

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY AND THE ART OF SELF-DISTANCING

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ABSTRACT

The metaphor of historical distance often appears in discussions about the study of contemporary history. It suggests that we cannot see the past in perspective if we are too near to it. According to founding fathers like Ranke and Humboldt, temporal distance is required to discern historical “ideas” or forms. The argument may have some plausibility, but the presupposition is plainly false, since we cannot see the past at all. This leaves us with the question of what to make of the so-called historical forms. This article discusses three different views. The first, historicist, view is objectivist and localizes historical forms in the past. The second, narrativist, view is subjectivist and localizes historical forms in the realm of imagination and representation. The third view goes beyond the other two in that it considers both sides. It does not use a one-sided but a two-sided concept of form, which hinges on the idea of a distinction. This means that historical forms occupy both sides of the subject–object distinction or the present–past distinction. Because the subject–object terminology is confusing, the essay employs an alternative distinction between first- and second-order observation. With the help of this distinction, it is possible to redescribe the distance metaphor in such a way that the theoretical status of contemporary history becomes less enigmatic.

Keywords: Frank Ankersmit, Niklas Luhmann, George Spencer Brown, contemporary history, historical distance, historicism, historical form, second-order observation, form as distinction, nostalgia.

I. INTRODUCTION¹

When I finished this article and thought about a title, all of a sudden Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* jumped into my mind. To my surprise, I must say, for I had not spent a single thought on this bestseller for ages. I read it shortly after its appearance, in 1974, because the last words of the title had attracted my attention. Riding an old BSA at the time, I was curious how other people coped, mentally speaking, with broken bolts, worn-out valves, and leaking head gaskets. Unfortunately, the book did not live up to its title. There was little motorcycle maintenance in it and much philosophical mumbo-jumbo. That was, at any rate, how I thought about it nearly forty years ago. Now that I have read the text anew, to find out what prompted the recall, my reaction is somewhat milder. The story told in the first and last hundred pages is not that bad. It is about

1. I would like to thank Frank Ankersmit (Groningen) and Carlos Fico (Rio de Janeiro) for their useful comments.

the motorcycle journey of a nameless, troubled man and his eleven-year-old son, Chris—“Erlkönig on the motorbike,” as a Dutch reviewer aptly summarized it. The first-person narrator is recovering from a mental breakdown and electroshock therapy, from which he has lost a great part of his memory. During the journey, he struggles to get in touch with his former self, whom he consistently addresses as Phaedrus. Only at the end of the book, after Chris is rescued from slipping into *his* upcoming mental illness, does Phaedrus’s personality begin to re-emerge and the narrator is reconciled with his past.

On reflection, I think that the unconscious association with *Zen* was caused by a problem that occupied me while writing this essay, namely the problem of splitting or *Entzweiung*, to use a Hegelian expression. Although the context is different—I am not writing about the pathology of a split personality but on the quite normal process of historical self-reflection—the distinction between present self and past self shows a structural likeness. Historians face this distinction when they write about their own time or their own culture, for in doing so they are implicitly writing about themselves, which entails an internal split between a present subject (the “I” that describes) and a past object (the “I” that is described). An intriguing question is how far this process of self-distanciation or self-objectivation may go. Can we describe our own *Zeitgeist*, or would that amount to a kind of bootstrapping à la Von Münchhausen? Was Hegel right, perhaps, and can we discover a cultural period only when it is nearing its end? I suppose that questions like these awakened my slumbering memories of Pirsig’s philosophical road novel, but I cannot vouch for the truth, because “I” am not sure what “I” had in mind while having this free association.

It is the aim of this essay to analyze the epistemological position of contemporary history. This might be interesting for two reasons. First, historiography at large has always had a predominantly contemporary character. Since Thucydides, numerous people—retired generals, clerics, urban chroniclers, reporters, and political commentators—have written about their own life and times. This *histoire sauvage* deserves more theoretical reflection than it has received up to now. Second, it is an interesting fact that the modern, academic discipline of history was initially at odds with this tradition and preferred *Vergangenheitsgeschichte* to *Zeitgeschichte*. A quote from Burckhardt may illustrate this: “Nothing is less conducive to higher learning and more destructive to scientific life than the exclusive concern with contemporary events. We just live in a different age from Thucydides. . . .”² Only after the Second World War did the study of the recent past become a part of the academic curriculum, not without substantial pressure from public opinion. This “rehabilitation” of contemporary history raised some discussion among historians, but a thoughtful reaction from philosophers and theorists of history remains forthcoming.

2. In a letter to Bernhard Kugler, July 2, 1871: “Nichts ist der höhern Erkenntniß weniger förderlich, nichts wirkt zerstörender auf das wissenschaftliche Leben als die ausschließliche Beschäftigung mit gleichzeitigen Ereignissen. Wir leben in einer ganz andern Zeit als Thucydides, der die Lage und die Gegensätze vollkommen übersah und in Alles eingeweiht war.” Jacob Burckhardt, *Briefe, Vollständige und kritisch bearbeitete Ausgabe: Mit Benützung des handschriftlichen Nachlasses hergestellt von Max Burckhardt* (Basel and Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1963), V, 131.

A standard argument against the study of contemporary history that I want to discuss is the lack of historical distance. As usual in historical debates, the argument is metaphorical and vague. It suggests that temporal distance is a prerequisite for seeing the past in proportion, but exactly how much distance remains unclear. Perhaps a lifetime would do, for that might seem to solve the problem of self-reference or subjectivity. Precise criteria are hard to give, however, because at one time it may take a few decades to write objectively about a controversial subject and at another time a few centuries. All the same, a lapse of time seems inevitable, and this seems to give the argument of historical distance some plausibility. A fundamental objection, however, is that the visual character of the metaphor leads us astray. Though we may indefinitely talk about the right distance for seeing the past, there is in fact nothing to see at all. The only things we can see are the relics of the past, our primary sources, so to speak.

The objection to the visual character of the distance metaphor raises the question of what the deeper meaning of this metaphor might be. What does it stand for? If it does not apply to the historical events themselves, does it apply then to historical evidence?³ If so, what could words like “observation” and “distance” possibly mean in this context? Perhaps we should look for an answer in the historical method introduced by Ranke and others. An important innovation of theirs was the exclusive use of written sources. Historians should no longer proceed like reporters by relying on their own observations, but observe the results of observations made by other people in the past. Borrowing a term from cybernetics, we might say that modern historians should become “second-order observers.”⁴ This enables us to specify our question in the following way: does the metaphor of historical distance stand for the distinction between first- and second-order observation?

I will answer this question in terms of the concept of “historical form.” This concept comes from Ranke and Humboldt and will serve here as an abstract referent for the “observations” historians are supposed to make. Using the subject-object criterion, I will discuss three different views of historical form. While the first, historicist, view localizes form on the object-side, the second, narrativist, view does the same on the subject-side. The third view claims both sides at the same time. In the section II, I will briefly explain the historicist doctrine of historical “ideas” (forms) and its relation to the argument of historical distance. In section III, I shall make a leap in time to the work of Frank Ankersmit, in which the historical form moves from the past itself to the interpretation of the past, and to the ensuing narrativist view of historical distance that emerges from it. In section IV, I will pay attention to the idea of a two-sided form derived from Spencer Brown’s *Laws of Form*.⁵ Here, form and distinction are essentially the same, and

3. Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 18: “the immediate, primary, subject matter of historiography is evidence and not events.”

4. Heinz von Foerster, *Observing Systems*, with an introduction by Francisco Varela (Seaside, CA: Intersystems Publications, 1982). Mind the ambiguity of the title. To Austrian historians Foerster is no stranger. See “Im Goldenen Hecht: Über Konstruktivismus und Geschichte. Interview mit Albert Müller und Karl H. Müller.” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 8 (1997), 129-143. Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Reidel, 1980).

5. George Spencer Brown, *Laws of Form* (New York: The Julian Press, Inc., 1972). I follow

this enables me to say that historical forms coincide with both sides of the subject–object distinction and the corresponding present–past distinction. The theory of first- and second-order observation may help us, next, to explain the problem of historical distance in the study of contemporary history. The argument will be illustrated with the example of nostalgia in section V.

II. THE DOCTRINE OF THE HISTORICAL IDEAS OR FORMS

The metaphor of historical distance is typical of the modern, historicist approach to history. It presupposes a new dynamic worldview, no longer based on the distinction between *aeternitas* and *tempus* but on the purely temporal distinction between past and future. The traditional worldview made no sharp distinction between the different modes of time so that all historical experience converged somehow on the present. This explains why most history was primarily contemporary history, even if annalists and chroniclers started dutifully with the creation. When the belief in *aeternitas* dwindled, the distinction between past and future became more prominent.⁶ For convenience's sake we can situate this change in the eighteenth century, but it naturally took a longer period. In a recent study on the writing of contemporary history in several European countries, Nützenadel and Schieder describe the consequences of this change as follows:

With the rise of historicism, a radical paradigm shift took place in Germany. Contemporary history had always been the center of all history, but now it became marginalized as *Zeitgeschichte*. From the viewpoint of historicism, the contemporary historian lacked reliable evidence as well as historical distance. Oral testimony no longer counted as trustworthy and had to make room for written records. Proximity to the event, which had always been considered an advantage of the study of contemporary history, was now held against it as a special drawback.⁷

Before about 1800, historical observation had usually meant direct observation of current events. Herodotus, Thucydides, and other classical authors referred to as “historians” had characterized their method of working as “autopsy” or seeing with your own eyes.⁸ Around 600 CE Isidore of Seville canonized this approach for the European Middle Ages with the words *videre* and *interesse*.⁹ As late as 1759 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing still echoed this received wisdom, when he wrote in a

chiefly Luhmann's interpretation of this calculus.

6. Reinhart Koselleck, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical Categories,” in Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 255-277. Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, transl. J. Bednarz, Jr., with Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 310-312.

7. *Zeitgeschichte als Problem: Nationale Traditionen und Perspektiven der Forschung in Europa*, ed. Alexander Nützenadel and Wolfgang Schieder (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 9. My translation.

8. G. Schepens, *L'“Autopsie” dans la methode des historiens grecs du Ve siècle avant J.-C.* Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Letteren 42, nr. 93 (Brussels: Koninklijke Academie, 1980).

9. Isidor of Seville, *Etymologiae*. Liber I: *De Grammatica*, XLI De historia: “Apud veteres enim nemo conscribat historiam, nisi is qui interfuisset, et ea quae conscribenda essent vidisset.” (“Among the Ancients nobody wrote history, unless he had witnessed and seen by himself what had to be described.”) See the text in the Latin Library of *The Classics Page*: <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/isidore/1.shtml> (accessed June 8, 2010).

review that a true historian writes only about his own country and his own time, “for only he can fulfill by himself the role of eyewitness.”¹⁰ Critical remarks of this statement appearing in the century thereafter show a turn of the tide.¹¹ The historians of the nineteenth century no longer recognized themselves in this traditional depiction of history.

According to Ranke and other historicists, a modern academic historian should study only written sources from the past and the observations made by people in their own time. With this new view of the historian’s task, the observation of current events fell out of favor during the nineteenth century. Historians became specialists in *Vergangenheitsgeschichte* and left *Zeitgeschichte* to amateurs and journalists. Important considerations in this change were the availability of archival documents, the decision to study only written sources, and the fear of political entanglement. The last point is emphasized in the first issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History* (1966): “The historical journals of the nineteenth century excluded the ‘discussion of unresolved problems of current politics’ (*Historische Zeitschrift*), announced that they would ‘avoid contemporary controversies’ (*Revue Historique*) or even that they would refuse ‘contributions arguing still burning questions with reference to present controversy’ (*Historical Review*).”¹² Fear of political entanglement was also the reason why many schools and universities skipped the period of “the last fifty years” in their curriculum, a practice that I can still remember from my own school years in the early 1960s. In the same decade, however, the otherworldliness of the historical establishment came under heavy fire. As a result, contemporary history finally became an academic subdiscipline, complete with its own chairs, journals, and research institutes. In a sense, this meant a rehabilitation of the tradition from before 1800.¹³

Illustrative of the historicist view on distance is a quote from Humboldt’s famous essay “On the Historian’s Task” dating from 1821: “Thus historical truth is, as it were, rather like the clouds which take shape for the eye only at a distance.”¹⁴ It is an expressive image, implying that contemporary historians are engulfed in a dense fog, unable to see any contours. The question, however, is what it means. What do the clouds stand for? Why does Humboldt use a visual metaphor, if he rejects the traditional view of *videre et interesse*? “Seeing” is, after all, an activity necessarily taking place in the present. If applied to a distant or even recent past the word loses its meaning, unless it is given an unusual connotation. This is

10. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*, Dritter Teil, VIII, 23 August 1759: “Überhaupt aber glaube ich, daß der Name eines wahren Geschichtschreibers nur demjenigen zukömmt, der die Geschichte seiner Zeiten und seines Landes beschreibt. Denn nur der kann selbst als Zeuge auftreten.” (“After all, I think that only he deserves the name of a true historian who writes the history of his own time and his own country. For only he can fulfill by himself the role of eyewitness.”) See the text at Zeno.org: <http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Lessing,+Gotthold+Ephraim> (accessed June 8, 2010).

11. Fritz Ernst, “Zeitgeschehen und Geschichtschreibung: Eine Skizze,” in *Die Welt als Geschichte: Zeitschrift für universalgeschichtliche Forschung* 17 (1957), 137-189, esp. 171ff.

12. Editorial note in the *Journal of Contemporary History* 1 (1966), iv.

13. Geoffrey Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1967), 15: “what was newfangled was not a concept of history firmly anchored to the present but, on the contrary, the nineteenth-century notion of history as something dedicated entirely to the past.”

14. Wilhelm von Humboldt, “On the Historian’s Task,” *History and Theory* 6 (1967), 58.

exactly what Humboldt did, when he wrote about “clouds which take shape for the eye only at a distance.” Humboldt was thinking here of an inward eye that intuitively grasps “historical ideas,” which are a kind of temporalized Platonic form: not the timeless, mathematical forms Plato had in mind, but historical, time-bound forms like *Zeitgeist* or *Volksgeist*. One may raise one’s eyebrows at these ghostly German concepts, but they are in fact no more outlandish than present-day equivalents like mentality, ideology, cultural context, episteme, paradigm, or worldview. All these vague and awkward notions do the same: they define ideational wholes, which are indispensable for our reconstruction of the past.

The historical method as conceived by Ranke and others made use of the comparison of sources. By eliminating individual idiosyncrasies in various records of a certain event, it would be possible, ideally, to reconstruct a historical state of affairs.¹⁵ This works fine as long as the individual biases cancel each other out. But what if several historical informants happen to share the same cultural or ideological bias, and report, for example, that they saw a witch on a broomstick or the Russian proletariat seizing power? The only option is then to reconstruct their common belief system. Only by knowing the meaning and social function of such a system is a realistic interpretation of the records perhaps possible. This method presupposes, of course, that the historian has a contrasting belief system; otherwise he or she would not recognize any bias at all. This may seem a hermeneutical truism now, but in the nineteenth century the thought occurred only to a few critical minds like Gustav Droysen. Most historians did not question their own status as observer. Although Humboldt left some room for the imagination, he and Ranke were in the end convinced that historical forms could somehow be discovered in the past.¹⁶ This Platonist realism still appeals to historians, in the same way as it appeals to mathematicians who believe in the reality of numbers. This professional Platonism seems resistant to the criticism of philosophers. It is important to keep this in mind, but in the meantime we have to see what this criticism is in the historian’s case.

III. NARRATIVE FORM

Humboldt was rather ambiguous about the ontological status of historical wholes like periods or nations. Although he was not blind to the constructive part played by historians themselves, his Platonism led him to depict historical forms as realities of some sort. In response to this, Frank Ankersmit, in his *Narrative Logic* (1983), made short work of the confusion inherent in the Platonist view by arguing that historical ideas or forms are narrative constructions. Although he acknowledged that “profitable use has been made of historicist notions such as ‘Zeitgeist,’

15. The German hermeneutical theologian Johann Martin Chladenius (Chladenius) had already described this method for reaching objectivity in the 1740s. Referring to Leibniz’s “point of view,” he advised paying attention to the individual perspectives in different texts. See Jean Grondin, *Einführung in die philosophische Hermeneutik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001), 80-86.

16. Humboldt, “On the Historian’s Task,” 58: “For if the historian, as has been said, can only reveal the truth of an event by presentation, by filling in and connecting the disjointed fragments of direct observation, he can do so, like the poet, only through his imagination.”

the ‘historische Idee’ of a nation or a cultural tradition, the so-called ‘historical forms.’” he showed clearly that these notions do not refer to the past itself but to narrative representations of it.¹⁷

Narrative logic reveals a clear distinction between description, which occurs at the level of individual sentences, and representation, which takes place at the level of narrative structures. When historians describe historical events, they operate within the scientific scheme defined by the rules of reference and truth. However, as soon as they move on to the composition of their narrative, they rather become artists or novelists. By structuring the sentences of their text, historians *suggest* a similar structure in the historical events to which these sentences refer. And the better they write, the more suggestive their representations will be, to the extent that we as readers are even tempted to believe that the Renaissance or the Baroque really did exist, although they exist as historical forms only in the narrative, much like the characters in a novel.

In traditional epistemological language one might conclude that Ankersmit moves from an objectivist to a subjectivist position, because he holds that historical forms are not “discovered” in the past but “projected” onto it.¹⁸ However, we cannot leave the matter here since narrative logic defies the traditional language of subject and object. Comparing the representational view of the world with a “baby view” of reality, Ankersmit explains that narrative forms are logically anterior to a world of subjects and objects. On the level of the narrative as a whole, we can no longer think in terms of subject-predicate sentences with a referring capacity. We find only self-referential clouds of meaning, metaphorically speaking. These clouds can be differentiated, however, by a sorting procedure called intensional typification. This means that the historical narrative or representational language at large is responsible for the production of basic conceptual distinctions, including those between subject and object or present and past. The forms discerned in this way may harden into “normal” objects by repeated usage. For example, if we talk long enough about “the state” and act as if it really exists, it comes into existence, in a manner of speaking. Ankersmit arrives here at a constructivist view quite similar to that of Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist and epistemologist who showed how babies come to see objects in the real world, by repeated peekaboo games, for instance.

Since forms are identifiable only in contrast with one other, narrative constructs like cultures, periods, or nations always come in twos or more. It is impossible to discuss the identity of the one without the identity of the others. Ankersmit explains this when he discusses “the narrative scope” or the point of view of a narrative interpretation: “The narrative scope of a historical narrative cannot be established by considering only *that* historical narrative. Narrative scope only

17. F. R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language* (The Hague, Boston, and London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 124.

18. F. R. Ankersmit, “Six Theses on Narrativist Philosophy of History,” in Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 36: “Historists attempted to discover the essence, or, as they called it, the *historische Idee*, which they assumed was present in the historical phenomena themselves. Narrativism, on the contrary, recognized that a historical interpretation *projects* a structure onto the past and does not *discover* it as if this structure existed in the past itself.”

comes into being when one compares narrative interpretations with rival interpretations. If we have only *one* narrative interpretation of some historical topic, we have *no* interpretation.”¹⁹ Any teacher of undergraduate courses in history may confirm this observation. It is unreasonable to expect from junior students a critical judgment about a textbook if they have no other books for comparison. How could they recognize an interpretation without rival interpretations?

Applying this insight to a cultural period or a *Zeitgeist*, we might say that a characterization is possible only in contrast with another period or *Zeitgeist*. This is the crux of historical periodization. By drawing a caesura, we distinguish two periods at one and the same time. We cannot characterize the style period of modernism, for example, without placing ourselves *ipso facto* in a postmodern position.²⁰ There must be a difference, and we should try to make it visible, even though we cannot yet circumscribe the character of the postmodern period we live in. Geoffrey Barraclough said as much in 1964: “The new period which we call ‘contemporary’ or ‘post-modern’ is at its beginning and we cannot yet tell where its axis will ultimately lie.”²¹

From a narrativist point of view, Barraclough’s quote raises a serious problem. How can we distinguish modernism from a later, postmodern period if this is not yet a period for us? How do we conclude that the past is over if we cannot structure the present in a narrative way? This is a difficult question, but an attempt to answer it might start with the problem of historical self-reflection, which seems closely related to it. With this problem, we enter the field of memories and experiences, which Ankersmit explores in his later work. Many readers interpreted *Sublime Historical Experience* as a turn away from Ankersmit’s earlier work, but in my view the book only continues the research into the peculiarities of historical representation. In the context of the present article one might say that Ankersmit tries to find out how we create distance in ourselves between a present subject and a past object.

As the title indicates, *Sublime Historical Experience* applies the aesthetic concept of the sublime to the world of historical experience. In order to do so, one might think that Ankersmit should take a position in the traditional, philosophical debate whether the origin of sublime feelings lies in the objective realm (Burke) or in the realm of the subject (Kant), but contrary to expectation, he does not do this. Instead, he turns the tables by asking how the subject of the sublime can offer us insight into the distinction between subject and object or present and past. He answers this question in a central section of the book bearing the title “The Dissociation of the Past.”²²

Psychiatrists often use the term “dissociation” for people who feel cut off emotionally from their body (depersonalization) or from their environment (derealization). This emotional dissociation is a normal reaction to stress, trauma, sleep

19. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology*, 41.

20. One of the first articles on postmodern fiction came, not coincidentally, from a literary historian who helped to coin the term “modernism.” See Irving Howe, “Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction,” *Partisan Review* (Summer 1959), 420-436.

21. Barraclough, *Introduction*, 23.

22. F. R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 340-350.

deprivation, or the use of drugs. Many people will know it from their own experience as a momentary sensation. Only when it is a long-lasting or permanent condition will psychiatrists think it a mental disorder. Ankersmit illustrates the effect of derealization with the very Dutch metaphor of a glass cheese cover. I shall give my own version of it. Imagine that you are coming from your GP, who has just told you that you have only a few months to live. It is a sunny day and you walk through a busy street with children playing and merry people sitting in an outdoor cafe. Everything looks normal and yet everything is different, because you seem fenced off from the environment by a glass wall and move like a zombie in the human world. Your contact with reality is direct and indirect at the same time. It is direct because everything is as usual, and it is indirect because your *way of looking* at the world has come between you and the world. This combination of directness and indirectness is a first step in what I call the process of self-distancing, and it may finally result in a subject–object split.

Ankersmit explains the process of self-distancing further with the help of Arthur Danto, who gives a brilliant analysis of it in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Danto asks himself in this book what the difference is between Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and real Brillo boxes. The outward appearance of the boxes is the same, and yet we distinguish between art objects and common objects. What is the criterion we use to make this distinction? The problem has some similarity to the example of dissociation just mentioned, in that the way of representing makes all the difference. Common Brillo boxes represent themselves right away; Warhol's boxes represent the way they do this. In the last chapter of his book, Danto explains how everything changes when we start to represent our own representations, because we fall apart, as it were, into a present self and a past self. This may happen in times of great change or traumatic events. Usually we do not see the way in which we represent the world. We see only the world. We see it *through* our representations, as Danto puts it. With regard to others, it is different. *Their* way of representing the world is immediately clear to us. This is a strange asymmetry of "what" and "how." In the case of our own representations we can only answer "what" questions, whereas in the case of other people we find it quite natural to put "how" questions. Danto explains this asymmetry in the following way: "When I refer to another man's beliefs I am referring to him, whereas he, when expressing his beliefs, is not referring to himself but to the world. The beliefs in question are transparent to the believer; he reads the world through them without reading them. But his beliefs are opaque to others: they do not read the world through these beliefs; they as it were read the beliefs."²³ The asymmetry is not absolute. Otherwise we would never be able to reflect on ourselves. Reality shows that now and then we can reflect on our way of representing. Sometimes we look at ourselves with the eyes of someone else and then may have doubts about our own way of observing and representing the world. On such rare occasions, we seem to get an outside glimpse of our own character. However, the price for this insight is high. When we look back at ourselves in this way, we necessarily freeze a part of ourselves, just like Lot's wife who changed into a pillar of salt when she

23. Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 206.

looked back at Sodom. At the very moment when we seem to catch a glimpse of ourselves in our capacity as observers, we see a former self, an objectified or petrified part that has broken away from our present self. Danto draws a parallel here with the Hegelian discovery of a style period. As long as we actively share a cultural style we have no idea of living in a style period, since there is no outside from which we could recognize it. Only when a period is over or nearly over does it become recognizable as an entity, as Hegel expressed it so beautifully with his metaphor of Minerva's owl spreading its wings only at dusk.

Reviewing the discussion so far, we may conclude that there is an opposition between the historicist proposal to see forms in an objective past and the narrativist proposal to identify them with subjective interpretations. We may also conclude, however, that there is an inclination to convergence. While Humboldt leaves some room for the historian's imagination, Ankersmit recognizes in his later work that people can make real discoveries about their own past. The dissociation of the past as he describes it is in fact the starting point of all historical periodization. It is important to notice here that the distinction between past and present does not occur so much on the level of the *res gestae* as on the level of experience and representation. The problem of distance and objectivity is primarily concerned with this second level. Writing in an objective way about events has never been much of a problem, even in medieval chronicles.²⁴ The real problem is "the other half" of the past, the way in which people observe and represent their own world. Since many invisible threads connect us with the cultural memory of society, it is sometimes hard to say where the past stops and the present begins. This explains why a purely temporal definition of contemporary history is bound to fail. The final criterion is whether we are able to distance ourselves from a certain frame of mind.

A case in point is the French definition of "histoire contemporaine," which covers the entire period since the Revolution of 1789. For nearly two centuries, French historians remained under the spell of the distinction between the political Right and Left dating from the Revolution itself. They continued, as it were, the political struggle by other means. Only after the May Revolt of 1968, the last unsuccessful attempt to restage the Great Revolution, did some historians of the Left decide that the time had come for a revision of the traditional political antagonism.²⁵ The example is interesting for two reasons. First, it shows that centuries may elapse before a present fades into a past (I use the indefinite article "a" on purpose to underline that the concepts "past" and "present" are relative throughout). Second, the example suggests that distancing ourselves from our past has something to do with overcoming fundamental oppositions, dualisms, or distinctions.

IV. FORM AS DISTINCTION

In the previous section, we discussed Ankersmit's idea that representation implies the production of distinctions, including the distinction between subject and

24. Ernst, "Zeitgeschehen und Geschichtsschreibung," 147.

25. François Furet's *Penser la révolution française* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1978) was a turning point.

object or between present and past. Since traditional epistemological language makes it difficult to explain this idea, I will introduce in this section a more abstract terminology based on George Spencer Brown's *Laws of Form*, a curious Boolean-like calculus starting with the precept "Draw a distinction."²⁶ According to the interpretation of this calculus given by Niklas Luhmann, each form should be conceived of as a distinction with two sides. This two-sided form may then serve as the referent for an abstract idea of observation, which can be subdivided into a first- and a second-order observation.²⁷ The term "second-order observation" had already been used before in this article in connection with Ranke, and rightly so, since modern historians were the first to practice this kind of observation in a professional way. The theoretical explanation, however, had to wait a few centuries.

The distinction between first- and second-order observation makes use of a rather abstract definition of observation, which applies to widely divergent cases such as the sensorial perception of organisms, electronic sensors, computer programs, and social systems. According to this definition, observation does two things at the same time: 1) it draws a distinction, and 2) it indicates one side of the distinction.²⁸ The operation of distinction consists in pulling apart the world as it presents itself to us into different aspects; indication, on the other hand, consists of a picking out of and a focusing on one of these aspects, in the sense of "this" and not "all the rest" or "system" and not "environment." For example, in visual perception we distinguish between figure and ground while focusing on the figure, a vase for instance. The fact that we indicate only one side of the distinction means that most of the time we observe asymmetrically. We have eyes only for the vase and not for the background, although the former does not stand out without the latter. The rationale is, of course, that we can recognize something only if we can contrast it with what it is not. A momentous implication of this is that the form or shape of the vase is not an attribute of the vase itself only. The form is two-sided and includes both figure *and* ground. In other words, *the form is the distinction*.

Applying this definition to ourselves as observers, we may say that the basic distinction with which we habitually observe the world is that between our environment and ourselves or, in traditional philosophical terms, between object and subject. The asymmetry in this case is that we focus alternately on only one of the sides. Usually we concentrate on the object-side, which is the world minus ourselves. However, we can also switch to the subject-side, by dreaming or hallucinating, for instance. "Crossing" is possible, but it takes time, and that is why we can never see both sides of the distinction at the same moment. A visual illus-

26. Spencer Brown, *Laws of Form*, 3: "Call the space cloven by any distinction, together with the entire content of the space, the form of the distinction." That the calculus of Spencer Brown is hardly more than a Boolean algebra is argued among others by B. Banaschewski, "On G. Spencer Brown's *Laws of Form*," *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 18, no. 3 (1977), 507-509. The physician and cybernetician Heinz von Foerster (see note 3) and the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (see note 4) saw more in it and hailed *The Laws of Form* as a groundbreaking work.

27. See, for instance, *Problems of Form*, ed. Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). Luhmann has discussed second-order observation in nearly all his publications since the early 1980s, but see especially the second chapter on "Observing" in Luhmann, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*, 68-122.

28. Distinction and indication are the terms used by Spencer Brown.

tration of this non-simultaneity is the Gestalt Switch as discussed by Wittgenstein and Thomas Kuhn.²⁹ We can see in the drawing of a rabbit-duck either a rabbit or a duck, but we cannot see them both at the same time. An even better illustration is the Necker Cube with its typical flip-flop effect. It clearly shows that, each time we cross, our brain needs a pause to form the new pattern.

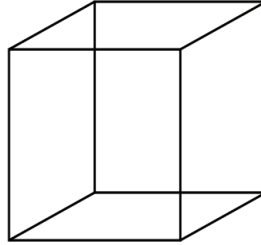


Figure 1: Necker Cube

Examples like these confront us with the question of how we know that we are dealing with two sides of the same distinction. What makes us think that both sides belong together, if we can see only one side at a time? The answer is that only memory can tell us. There is no other possibility of “seeing” the unity. Attempting to see both sides simultaneously would amount to the paradoxical attempt of grasping “the unity of a distinction” or “the identity of a difference.” It would also be an attempt to eliminate the time factor, which is needed for crossing. This offense against time is punished with an eternal oscillation, the same oscillation we encounter in paradoxes of the liar type like “This sentence is false.” Our way of observing “the world” obeys the same rule. If we try to see the world as an identity of subject and object, we end up with a paralyzing paradox.

Summing up, we may say that the distinction guiding all our observations remains itself unobservable, as a kind of blind spot. We know, of course, through communication with others, that there is a distinction between the environment and ourselves, but this is irrelevant for the observation theory under discussion. The crucial point is that we cannot *observe* the distinction in question. For example, I cannot see what is right behind my back. Only others are in the position to say, “Watch out behind you!” We arrive here at the crucial difference between first- and second-order observation. Whereas I observe only my own environment, other people observe *me in my own environment*. They notice that I observe the world from a particular point of view, while I am unable to see this. First-order observers are necessarily self-centered and convinced that the world is as they see it. They are prone to all kinds of “centrism” like egocentrism, geocentrism, ethnocentrism, and hodiecentrism. Second-order observation, on the other hand, shows the contingency and relativity of all our knowledge. As a social phenomenon it became dominant only in modern society, according to Luhmann, and an important manifestation of it was the rise of historicism. Contrary to what the

29. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), 308. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 111-114.

historicists themselves believed, though, second-order observation does not lead us to a higher level of wisdom, for all second-order observers necessarily remain first-order observers, unable to transcend the distinctions they use.

As a rule we can state that a *Leitdifferenz*, or guiding distinction, can be observed (distinguished!) only with the help of another *Leitdifferenz*. Only on this condition are we able to see both sides at a single glance. This may happen in two ways. If we observe the *Leitdifferenz* of other people in the here and now, a “spatial” approach may be said to apply. This comes so naturally that nobody has ever felt the need to take notice of it, although special cases like culture contact have raised some discussion. The other possibility is the observation of our own *Leitdifferenz*, be it as an individual or as a group. Since we are unable to do this *in actu*, only a “temporal” or historical approach will do. Using our own memory or “experiential” records like letters, diaries, photographs, and interviews, we may be able to reflect on how we perceived the world at earlier moments.

Here we have a justification for Ankersmit’s interest in historical experience, for only by observing our own memories and by coming to see ourselves as strangers in the past can we distinguish a former *Leitdifferenz*. The distinction between the two kinds of second-order observation just mentioned manifests itself in the two basic approaches of cultural studies, namely, cultural anthropology with its criticism of ethnocentrism, and cultural history with its criticism of hodiecentrism or presentism. What interests us here is the historical approach.

V. NOSTALGIA AS AN EXAMPLE

Second-order observation of ourselves need not be a strictly individual matter, for we can define “memory” broadly as a social or cultural phenomenon.³⁰ I will not address here the question of what memory actually is, but confine myself to an example, which is illuminating for both individual and social memory. I mean the phenomenon of nostalgia, which happens to be one of Ankersmit’s favorite examples of historical experience.³¹ I think that it shows perfectly well how the subject–object split works in a historical context. Nostalgia counts in my view as a first step in the development of a mature historical consciousness. It shows the “other side” of our first-order observations in the past and is for that reason a good starting point for reflecting on a former *Leitdifferenz*. It is only a starting point, though, for observing the other side of a distinction is just a question of switching. A historical reflection in the real sense of the word requires us to see both sides of a distinction at the same time, which is possible only if a new *Leitdifferenz* sets us free to recognize the old one for what it is.

A good point of departure is the explanation of nostalgia given by Fred Davis in his *Yearning for Yesterday*.³² Davis starts from the individualistic premise that

30. Jeffrey K. Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures,” *Sociological Theory* 17 (1999), 333–348.

31. Ankersmit, *History and Topology*, esp. 196–208. The Dutch translation of *Sublime Historical Experience* has a new epilogue specially devoted to nostalgia: *De sublieme historische ervaring* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2007), 408–421.

32. Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979).

people can have nostalgic feelings only for a time they experienced themselves. This sounds reasonable, but a historian might ask how we should then explain the nostalgia for bygone times, such as the Romantic *Sehnsucht* for the Middle Ages. I think there is an answer to this question, but before going into detail, I must first give a general idea of Davis's analysis of nostalgia. The analysis makes use of the distinction between figure and ground, the same distinction we met before when discussing the theory of observation.

Davis's hypothesis is that young people are so occupied with the exciting new events in their life that they perceive the stable elements in their environment, such as buildings, furniture, parents, and boring teachers, only from the corner of their eyes. When our adolescents become settled as young adults, the perspective changes. A figure-ground switch may occur resulting in a nostalgic experience. Background perceptions of years ago suddenly pop up, occasioned by seemingly irrelevant trivia like the smell of a wet street, the song that played when you kissed your first date, or the sight of an outdated computer. The well-known literary example is, of course, Proust's madeleine.

It may be relevant to refer here to recent memory research, which furnishes empirical evidence for the existence of what Freud once called "the unconscious" and what psychologists nowadays call "implicit memory." Repression of fears and desires is no longer the main factor in explanations, although it is not completely ruled out either.³³ Today, researchers think more in terms of procedural schemata or scripts. It would be interesting to know if the basic operations of our way of observing are also part of it. If so, it could perhaps explain our nostalgic reminiscences, starting from the hypothesis that the implicit or latent memory contains non-episodic background perceptions matching foreground perceptions, which we clearly remember. The figure-ground switch discussed by Davis would then be a first step in the process of historical reflection, as it enables us to cross from one side to the other and watch the hidden dimension of our former worldview.

Nostalgic reminiscences can be strictly individual, but they often appear under the cloak of social memory. A good example is the wave of nostalgia for the Middle Ages that started with the Gothic revival in England and flooded the rest of Europe between 1750 and 1850. The question is what the object of these nostalgic feelings was. Usually we speak without much thought about "nostalgia for the Middle Ages." But what does it really mean? According to Davis it would be nonsense to suggest that the Romanticists thought longingly back to the Middle Ages, because they could have no personal recollections of it. This is true, no doubt, but on the other hand it would be shortsighted to overlook the *longue durée* of social memory. During the period of the democratic and industrial revolutions, society underwent a great transformation. Many Romanticists belonging to this period were born in the latter days of the *ancien régime*, in which they had experienced cultural traditions going back to the Middle Ages, such as Gothic churches, noble privileges, guilds, monasteries, village rituals, and folktales. It is conceivable,

33. Comparing his own research with Freud's theory, Daniel L. Schacter writes in *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 191: "The implicit memories I have been considering are far more mundane. They arise as a natural consequence of such everyday activities as perceiving, understanding, and acting."

therefore, that in their case a personal nostalgia for the years of innocent childhood grew out into a collective *Sehnsucht* for the Middle Ages.

As is well known, the Romantic nostalgia for the Middle Ages was an important aspect of the rise of modern historical scholarship. It brought “the other side” of the Enlightenment to the foreground, the Dark Ages. Carl Becker was right. The philosophers of the Heavenly City did not realize how close they were to the medieval priests they derided.³⁴ Both sides took universalistic positions, whether they defended religion or science. This was the gist of Ranke’s criticism of Enlightenment historians like Voltaire.³⁵ These historians lacked distance from the very traditions they denounced. The Romantic reaction was an important change in this respect, because it expressed a real sense of rupture and loss. Historians may sometimes see nostalgia as an irresponsible idealization of the past, but it is, first of all, an experience of historical alienation and separation. After all, one can only yearn for something that once was familiar and that has meanwhile become strange or “objective.” In this sense, the Romantic nostalgia for the Middle Ages stimulated the rise of modern historical scholarship.

Reacting to the Enlightenment, however, even the Romanticists could not escape the fate of counter-dependency. This point is emphasized by Hans-Georg Gadamer, when he characterizes Romanticism as an *Aufklärung über die Aufklärung* (enlightenment of the Enlightenment). In his attempt to historicize historicism itself, Gadamer writes that “the historical consciousness that emerges in romanticism involves a radicalization of the Enlightenment.” His main point is that the historicists turned the enlightened criticism of prejudices against the Enlightenment itself by attacking its own hodiecentric or presentist prejudices, such as the Whig interpretation of history. This led Gadamer to the conclusion that “the romantic critique of the Enlightenment itself ends in Enlightenment, for it evolves as historical science and draws everything into the orbit of historicism.”³⁶ I shall not discuss Gadamer here, but I think he has a point when he suggests that Romanticism has more in common with the Enlightenment than is often thought. Historians often overstated the opposition between the two cultural periods, especially in the German *Sonderweg* literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Perhaps it is time to ask what the “unity of the distinction” is. What are Enlightenment and Romanticism together? What is the common ground that makes their opposition possible in the first place? Is it modern culture perhaps? This is a confusing question, as we are still moderns wrestling with what Pirsig calls the “classical” and “romantic” approaches to life. Reflecting on modern culture would imply that we take a postmodern position, but as yet nobody seems capable of defining this position clearly.

34. Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1932).

35. In the famous sentence: “To history has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices this work does not aspire: It wants only to show what actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).” Leopold Ranke, “Preface: Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations from 1494–1514,” as cited in *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 57.

36. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 312.

VI. CONCLUSION

The notion of historical distance refers us to a quite real and serious problem, especially in contemporary historiography. We must nevertheless avoid being wrong-footed by this spatial metaphor. Therefore, this article proposes a change in terminology. Instead of “distance” we had better use the “purer” and non-metaphorical notion of “distinction,” more particularly that of the “distinction between historical forms.” The term “historical form” is derived from the quasi-Platonic doctrine of historical ideas put forward by Humboldt and Ranke. According to this doctrine, contemporary history is a problem, because historians are able to discern historical ideas or forms only from a certain distance in time.

Starting from the philosophical subject–object distinction, this article has discussed three different views of historical form. The first two are one-sided. They localize historical form either on the object-side (historicism) or the subject-side (narrativism). The third view is two-sided and spreads the form, as it were, over subject *and* object. Ankersmit is often credited with the second view, because he claims that cultural periods and other historical forms exist only in a narrative universe and not in the past. However, on closer inspection he could also be placed in the third position, because he argued right from the start that historical forms precede the subject–object distinction. This argument is further developed in his later work on historical experience, which is a kind of matrix for the distinction between subject and object or between present and past.

Since the subject–object terminology is fraught with problems, I have proposed a new conceptual distinction between first- and second-order observation. This terminology may be new, but the practice referred to is not. Since Ranke, historians have specialized in fact as second-order observers, relying on observations made by other people in the past. Depending on the philosophical jargon of the day, however, they did not really understand their own practice. The problem of historical distance is a case in point. It became a problem only when the study of history became geared to second-order observation. Until the eighteenth century nobody made a fuss about the writing of contemporary history, but since then it has been left to reporters and journalists with the argument that historians need temporal distance to write objectively about their subject. This argument of time has some plausibility, but it is not decisive since it does not explain why historical reflection sometimes takes a few decades and other times a few centuries. In order to know what is decisive we must know how second-order observation works; fortunately, this is explained by Luhmann.

A basic idea of Luhmann’s theory is that observations are always asymmetrical. The explanation is that observing always implies two things at the same time, namely a distinction between two sides and a focusing on one of them. For example, when I observe a vase, I distinguish between a foreground and a background while focusing my attention on the foreground, that is, the vase. The background may seem of secondary importance, but without it we would see no vase at all. So

the form of the vase depends on both sides, or rather on the distinction between them. The crux, however, is that we cannot see this distinction, because it is the very condition for our seeing, at least for the time being. Perhaps we may discover in the future how we look at the world today. This depends on our implicit memory, especially on the background observations we can recall. The example of nostalgia shows how we may switch from foreground to background memories. The accompanying feeling of rupture and loss is an important condition for the rise of historical consciousness, as appears from the period of Romanticism.

I finish with an unsolved riddle, namely, how can we identify a historical period like modernism without a contrasting period in the present? I am not sure how to deal with it, because narrativism seems to leave us empty-handed here. Without narrative interpretations of the present we do not seem to have a counterpoint to our interpretations of the past. Perhaps we should pay more attention to the future. After all, the crucial distinction of time is not between past and present, but between past and future. The present is the point at which we distinguish between the “no longer” and the “not yet.” It is the fundamental *Leitdifferenz* in our temporal existence and our most basic historical form, of which we can know only one side, namely the past. The future will always remain unknown to us, and it can be discussed only as a fictional reality.³⁷ Perhaps we should look here for a narrative counterweight against the periodization of contemporary history.

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37. Elena Esposito, *Die Fiktion der wahrscheinlichen Realität* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007). Italian version: *Probabilità improbabili: La realtà della finzione nella società moderna* (Rome: Meltemi, 2008).