composes them into a narrative that explains how an event came to be. Another way of saying this is that historians provide information with both a causal link and understanding. They link events to explain their “coming to be” and the significance that the causal connection implies.

Aspects reveal that there is a conceptual act of connecting events and occurrences to give meaning to them. *The way these connections can be made are different.* Therefore, interpretation and organization prove to be key activities that historians necessarily engage with. Without them we would just have chronicles, annales and sets of events with no particular framework for understanding how a historical occurrence

came to be. What aspects allow us to recognize is that the imposition of a particular structure of meaning is not only necessary, but it is an epistemic act. Framing an event as a revolution, a rebellion or a civil war is both an interpretive and organizing activity. Historians impose a cognitive perspective or standpoint to the sources and by doing so, they organize and interpret the historical material in a particular way.

What also becomes evident in chapter two is how and why organization and interpretation can always be done differently. In other words, there are different ways to tell the same story: different characters to take into account, and different aspects that events can be clothe with. That is why we will always have multiple accounts regarding the past and these accounts are not only the ways in which different historical agents experienced their time, but also accounts that are written after the events have occurred and portray different versions of the same historical event. One event can be redescribed in a multitude of ways depending on how historians choose to tell a particular story.

As with visual aspects, these different historical accounts cannot be said to aggregate. There is no single universal past that is being

constructed by the entirety of these views. Rather, there are multiple pasts that have many different meanings because different organizing principles allow for changes of meaning without changing whatever the facts are taken to be. In other words, what we come to realize in chapters two and three is something that Kuhn recognized about competing scientific explanations, that is “what differentiated these various schools was not one or another failure of method—they were all ‘scientific’—but what we shall come to call their *incommensurable* ways of seeing the world and practicing science in it.”<sup>208</sup> What Kuhn argues there is relatable to historical narratives as well. It is important to realize that the idea of discovery and the idea of invention—discussed in chapter three—, or the different accounts of the concept of surplus value discussed in chapter one, are *incommensurable* views; meaning that they cannot aggregate and give a “fuller” picture of the world. Additionally, it is not as if O’Gorman or Marx are telling the truth and Morison, Ricardo and Smith are not. What these works come to show is that the way that one can integrate facts can be radically different. There

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<sup>208</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, p. 4. (my emphasis)

are different ways of arranging facts and giving meaning to them, and these different ways respond to the different kinds of stories that the historian wishes to tell.

As detailed in chapter three, what comes to be unsatisfactory about Morison's account is where he places the emphasis of this narrative. By foregrounding a particular set of questions, he left in the background many others that proved to be problematic. Again, paralleling points made by Kuhn, what is interesting about incommensurable viewpoints is that they will also often disagree *about the list of problems that are important to tackle*. Copernicus' innovation, for example, "was not simply to move the earth. Rather *it was a whole new way of regarding the problems of physics and astronomy*, one that necessarily changed the meaning of both the earth and motion."<sup>209</sup> For our two historians, O'Gorman and Morison, what comes to be interesting and, in fact, incommensurable, is that *they took as the central problem radically different things*. While Morison tried to answer the question, who discovered America? O'Gorman focused on the idea of why discovery in the first place. The two

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<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149. (my emphasis)

historians saw different things when they looked at the same set of information. As Kuhn clarifies, “again, this is not to say that they can see anything they please. Both are looking at the world, and what they look at has not changed. But in some areas they see different things, and they see them in different relations one to the other.”<sup>210</sup> The interesting thing to notice here is that they organized and interpreted the material differently. They took the problem to be radically different things that needed to be explained. Due to this organizing discrepancy and the emphasis of the questions that are worth paying attention to, their stories are drastically different and thus, the meaning that they convey to the facts respond to different kinds of stories that they wished to tell.

As noted, we also saw this phenomenon in chapter one with Marx’s introduction of the concept of surplus value. What O’Gorman and Marx ultimately showed is that the problem relied *on the focus* that was so far given by certain schools of thought. For Marx, the issue was that the notion of surplus value was not taken as a central problem of the capitalist system; on the contrary, it was taken as a

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<sup>210</sup> *Idem.*

natural consequence of the productive relations. Marx's innovation was to take material that had already been studied in previous economic theories and transform it into a novel problem. To use Kuhn's Wittgensteinian terminology, the frame that Marx brought to what he "saw"—the capitalist system—opened a whole new network of relationships that made Marx's theory a new way of seeing the world.

Similarly, taking the notion of discovery as a problem and not a question of priority amongst explorers was the switch that O'Gorman produced in his work. Switching this point of emphasis opened a whole new set of questions and relationships that demanded attention and could not be answered by appealing to the well-known paradigm of discovery. O'Gorman opened up a new way of understanding and relating to the occurrences that took place in 1492 and, thus, he also brought forth a new way of seeing the world.

Therefore, chapter three begins to develop an evaluative framework that can take into account not how many facts or truths are listed in a narrative but how a narrative allows us to understand

in new and creative ways the same set of evidence. In other words, we need an account that can recognize and evaluate how the historian gives meaning to the past. Interestingly enough, what chapter three makes explicit is how the organizing principles that were explained in chapter one and proved to have epistemic content in chapter two also have specific normative implications since they reveal what new and interesting questions can be asked and answered in realms such as historiography. What chapter three allows us to realize are ways in which organizational principles impact and shape normative criteria. The way in which a historian chooses to frame certain historical information expresses a particular *understanding* of an event. What this approach suggests is that normativity in historiography cannot be centered on evidence and verification. It should necessarily take into account the ways in which historians give meaning to the evidence. Success in historical narratives depends not only on accuracy, but on the structure of meaning that the historian uses to tell a particular story.<sup>211</sup> Doing

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<sup>211</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The essential tension*, University of Chicago Press, 1977, p. 28.

so brings the possibility of making novel integrations that reveal new things about particular events. This also allows us to acknowledge the importance of framing information in new and insightful ways that can challenge and expand our understanding of the past.

It is important to press on the idea that the standard of evaluation that this dissertation proposed in chapter three privileges understanding over knowledge. This move allows us to evaluate not necessarily *the content* of a history but rather *the form in which the content is displayed*. By introducing the idea of understanding we are able to evaluate which type of organization is better than another. In other words, privileging understanding over knowledge allows us to take into account the ways in which organization is displayed. This dissertation talks about the notion of understanding as a special kind of skill that allows the historian to organize and reorganize information. By doing so, we recognize that historians not only use understanding to link information and give a causal account of how an event came to be, but by doing so, they also grant an event with a particular meaning.

Catherine Elgin and Alva Noë's works establish a very interesting link between epistemology and artistic creations and thus, between organization and understanding. One of their central challenges is to explain the epistemic value of works of art. To do so, Elgin privileges the notion of understanding in what she calls critical epistemology. One of her central claims is that to appreciate the epistemic value of art we need to start recognizing that enumerating statements of facts about a certain piece of art may not be the answer to its epistemic appreciation. Artistic compositions are about realizing how "things hang together", how can they organize and reorganize the world to convey a particular meaning about it. The notion of understanding proves key in her account because it allows us to acknowledge that this meaning making activity—of organizing and reorganizing— has epistemic value and thus, can be evaluated. One of the cognitive functions of art, Elgin remarks "*is to effect such reorganizations and show what they have to offer.*"<sup>212</sup> One of the examples that Elgin calls our attention to is

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<sup>212</sup> Catherine Elgin, "Reorienting Aesthetics, Reconceiving Cognition", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Summer, 2000, p. 221. (my emphasis)

Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein. By painting a picture of Stein, Elgin remarks, Picasso "highlights certain hitherto unnoticed or underemphasized features. [He] enables us to see her differently [...] Gertrude Stein's appearance is thus reconfigured as a result of Picasso's work."<sup>213</sup> But that is not all. Elgin also recognizes that Picasso's portrait affords us the opportunity to see other people differently as well. By portraying for the first time in history a woman as "magisterial"<sup>214</sup> the painting presents us with the opportunity to raise questions such as: "Who else is worthy to be so portrayed? Why aren't there more such portraits? What took so long? Picasso was hardly a feminist. But his portrait of Stein provokes exactly the questions that feminists have been urging us to ask."<sup>215</sup> What Elgin allows us to recognize is that art has a peculiar way of making new connections and establishing unrecognized similarities and differences and by doing so, art expands our understanding.

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<sup>213</sup> Catherine Elgin, "Art in the advancement of understanding", p. 4.

<sup>214</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>215</sup> *Idem.*

Noë's work allows us to take Elgin's claims and expand on them. His idea of *strange tools* recognizes that there are tools that we create that allow us to question the world around us, particularly the ways that we are naturally organized. *Sometimes, Noë argues, these strange tools are hard to understand and appreciate because they aim at questioning and reconceptualizing very basic notions and ideas that we have reassessed through time.* Art is an example of these strange tools. But the central point in Noë's work is that this questioning is precisely the epistemic value that art offers. Painters like Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso, for example, "were able to reorganize the ways we take for granted what it is to depict the world precisely by refusing even to try to draw things as they are seen to be." In this sense, Noë continues, "art invites us to wonder what we can see in or with or thanks to a picture."<sup>216</sup> In other words, the possibility of understanding the ways that we have been organized and reconsider them is art's essential activity.

In this sense, historiography shares an important feature with aesthetics, viz. they both urge us to focus on ways that we can

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<sup>216</sup> Alva Noë, *Strange Tools*, p. 45.

question and reorganize ourselves. Thus, the aesthetic value of historiography relies on its capacity to reorganize us and by doing so it teaches us new ways of understanding and engaging with the world.

Interestingly, Hayden White recognized that narrative theory could tell you everything about narrative except what makes it good.<sup>217</sup> But White was focusing on trying to evaluate the style of plotment of the historian. Evaluating a tragedy over a comedy regarding the same set of events seems to be rather difficult. To go back to White's *Burden of History*, how can you evaluate a Monet over a Picasso? How to evaluate the line, traces, the use of color or even the stylistic schools that each of these authors belongs to? The question seems to reach a wall asked in such a way. But what if we ask which work of art expands the limits of traditional ways of seeing the world? Or what painting allows us to understand our experience of the world better? Or which painting allows us to question and even transform ourselves? This is precisely the route that Noë and Elgin argued for. What both of these authors allow

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<sup>217</sup> Paul Roth, *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanations*, p. 149.

us to recognize is that understanding and reorganization can be normative criteria to evaluate works of art and appreciate their epistemic value.

Inspired by these works, what chapter three conveys is the idea that history like art also needs to be appreciated first in terms of understanding –not knowledge– and reorganization. What we are evaluating is how the structure of meaning that each historian chooses to frame their narrative with is transforming prevailing paradigms and in that sense, how this transforms the ways in which individuals and knowing communities understand themselves. What we are evaluating is not the style of the historian but the ways in which the epistemic form of a narrative allows us to question and even change the ways in which we see the world.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that challenging our own set of beliefs and furthering our understanding about a particular event has *practical* consequences such as the changing of predominant paradigms in the historical discipline. The paradigm of “the discovery of America”, for example, was a prevalent one, and one might say that it still is. Works such as O’Gorman’s, which were

published even before critical race or feminist theories were in vogue, allow us to really challenge a problematic and yet well-established perspective. That is to say that the aspects discussed in chapter two influence the ways historians practice the discipline and, vice versa, practical demands influence the aspects that historians use to talk about the past. What O’Gorman ultimately did was “engineer” a switch that responded to practical and theoretical questions that had to do with the identity of America and its inhabitants. He began to ask new questions that traced the answer to a new way of seeing and understanding the identity of America. Taking well known facts and reorganizing them in novel ways allows us to further our understanding about events, but it also allows us to talk about and see reality in a new light.

To conclude, this dissertation brings to the foreground a new relationship that historiography has with aesthetics, one that recognizes and puts emphasis in their epistemic value. Recognizing this new connection affords us with the opportunity of looking at historical narratives as *possibilities* of understanding the past. Works of art, as historical narratives are never closed off structures, on the

contrary, they are open ended possibilities that allow us to understand ourselves and the world around us in new and interesting ways. In this sense, historical narratives should be understood as an epistemic and aesthetic act that have the purpose of giving meaning to our experiences in time. The importance of seeing the past as something open ended and constructed gives us, as Hayden White so forcefully argued, the possibility of an open future, one that is not determined and static but one that invites freedom and the opportunity to reinvent ourselves.

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