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3 Manifesto for a history of the media

Mark Poster

He had been taught . . . that history, along with geography, was dead. That history in the older sense was an historical concept. History in the older sense was narrative, stories we told ourselves about where we'd come from and what it had been like, and those narratives were revised by each new generation, and indeed always had been. History was plastic, was a matter of interpretation. The digital had not so much changed that as made it too obvious to ignore. History was stored data, subject to manipulation and interpretation.

William Gibson, *All Tomorrow's Parties*

Marx theorised a changed relation between men and machines. Machines had changed: they had been hooked up to natural energy sources, first steam, then petroleum, then electricity. So men could change too: their work relations and skills could be reorganised. In the Industrial Revolution, labourers acted upon natural materials but only through the mediation of increasingly complex machinic apparatuses, so complex and expensive that, unlike their artisan forebears, industrial workers could not own their own tools. The consequences of these alterations in the daily work life of men and women were played out in the politics and society of the past two centuries and were increasingly the main focus of historical investigations. History took into account a new relation of humans to machines.

Now machines are changing again. They are processing information, not raw materials, and they are globally networked. Today all elements of culture (texts, images and sounds) are coded into digital logic and uploaded into a global network that incorporates all human groupings, however unequally. Texts, images and sounds are exchanged between humans increasingly only through the mediation of networked computers. The work of human beings changes accordingly. No longer Chaplinesque cogs in assembly lines; workers are increasingly monitors of work processes and manipulators of symbols in close conjunction with computers. The historian's task is thus to theorise the implications of this transformation, to create research projects that explore its many aspects, and to write its histories with an eye to the political possibilities it opens up.

The discipline of history is haunted by the spectre of the virtual. Historians have bathed in the real for too long, writing about events and structures, people and institutions, attitudes and behaviour, consciousness and action, as if access to these phenomena through archival documents afforded them dips into the sea of the past as it actually was. In the 1970s and 1980s, historians took umbrage at Hayden White and the whole intellectual current of critical theory for even suggesting that writing history was a form of narrative with a variety of tropes introducing meaning into the historian's text that could not have emerged directly from the archive. Historians also objected to the arguments of poststructuralists that history was infused with assumptions deriving from Western cultural habits which were then the objects of investigation, forming a vicious circle of cultural closure and parochialism. Historians were so seduced by the past, so engrossed in the tragedies and victories over oppression that filled its moments, so impressed with the importance and weightiness of it all, that they forgot they were writing texts, reading texts, creating texts, processes which have logics in themselves, requiring attention to their internal complexities. Historians desperately needed theory and, for the most part, they adamantly refused it. So by the mid-1990s, when the media began to achieve a density and extensiveness that could no longer be ignored, when the virtual encroached undeniably upon the real, historians by and large were not prepared. The 'real' and the 'virtual' became inextricable and cultural (textual, visual, aural) at the same time. It is time historians took this change to heart, rethinking the 'real' and their methods of representing it.

Historians were certainly not alone in facing the future shock of mediated culture. Teachers in universities were astonished when students in large numbers began to download paper assignments from the internet, when they brought laptop computers to class to take notes, when they did email in class, when they wanted to hand in work on floppy disks or CD ROMs, when they answered mobile phones in class and communicated text messages on them, when they asked that instructors' notes be posted on university websites, and finally when they turned automatically to the internet as research tool, not the library, every time they were given an assignment. The media, digital media in particular, had arrived in the hallowed halls of ivy. And it affected all of the disciplines, not just history. A technology of networked computing that was born largely within the university community was now coming back to disrupt the habits of the classroom and carefully elaborated protocols of advanced research. Each of the disciplines needed to come to grips with the new technology of information machines.

In this manifesto I propose a framework for histories of media that rests outside the well-trod humanist approaches of looking for agents and victims, ideas and actions, influences and innovations. While this framework continues to inspire research into media history, that history must also be understood, I contend, as the construction of combinations of humans and information machines. In such assemblages the logic of the information

machine is as significant as the logic of human beings. Until now historians of the media have worried about the question of technological determinism versus human freedom. Either machines shaped human practice or humans deployed machines as tools for instrumental purposes. But this dilemma becomes salient only if the humanist frame is already at play in the historian's vision. If we focus instead on the interplay of humans and information machines, the question of technological determinism is nullified. The field of investigation no longer consists of subjects (humans) and objects (information machines) but as complexes of the two elements in which neither plays the role of subject or object. The *first* principle in the field of media history then will be the couple humans/machines in their complex interactions and mutual effects.

Historians need to approach media history with the couple humans/machines in the forefront because information machines affect not natural objects, as mechanical machines do, but cultural objects. Information machines – the apparatuses of media – operate upon texts, images and sounds. In conjunction with humans they produce, reproduce, store and disseminate these cultural objects. When machines work on cultural objects they alter the basic conditions of culture. They disrupt and reconfigure time and space, body and mind, object and subject, the living and the non-living, the organic and the inorganic, the ideal and the material. They introduce into language, visibility and aurality a new level of materiality, one that is outside human perception and the Newtonian physical world, but is fully material at the micro-level of electrons, chemical switches and light pulses. In this way, culture, the processes through which meanings appear and are disseminated in society, is altered by information machines that code, crunch and work upon the bearers of meaning – texts, images and sounds.

These changes in the structure of media were not visible during the half millennium of history that began with printing machines. Until recently information machines operated upon cultural objects in the perceptible realm of the analogue. Inked paper 'looks like' handwriting; photographs trace light patterns upon chemically coated film; grooves in phonograph records force needles to generate movements that can be transduced into radio frequencies that mimic sounds; telephones (until the recent introduction of digital technology) change spoken words first into electro-magnetic waves only to return them into sounds after they are transmitted to a receiver. In each case the information machine produces at a different physical level an analogue of the text, image and sound initiated by the human. Such changes to the physics of the cultural object enable drastic innovations in their reproduction, storage and dissemination. Printing presses outperform teams of scribes in reproducing texts; telephones transmit sounds far beyond the capacity of the human voice; photographs store images much better than memory cells in the brain, and so forth. But analogue information machines have severe limitations, operating as they do within the Newtonian domain of human perception. These limitations become visible to the historian or observer only

after the advent of the digital. The analogue only becomes analogue once it is defined as such by the difference of the digital. Perhaps that helps explain why historians of media tended, until recently, to overlook the message of the medium.

With the advent of networked digital information machines, the restrictions of the analogue are transcended and, as a result, the impact of media upon culture vastly increases and changes in quality. Culture is now mediated by a different physical region, one governed by laws of time and space, for instance, which are drastically different from those of previous information machines. This translation is carried out through several operations. Digital machines do not mimic traces of human sounds and sights. They translate these cultural objects into a machine language of zeros and ones, a binary logic of on and off, yes or no, a code that operates outside human perception in a microscopic realm that pulses light, switches tiny chemical charges, moves invisible electrons. Once transcribed into the binary logic of the digital machine, culture may be infused with the properties of a new physical domain. What makes sense in the analogue world of mediated human perception no longer necessarily applies. A copy of a cultural object, for instance, does not require new resources, energy, space or time, invalidating the principle of scarcity that is the basis of modern culture. The individuality and intentionality of a user does not affect the truth value of an entry into a digital database so that anyone can be anyone else in the network. The digital domain of media imposes new ethics, new conditions of trust.

But digital information machines are not independent of humans. The machines and the humans interact continually with one another through interfaces that are able to connect with both domains, to converse with each, to transact across the divide of the analogue and the digital. Information machines and humans continually and relentlessly *change each other*. With analogue media, the cultural object is independent of the human user. The cultural object – book, film, radio broadcast – is in direct contact with the user. In the case of the computer, a series of interfaces stand between the user and the information machine. Monitor, printer, keyboard, mouse and other devices function to translate back and forth between the user code and the machine code, between the ‘culture’ of each. Texts, images and sounds that are comprehensible to the user are impenetrable to the computer’s central processing unit. By the same token, the CPU’s digital code is meaningless to the user. Without interfaces that translate from the user to CPU (keyboard) and from the CPU to the user (monitor), digital information machines could not function. One might say that other electronic media – telephones, radio and television – also require interfaces such as tuners that transform radio frequencies into sounds waves and images. The continuities and breaks between earlier electronic media and current ones must be researched in detail by historians. It will then be recognised, I believe, that digital code requires a much more complex set of interfaces than earlier media in order to function as information media for the user.

At all of these levels, computers introduce a change in the relation of humans to machines. Historians of media must account for this discontinuity or break by rethinking the figure of the human and the figure of the machine as agents of history. If the human persists in historical texts as agent or subject and the machine continues to be represented as object, the specific configuration of the assemblage of human and machine in computing is lost. The culture in general has certainly recognised the problem (even if historians have not). Without going back to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), the increasing spate of films that portray humans and machines in life and death struggle (the Wachowski brothers’ *Matrix* trilogy of 1999–2003 may stand in for dozens of them) registers a deep anxiety over the relation. The doggedness of historians’ usage of the human–subject/machine–object binary serves to misrecognise the new configuration and to stabilise the older cultural norm. It functions as a profoundly conservative ideological limit to obscure newer forms of antagonism and possibility in the relation of humans and machines. We must then write the history of the human/machine assemblage without the instrumentalist ideology of machines as tools that characterises much of previous historical work.

Computers are no longer stand-alone devices but linked to a worldwide network. This feature of digital information machines also introduces profound changes in human culture, changes that require attention by historians. First, the network is global and politics is national. This contradiction results in conflicts, for example, over copyright law. United States law provides for copyright for ninety-five years after the author’s death; Australian law limits copyright to fifty years from death. So works fall into the public domain forty-five years sooner down under. The text of *Gone with the Wind* is available now in Australia but not in the United States. Yet anyone connected to the network may easily obtain it from Australia’s Project Gutenberg (Shannon, 2004). National sovereignty is thus defeated in this and many other cases. Many cultures do not even have copyright law. Yet they too must adapt to the strictures of global processes as these are being generated by the World Intellectual Property Organisation. Cultures become thereby transnational, inducing a set of new issues that require much negotiation, translation and mutual understanding. While long-distance telephone use achieved similar conditions, the global network normalises translational communications.

The registers of time and space – basic conditions of cultural coherence – are also reconfigured by networked computing. One’s sense of locality changes when communications are rapid across thousands of miles, as they are on the internet. Massively multiple online games, for instance, connect players across the globe in synchronous activity and thus inject a second order of temporality into players, one out of joint with their physical location. Challenged by innovations in transport systems in earlier centuries, geographic specificity is today complicated by speed dimensions that nullify spatial distance. In many contemporary communications systems spatial

location recedes in importance. One no longer waits by the phone but takes it along. As for the internet, user location means little in most network functions. To receive an email from someone you know tells you nothing about that person's location on the globe. Numerous technologies fold into the internet in this regard: satellite communications, global positioning systems, multi-band digital telephones with visual displays, webcams hooked into GPS, and so forth. Theorists such as Paul Virilio and new media artists such as Stelarc in turn bemoan and explore the vast transformations affecting the body in the new spatial and temporal modalities.

With its divisions into nations and continents, the discipline of history is ill-suited to account for these novelties. The recent trend towards world history will help in this respect but much of it still operates in geographic frameworks of earlier cultural domains. And academic posts in history departments are defined as continent or nation. Undergraduate history curricula are filled with courses titled by time and place, not by problem or theme. Ph.D. candidates are classified by national field or fields. Temporal and spatial categories in the discipline are increasingly out of sync with historical tendencies and inherently conservative in their inability to call into question such phenomena as the nation state or to trace the history of phenomena that do not fall within national boundaries that are deeply transnational. The temporality introduced by networked computing adds on to other temporalities – those of natural cycles, of work and of other media such as the 'flow' of television – producing a multiple, heterogeneous complex of culturally inscribed time, destabilising the dominant temporality of Western clock time and rendering anachronistic the foundational habits of mind of most historians. The time of the nation, 'local time', is no longer hegemonic but part of a complex of temporalities that must take each other into account. The nation state may not be disappearing but it is certainly becoming relative to other spatial formations, from regional groupings like the European Union to sub-national ethnicities and global NGOs, corporations and cultural movements. History departments need to open positions for scholars to study these phenomena.

The digital culture emerging from networked computing furthermore initiates a massive shift in the nature of cultural objects. Modernity relies upon fixed cultural objects: printed materials, photos, CDs, celluloid films, broadcasts, and so forth. These relatively stable objects constitute the foundation of Western culture. They may be altered to some extent by users, but they are reproduced as uniform things by printing presses, CD factories and broadcast companies, regardless of changes made in individual copies by consumers. Films, television shows and books may be commented upon by audiences and reviewers, lauded or criticised in the minds of readers and viewers. Still, these modern cultural objects persist unchanged by their circulation in society. They are reliable, solid analogue blocks of matter. As such they militate for a clear line of separation between those who made them and those who purchased them. Modern cultural objects, in other words, construct and

continuously reproduce the producer and the consumer as two distinct subject positions. The celebrity/author and the consumer of cultural objects are decidedly modern subject positions. Histories of their emergence ought to include analyses of the role of fixed cultural objects in this process.

Things were certainly not the same before modern society and the printing press, the camera and the mechanisms of broadcasting. Throughout the millennia before 1500 most cultural objects were made and remade continuously by their users. Their creation was integral to their recreation. Songs and stories were performed by the audience and were altered with each enactment. Before the existence of media of reproduction, cultural objects were variable to some extent and by and large did not introduce a sharply etched division between producer and consumer. When human memory was the only basis for storing and archiving cultural objects, exact reproduction was impossible. Without the stability of the record, written or otherwise, creators of cultural objects could not be elevated to the status of author.

Networked computing combines elements of modern and pre-modern types of cultural objects. Like modern society, digital cultural objects are stored and distributed in material forms that may be reproduced as exact copies. A digital text file, image or sound on one's hard disk may be copied and disseminated without change. Unlike modern culture, digital culture accomplishes this task at very little cost and extends this capability to anyone with an online computer. Each user is thus at the same time a producer, like Disney or Scribner's. Such democratisation is in itself potentially of great import. Digitisation also transforms texts, images and sounds into the same material form: the computer file. By doing so, digitisation erases the analogue differences between cultural objects and renders the same individual capable of producing, reproducing, storing and distributing any cultural object. A single online computer user functions as a printing press, a broadcaster, a film-maker and a music company. But the networked computing of digital cultural objects goes considerably beyond the amplification of modern forms. It also captures some elements of the pre-modern condition of cultural objects: as easily as a computer user may copy and distribute texts, images and sounds, so may they alter them and distribute them in their altered state. As a result, digital cultural objects depart from analogue, fixed objects of modernity in yet another significant way: they are variable. The human/computer assemblage may change a text, image or sound almost as easily as reading, viewing or listening to it. Digital cultural objects have no more fixity than liquid. The content of culture becomes, in the regime of the digital, evanescent and permanent at the same time. Data or information on the internet is changeable, temporary, or what I call 'underdetermined'. Like a folksong or oral narrative, each instance of the digital cultural object may be different from all others. And yet one cannot be sure. The variability of cultural objects creates special problems for the historian, to be sure.

Some aspects of digital cultural objects avail themselves of the changeability of the file more than others. Text files saved in the .pdf format, of

Adobe are more difficult to alter than those in the .txt, .rtf or .doc formats. Stumbling blocks to text manipulation are introduced in some computer files as a form of resistance against their inherent malleability. At the other extreme producers of computer games have yielded to the hacking of users who often made changes in the game ('Doom' is a good example) and redistributed the resulting files on the internet. Commercial game producers consequently sometimes include a feature that allows users to make changes in the game and redistribute it. Like the free software and open source movements in the realm of computer programs, a culture of open content has emerged in networked computing that takes advantage of the variable character of digital cultural objects.

But modern institutions resist the variability of cultural objects. The culture industry attempts to restrict the user's ability not only to change the object but even to 'consume'. Regional restrictions are imposed on DVDs. The music industry has attempted to prevent playing CDs on computers. So-called 'Digital Rights Management' techniques attempt to restrict how many times a song or a movie can be played, on what type of machine, and how, if at all, it might be copied. Similar restrictions are imposed on cable, satellite and broadcast high-definition television. Digital audio-tape machines, from the start, could not record at the same bit rate as commercial CDs. Commercial software programs have also been fitted with copy protection, authorisation systems and the like. It is the ease of copying and changing digital objects that leads to a fundamental incompatibility with modern cultural practices, such as the passive figure of the consumer and copyright law. This highly controversial area will no doubt lead to much conflict and the resolutions of the conflict will deeply affect the shape of culture in the coming decades.

For historians, the change from variable to fixed and back again to variable cultural objects must be a central dimension of media history. Not only is this phenomenon in itself a salient aspect of culture; these changes have ripple effects on other important aspects of culture, most notably the configuration of the individual, or, to use the term often cited by historians, the 'agent'. Historians depict individuals in modern society as autonomous agents, most often rational and conscious beings who struggle against domination or suffer as victims of its injustices. Like Michel Foucault, I contend that the chief problem of cultural history in the modern era is not to describe how these agents act and think in structures and events but rather to account for the construction of such a figure of agency or individuality in the first place. Just as historians blind themselves to the nation as a geographic unit by fixing it as the premise of their research and teaching, as the category that divides up the field of history, so they blind themselves to the great question of the historical construction of the modern ideology of individualism by reproducing in their texts and lectures the very figure of such an individual, as if it were a natural being or a given fact of life. Agents populate ubiquitously the pages of modern social history as the fauna of the West.

The most recent term for this cultural inscription of individuality is 'identity'. All individuals, historians write, have identities in the same way as elephants have tusks. In book after book written by American historians since the 1970s the reader is presented with narratives in which individuals and groups seek or assert their identities. One finds the question of identity popping up in the most unlikely places, in sixteenth-century France or the Italian Middle Ages, places where the term itself was never used and would not easily be comprehended. Yet how individuals are understood to have identities is a most interesting historical question and is closely tied to the history of media. Of critical importance to the emergence of identity as a characteristic of the self were media of recording, media that were not invented or disseminated throughout societies until the modern period. Fingerprinting, brain measurement, the discourse of taxonomy, photography, printing, the practice of counting populations, identity and credit cards with numbers unique to each person, passports, and the discursive practice of the case file – all of these, as well as more recent media of databases, biometrics and gene analysis, have been conditions for the possibility of individuals having identities. Identity has been constructed as a social and cultural fact outside the consciousness of the self and in the media or recording and storage. The vaunted agency of the individual could not exist before such media practices were in place.

And now that digital media have spread across the globe, however unequally, 'identity' and 'agency' are increasingly giving way to new forms of the cultural construction of the self. In online chat rooms and games, 'identity' becomes not a given figure of the self but a practice of self-fashioning, not a natural attribute but a manufactured result, not a permanent centre of individuality but a temporary and changing aspect of personal development. A new kind of agency or identity is in the process of emerging, in and through media practices. This subject position does not appear to have the characteristics so valued by the modern individual: autonomy, privacy, a stable centre, privileged rationality, self-reliance, consistency of character. Instead, the subject position of digital culture appears as a node in network, a relay point, changeable in time and space, amorphously defined, internally inconsistent. One might contrast these subject positions as fixed and variable, mirroring the cultural objects that surround them in their respective social landscapes.

There is no question here of preferring one type over the other, of celebrating the new or weeping nostalgically for the disappearance of the old. *The project for historians is to grasp the process of cultural transformation and to trace its trajectories.* This requires, as I have argued, a clear understanding of the role of media in the process and a post-humanist willingness to look for changes in relations of humans to machines. We will not comprehend the emergence of new subject positions and new forms of agency if we treat, for example, the history of computing as a problem of assigning credit to inventors, as in earlier forms of the history of technology. The

problem is not that such information is irrelevant – far from it – but that if historians look for agents of the modern type in the history of the media they will be unable to discern the history of new types of agency in new configurations of humans and machines.

Perhaps a convincing way to illustrate the change in agency connected with changes in media is to examine the methods of historians and ask about their agency in archival work. As archives become digitised, they fall into the domain of variable cultural objects. I will set aside this aspect of the question, one that raises many highly challenging issues, and look instead at the way digitised archives have new relations to information machines. Digital archives require for access the mediation of computers, perhaps networked or online computers. There are serious questions about formatting and compatibility between the data and the computer, but again we may at present leave aside this question. What cannot be ignored, however, is that this historian, in the case of digitised archives, becomes dependent upon a complex information machine: the computer and its software programs. This dependence is new. Before digitisation, nothing but language proficiency and bureaucracy stood between the historian and the data in the archive. True enough, the historian had to travel to the archive, often with great difficulty and cost, a disadvantage of analogue records that does not necessarily apply to digitised archives which may be online and accessible from any online machine. The dependence of the historian on the information machine also appears in the search functions of the database software: the historian may find his or her data only with the help of the information machine. The machine, in this way, becomes an aspect of the agency of the historian, an integral part of the research project. With the vast quantity of data becoming available and the digital quality of that data, historians become only as good as their search engines in retrieving significant materials.

In sum, changes in the media since the mid-twentieth century pose a sharp challenge to historians. Differences in the physical domain of new media introduce ruptures into culture that must become central questions for historians in the decades to come, especially for historians of media. The interface of humans with networked, digital information machines constitutes a new phenomenon in human history, one that promises to change for ever the habitation of the planet. These machines are harbingers of unprecedented forms of cultural practice that are already emerging in online domains and spill over into the 'real' world of politics, economics and social life. Historians of the future will be writing a history of the virtual, a task that is as daunting as it is exhilarating, but in either case requires a fundamental rethinking of the basic constituents of historical texts, historical research procedures, theoretical frameworks for establishing research questions and agendas. This huge task of reinventing the discipline will be the preoccupation of coming generations of historians.

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4 The closed space of choice

A manifesto on the future of history

Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth

The most obvious sign of the failure of the American-led global anti-terror war is the pervasive, frequently expressed, and growing sense of vulnerability that defines much of the West, especially the United States and Britain. The certainty that something equivalent to or bigger than 9/11 is going to happen is matched by the almost total inability of the US and UK political leaderships to comprehend the real nature, causes and aims of the terror groups that target them, like Al Qaeda. Consequently, the US and UK counter-terrorism strategies are failing across the board. Fear and ignorance together are a deadly combination.

Rami Khouri

We are difference.

Michel Foucault

Information has nothing to do with imagination or culture.

Henri Cartier-Bresson

The 'growing sense of vulnerability' that Rami Khouri (2005) notes in the West, and that so many feel today, arises primarily not from malign external threats but from internal incapacity. This is an incapacity persistently shored up and maintained by habits of thought that have become increasingly outdated for at least a century but still maintain their hold in Anglo-American culture, especially in the United States, where we and our gurus apparently lack the strength to confront our own cultural challenges and instead prefer to listen to the siren songs about economic indicators that keep us cycling in denial.

The epigraphs above mark three ideas I will set out in this manifesto: first, and most important, the idea that conventional historical explanation plays a significant role in the general sense of cultural failure; second, that changing definitions of knowledge offer new definitions of individuality and process and therefore new opportunities for historical writing that are not being pursued; and third, that in seeking remedy for our incapacity we must look to method, not information or data or 'facts' which, taken alone, can be worse than meaningless.

A manifesto has what Spinoza called a 'prophetic function' in that it gives expression to the desire of a multitude. That is a daunting standard; but whether or not I manage to meet it, I hope at the very least to connect with those readers who find conventional historical explanation unsatisfactory and are interested to experiment in new directions. What would I like to see historians do that they are not presently doing? I would like to see historical writing that finally comes to terms with language; not language as ornament or secondary reflection, but language as Saussure and his many heirs have defined it for us. I want to see historians write in ways that are adequate to the fullest and most generous contemporary understanding of how meaning and knowledge are generated and preserved. In other words, I want to see historical writing that acknowledges what I call the Discursive Condition (Ermarth, 2000), not just in its footnotes and arguments – though that would certainly be a welcome change – but in its entire format and methodology. This manifesto will be about what is involved in making that very considerable change in how history is done.

Seeking ways around conventional history is no small enterprise, given the deeply rooted commitment to empiricism that grounds historical writing in Anglo-American culture. Success would mean finding alternatives to the key instruments of conventional history – for example, the gathering and collation of information or 'facts', the reference to actions of 'individuals', and reliance on productive causality as an explanatory mechanism. Historians (including most popular novelists) who write comfortably – and, let's admit it, comfortably – using such tools of thought continue to get away with it because they ignore, and they persuade us to ignore, their format, their method. The tools are not in question. But unfortunately, and as every true artist knows, the form *is* the content, the *How is* the *What*; and in the Discursive Condition everyone including the historian carries the responsibility for creative intervention in the forms and mediums of their culture.

The first section deals with the tools of conventional historical practice and how they might be contributing to a sense of cultural failure; the second section deals with the alternative conditions and tools provided by Saussure and his heirs in practice. My usage of the term 'historians' includes not only the teachers and students who might be called 'professional' historians but anybody who uses historical conventions to explain things to themselves, which means just about everybody in Anglo-American culture. We are all historians, whether we seek our explanations in political argument, in planning our life projects, in therapy or in narrative. Historical conventions function for us as basic tools of thought; it is difficult even to think about personal or collective projects without them. First this happened, and then that, therefore something. It seems as 'natural' as breathing, despite the fact that historical explanation is the ultimate artifice and is anything but natural (Ermarth, 1998a: chs. 1–2). In considering the way forward, historians of both kinds, professional and pedestrian, badly need to pay attention to the *function* of conventional historical method and to shake the still-prevalent

assumption that, at base, historical writing is about the neutral discovery, collation and interpretation of evidence, information or facts. That idea – the child of centuries of empiricism – commits us to the practice of treating concretes as fodder for the higher levels of generalisation that eventually bring us to the scientific law or causal explanation at a level abstracted from concretes. Such abstract forms, and the causalities that supposedly produce them, have functioned at the heart of Western thought for two thousand years; they are what Alfred North Whitehead meant when he characterised Western philosophy as a series of footnotes to Plato. But as I explain in the second section below, these causalities do not work well in the Discursive Condition.

For reasons explained in the first section, I adopt phrases such as 'conventional history' and 'standard historical conventions' as shorthand for the fairly recent (two-hundred-year-old) idea of history that we take for granted as 'natural' (this shorthand is not just my invention; see Munslow, 2003). I hope professional historians will accept this shorthand in good humour for the sake of brevity. The term 'conventional' is not a term of opprobrium; it indicates only that history has generally operated according to certain rules and assumptions – that is, conventions – and that those rules and conventions are limited to a period of roughly six centuries, between the Quattrocento and 1900, and to a mainly Eurocentric culture.

Another unavoidable shorthand here has to do with identifying the arguments I have made elsewhere that sustain the present argument. Those arguments cannot be summarised here but at appropriate points I note in passing five of the most important so that interested readers can pursue the fuller case.

Conventional history

History as conventionally understood and practised involves relatively little attention to the question of what, exactly, its function is in our cultural life. Take, for example, the key instruments of conventional history that I have just mentioned – facts, individuals and emergent causalities. The implicit claim made by the unreflexive use of such instruments is that they are the harmless means of producing an accurate picture or representation of 'reality', the more neutral the better: as accurate a picture as possible of Roman politics, Michelangelo's personal life, the year 1776, Mary Wollstonecraft's influence, civil war in the United States or Bosnia, revolution in China, Shell in Niger. By virtue of its methodology conventional history implicitly claims that its proper work is a culturally neutral task: one of providing accurate portraiture, or the production of resemblances in which we are to recognise ourselves, especially our 'reality' composed of 'individuals' who motivate and are motivated by emergent causalities. Such resemblances are the long-familiar quarry of modernity, the era that put the world of forms on the horizontal and that for the first time ever introduced

projective, even productive, motion into everything from making maps to planning revolutions.

But what is the cultural function of such claims to be mapping resemblances? One of its functions certainly is to keep reconfirming the essentially Platonic idea that there is such a thing as a knowable 'reality' well past the point where that claim can be defended even by science. One of the epistemological scandals for empiricists, including conventional historians, is the claim associated with relativity theory that what we can measure includes our measurement and thus a foundational difference inimical to the objectification of the universe fundamental to modernity. Even granting that a stable, 'real' physical reality may exist among rocks and stones and trees – though even there our knowledge is infected by now outdated explanatory habits – still, in human and cultural terms such a 'real' either remains a desert or it is unknowable (Zizek, 2002; Belsey, 2005). The fictional side of 'reality' soon shows up when attempts to objectify cultural 'reality' encounter the many differences within and across cultures that make empiricist generalisations about them difficult or impossible.

Where method silently inscribes ideas that themselves are never spoken or weighed, method wields immense power, and such is the case with conventional history. In fact, speaking and weighing that method amount to scandal; decades after Hayden White's *Metahistory* it still is taboo to suggest that historical writing is not basically objective: that its methods are fundamentally literary, or that historical conventions belong to a historically limited phase of Eurocentric culture, or that historical writing functions to produce a 'reality effect', or that narrative of 'the' past is 'just us back there throwing our voices' (White, 1973; Ermarth, 1998a; Ankersmit, 1989; Jenkins, 2003). Conventional historical practices are protected by taboo, and they have the appropriately mythopoetic functions associated with taboos. In this case the mythopoetic function has to do with securing for the human world a common-denominator universe: the one that guarantees we can achieve objectivity, albeit by a never-acknowledged sleight-of-hand. That objectification in turn guarantees all the things we still regard as 'natural', such as representation (pursuit of resemblance) across the range of practice: in art and politics, in empirical science and philosophy, and in historical explanation. This mythopoetic function is rarely acknowledged. Why should we want alternatives to information, individuals and emergent causalities?

Some might say that in resorting to method that I define history too broadly, and that history is simply all and only the sum total of written records – a kind of archive of humanity. Right away we can argue about what a 'record' might be. Could the historical record include writing about recently discovered archaeological remains of a people remote in time and space? If so, in what sense is that document a 'record', and of what is it a record? A remote people? Or our desire to rationalise the differences that occupy the cultural distances between us? The official, self-serving Serbian 'record' of the 1990s war in the former Yugoslavia is nothing more than, as one

witness put it, 'a lie, a deceit' (Drakulić, 2004). Even the smallest, most immediate 'record' can be wholly unreliable. For example, the written 'record' of my brief testimony at a local municipal hearing consisted of words wholly invented by the secretary and differing completely from what was on the tape; had I not accidentally discovered that fact and complained, the written 'record' would have been entirely a 'lie' by my standard and probably by most standards of historical truth. Fortunately there was a tape. But how often is that the case when something important is at stake, and if there is, how frail (e.g., erasable) is such a 'record'?

The written record exists in the first place because it objectifies events that 'we' want to remember in the way we want to remember them. In the USA the selective 'record' excludes more than it includes, in some cases even 'events' such as private conversations that result in financial catastrophes affecting millions. It includes such markers as the Civil War, Joseph McCarthy's attack on civil rights, the taking and release of hostages in Iran, and the refusal of Rosa Parks to play the game of humiliation provided for her by a racist culture. The 'written' record in these latter cases often consists of police records, staged photos and videotaped interviews which have immense value and powerful functions. But as 'records' of events they are full of holes, like most 'reality'. The true function of those partial records is a cultural function and has much more to do with constituting collective memory than with accuracy. They satisfy an assumption about how things work and how people define themselves. In other words, they have a mythopoetic function similar to the legends that permitted certain people on the shores of the Indian Ocean to recognise a tsunami-in-progress even though they had never previously seen one. Mythopoetic functions obviously have their practical side. Whether we are talking about written records or a more general set of descriptive rules, in the case of Western historical explanation the question remains, what actual function do such records or descriptions have for us?

To approach such functions we must begin with a wider canvas and with the commonsense idea of history – one that is everywhere assumed and nowhere acknowledged in professional historical writing. That commonsense idea is this: that history is a condition, a medium, something almost indistinguishable from time itself. This is quite a different idea of history from that of a written record. 'History' in this expanded sense stands for everything that has ever happened and will ever happen, whether we know it or not, whether we record it or not. In this long view, history is not limited even to humanity, the definition of which has changed more than once over the centuries. No, the idea of history as a universal medium is larger than any manifestation and contains them all. When we speak – as we often do – of 'making' history or 'changing' history, we speak of influencing something that far exceeds any documentary frame.

Historical explanation thus creates and maintains this ultimate and still largely unacknowledged fiction: that time is a neutral, unproblematic,

universal medium 'in' which everything happens. Such time functions as a neutral, common-denominator medium that guarantees mutual relevance among things widely separated in time or space. The sheer fact that absolutely everything can be accommodated in a single system of measurement sustains history's crucial guarantee of objectivity (Ermarth, 1998a). This neutrality, furthermore, is infinite, extending beyond all perceivable horizons. Can we have a history of the cosmos? A history of the earth? A history of species? It seems we can. The function of conventional history is to confirm and reconfirm this all-important unifying neutral condition 'in' which it becomes possible to make mutually informative measurements between, say, the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Bible, the (corrupted) medieval versions and the King James translation. History in this sense is nothing less than a gigantic perspective system that includes, or at least implicitly claims to include absolutely everything in a single system of measurement operable from the origin to the end of time. *That time, neutral time, is the most important effect or product of historical explanations.* That neutral time is what conventional history inscribes and re-inscribes; it is the common denominator that links conventional history with empiricism in science and philosophy, with cartography and exploration, with visual realism and representational politics; in short, with every cultural institution that depends on such highly abstract common denominators in order to objectify the entire universe and unify its field.

That neutral time was unknown to Homer or Augustine, to Molère or even Gibbon. Shakespeare toyed with it only in his history plays; the eighteenth century in continental Europe, Britain and the United States had other fish to fry. Around 1800, however, and relatively suddenly by conventional historical standards of incremental development, historical time as we understand it became disseminated everywhere in the English-speaking world, in personal and social narrative, in biology, in geology, and by 1900 in most humanistic fields of education. Within fifty years (by 1850) in Britain this definition of time included everything from geological and evolutionary time to the social and personal time of everyday people. That last step – so long in coming, that inclusion of common life – was key to the establishment of history as an explanatory mechanism for the social order. It is a step that belongs to the great British and European social experiments of the nineteenth century and their sometimes violent political outcomes. Society came into its own then as an entity capable of study like any other object, rather than just one of the 'humane' platforms of a cosmic hierarchy. (The United States conducted its experiment in political not social terms and did not experiment nearly as broadly with historical explanation; it continues to have no social idea or a very weak social idea compared to its British and European cultural sources.)

This history – a supposedly universal, neutral medium 'in' which we reside, and 'in' which causalities have unfolded since the dawn of time – is a relatively recent, relatively local European invention. The nineteenth century

normalised it for us, especially for Anglo-American culture, in the work of Charles Lyell, Charles Darwin, and Walter Scott and his many heirs. Popular narrative before Scott had a very different form, although some eighteenth-century women novelists in England had begun to experiment with new formats in yet another case of artists working on the breaking edge of cultural change. Scott's novels were the first histories disseminated right across Eurocentric culture, including North America. In his day he was an international superstar and bestseller for one powerful reason: because he provided his culture with the new kind of narrative it was looking for, one based in four centuries of cultural development, and one that established a universal common denominator (the neutral time of history), and thus a basis for comparing things that had previously inhabited different worlds: for example, rich and poor, native and foreign, black and white. Although Scott's achievement was profound, it was only a late manifestation of a cultural function that had been first disseminated four centuries earlier in different terms. The painters and architects of the Quattrocento used the same kind of perspective apparatus to rationalise sight and neutralise space that Scott used four centuries later to rationalise consciousness and neutralise time.

There is more at stake here than 'accuracy' of description or 'life-likeness' in art. At stake are the powers of choice and creativity. Conventional historical explanation gives us mental tools that require the increasingly burdensome effort of functioning in an infinite horizon and of making those comparisons between widely separated cases which define empiricism and representation. By convention, the neutral time of history goes on for ever. Over the near horizon there is another horizon, and another to infinity; beyond the immediate future is another, farther future, and another beyond that to infinity. In such conditions individual choice has a daunting potential for future influence and yet seems, looking forward from the present, to have relatively minuscule power. It is daunting and confusing, a bit like the relationship in Protestantism between works and salvation: the one so small and ultimately ineffectual, the other so profoundly consequential. On the one hand, everything is at stake; on the other hand, my individual power over the outcome shrinks to nearly nothing in a horizon of infinite possibility. It is enough to make me procrastinate; there will always be time to make that choice tomorrow. Always time. This is one of the siren songs of conventional history.

In such conditions choice is easily diminished, postponed, even trivialised, and this is one of the foreclosures enforced by conventional historical knowledge. Historical knowledge *by definition* involves perspective, not action. On the vast plain of history causalities remained veiled, abstract and accessible only in retrospect. Choice is little more than a gamble: potentially hugely consequential and yet in the present moment relatively trivial and almost accidental. No wonder we are all at home 'counting our Porsches', as one commentator put it. The difficulty of pursuing political agendas on the infinite field of history is too great; action always happens at times

and in places that are 'always somewhere else' (Boyle, 1987: 8). Besides, it is always possible that your Porsche may be a sign of grace.

This may be the condition of 'freedom', but I doubt it; it seems more the condition of *anomie*. I fully appreciate the importance of information and 'facts'; flying blind is not desirable and is not the only available alternative. But the case for studying conventional history is precisely that, by giving us the facts, it can guide choice. Perhaps someone will give me examples of where this has happened? How has 'never again' worked to prevent genocide in Darfur? How well did neutrality work in Srebrenica? Hindsight would suggest a course of action that seems clear enough intellectually, but it produces no action. The inability to recognise this fact currently plagues liberalism in the USA, both in education and in politics. Historical knowledge does not appear in itself to sponsor creative action, and that is no accident. The temporal infinities of history, and the invisible causalities and identities they sponsor, dematerialise the present, turning it from a point of concrete and even qualitative value into a point of transit where abstract causalities produce their emergent forms. The values in such transactions are quantitative (how much, how far, how long, how big) not qualitative (how complex, how effective, how new, how organised).

Facing such insoluble dilemmas, it is easier to go shopping; at least there choice and its consequences seem perceivable, if somewhat trivial. I do not exaggerate. Consumer 'choice' in the United States – or at least the appearance of choice – is practically an American metaphysic. When George W. Bush told people to respond to 9/11 by going shopping he was not tripping over his tongue, though it may have sounded that way to Europeans who, while they have fewer items to choose among, nevertheless are accustomed to having far more actual choice than Americans have. Shopping, and the advertising that goes with it, keeps a future open and makes choice possible, albeit at the cost of trivialising both choice and the future.

The problem of choice brings me to the 2005 film that inspired the title of this manifesto, 'The Closed Space of Choice'. The film is *Good Night, and Good Luck*, and it makes my point about history and choice with special brilliance, through artistic creativity more than argument. Artists usually are ahead of the curve. The film is about the influential journalist Edward R. Murrow, his troubled times, and especially the political and cultural problems in the United States of the 1950s, resurgent in the United States *circa* 2002–6. It is hard to imagine a wider historical horizon for the protagonist of this film, Murrow, or for the implications of his campaign against the fascistic persecutions conducted by Senator Joseph McCarthy. The actions in the film, many of which are drawn from video archives, have their *éclat* precisely because they qualify as historically profound. They are actions that could qualify as 'world historical', enacted by men who qualify as cultural heroes and world historical agents, larger-than-life examples of conscience and courage. The stakes are nothing less than the survival of democratic principles in the United States.

If John Ford or George Lucas had made this film, they might have provided viewers with the wide horizons and infinities so customary in American cinema in which such issues play out over time. But not the director of this film. It has none of that big sky and long trail of consequences found in everything from *Stagecoach* to *Star Wars*. Instead, *Good Night, and Good Luck* takes place almost entirely in very tightly enclosed interior spaces: the offices of CBS broadcast news, a booth in a restaurant, or tiny parts of a couple's domestic space. While hindsight assures us in retrospect that these are world historical heroes – Murrow, Fred Friendly and, almost as fully, the head of CBS, William S. Paley – the film insists through its format that the space of choice is not infinite but closed, very limited, and very personal. At the moment of choice there are no outcomes to consult in order to work backward to find the 'right' choice; no one then knew what the future outcome would be and no one had the luxury of much reflection. Any preparation – in terms of building character and courage – had to have been done already. The space of choice here has nothing to do with the infinite horizons and possible futures of history. Of course, an important dimension of this film is the fact that most of its audience knows which futures were realised and which were not, so its success is a case precisely of reasoning backward from the outcomes to the 'right' choices that made them possible, and putting those choices on display. But the most important part of the film's effect is its format, its medium, the How that is also the What. What viewers experience there is the closed space of choice. The infinite neutralities of history have to take care of themselves. In that closed space, *and only there*, is the opportunity for creative intervention in complex, consequential political, economic and social systems.

The Discursive Condition

In contrast to the common-denominator universe of historical time (Ermarth, 1998a), the Discursive Condition (Ermarth, 2000) is characterised by the limitations and opportunities provided by the ways in which Saussure and his heirs have taught us to understand language. Where neutrality and its objectivity once were, code now is. Conventional history in this environment takes its place as one system of meaning and value among many, one code enabling some options and foreclosing on others, just as any code does. The fundamental ideas about language come from early twentieth-century lectures by Ferdinand de Saussure at Geneva, later collected from student notes after his early death into a small volume, *Cours de linguistique générale* (1915), which was translated into English in 1959. Saussure was not the only one to compromise the neutralities foundational to six centuries of modernity – Picasso and Joyce compromise the neutral time and space of modernity; phenomenology attempts to erase the gap between object and subject; Einstein makes measurement part of what is measured; existentialism and existentialist theology define identity differentially – but Saussure's

influence has been huge in academic disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, literature, art and cultural studies of all kinds.

The kind of cultural study that would unfold the paradigmatic nature of these shifts has hardly been attempted in the United States, and when the subject of what comes after modernity has been raised the discussion has too often been narrow and trivialising rather than generous. In the public domain the idea that there is something called 'modernity' and something that comes after it (postmodernity) has about as much traction as is necessary to justify using the term 'postmodern' in clothing adverts or in uncomprehending comments on National Public Radio (where you could learn, as I did recently, that 'postmodernism is a literary device'). A few thoughtful artists, especially some film-makers, have grasped the nettle and recognised that a paradigmatic shift is under way that justifies changes in method, not just content; and that change in method can even be fun. Their work is wildly, unexpectedly popular, but they are too few.

Although Saussure is more broadly familiar to academic readers than to others, the implications of his work still seem inadequately understood, especially as they bear on historical conventions. So let me summarise, very briefly, the key ideas. Saussure claims that language, far from being the unproblematically neutral instrument of modernity, is arbitrary and operates differentially. It is arbitrary in the sense that it has no necessary link with nature (if it did, we would all speak the same language; as it is, 'dog' or '*chien*' can be understood only within the context of English or French). Language operates differentially in that linguistic meanings only arise negatively within the system of differential relationships that constitute a language. To understand anything means to understand its function in a differential system of meaning and value; in other words, in terms of a code. Within that code the more we know about what something is *not*, the more we can understand how it functions and thus what it 'means'. For example, we understand 'dog' in English not by reference to an object but by knowing it is 'not-dot' and 'not-log'; in other words, 'dog' is most precise when we know most about what it is not. In short, linguistic value arises from a complex, largely subliminal system of differentiations: difference is constitutive, resemblance is not.

This is all bad enough for conventional history because it confines all identity, all process, indeed all consciousness, to what Saussure called 'semi-logical' systems. And things only get worse with the third and final step Saussure takes, that of making language the model for *all* systems of meaning and value, so that any code, whether verbal or not, operates like language; in other words, through differential function where all definition is negative. Saussure says almost in passing that language is the most complex of 'semi-logical' systems, and thus a model for all of them. This means that for 'language' we can consider usage in all kinds of systems of meaning and value: political systems, domestic systems, traffic systems, fashion systems. All are semiological systems. Because the term 'language' tends to imply

verbal language, it is fruitful to shift to the term 'discourse' which has a little more cultural upholstery and can indicate all differential systems of meaning and value.

The Discursive Condition, then, is the condition in which such semiological (differential) systems of meaning and value lie at the basis of knowledge and consciousness. This means that we use and understand all sign systems in the same way we use and understand verbal languages: differentially. The *langue* (whether verbal or non-verbal) consists of the implicitly understood (and rarely, if ever, articulated) rules governing possibility, and the particular enunciation or usage (*parole*) specifies in some particular way that potential, those possibilities. The beauty of Saussure's theory lies in the split nature of linguistic usage: *langue*, the system of rules that is never spoken and never exhausted; and the enunciation (*parole*) that is always partial specification of the general systemic potential. The system itself – the sets of rules by which it operates – is largely or completely implicit and exists only in a wholly disseminated state. 'English' is all – and only what – native speakers say it is, not something extracted in textbook rules. Usage in any system depends on the tacit knowledge by its users about what is and is not allowed by these rules. This is true for 'English'; it is also true of usage in politics, domestic life, traffic, fashion and so on. We exercise our code-knowledge this way all the time as we choose our enunciations, and we implicitly understand when the rules are broken even if we never articulate them. Few native speakers of English articulate its rules, but even so, every native speaker can spot a mistake. The same is true for all the codes or semiotic systems in which we function. Like native speakers of verbal languages, we know when a code is being misused: at the office, in traffic behaviour, at the White House. The trick for historians may be to learn how to articulate those rules. System-knowledge amounts to a kind of collective intelligence that operates well before any logic of ideas; getting to grips with that knowledge, a fundamentally linguistic (differentially grounded) knowledge, remains the challenge of our time.

What is more, we operate simultaneously in multiple codes, not in one at a time. Although the emphasis may differ from one to another, no one functions sequentially first as citizen, next as parent, next as professional, consumer, fashion slave, and so on. In this multiplex Discursive Condition, the moment of creativity and choice is thus ever-present and richly prepared and necessarily constrained by the rule sets necessary to any enunciation at all. The moment of enunciation is the constrained moment of choice when we can either replicate conventional usage or depart from it. Students have always easily grasped the simplicity and elegance of Saussure's ideas about language; they recognise in them models more adequate to their actual experience than the tools of thought inherited from empiricism and codified in conventional history. Historical conventions, in the name of productive postponement, foreclose almost entirely on this powerful and creative power of enunciation.

Once we accept both that language lies at the basis of our knowledge and that no universal common denominator exists to enforce neutrality in our 'codings', several things follow that make conventional historical explanation seem increasingly parochial. First, the definition of 'individuality' changes and with it the definition of agency (Ermarth, 2000, 2001). There is no such thing in the Discursive Condition as that free-floating monad known as 'the' individual, or Foucault's 'founding subject' of history, or the miserable treasure of autonomous selfhood, or the Cartesian *cogito*. To be sure, enunciation is always an individual usage, however conventional that usage might be; but usage implies systemic values that pre-exist any individual and that limit and enable what he or she can do within the system. Thus, one can say that language speaks us, in the sense that we are born into multiple semiotic systems and can do only what they allow us to do; an English-speaker has complex temporal inflections that are not available or even necessary in languages with other forms of inflection. But the fact that language speaks us does not mean that there is no room for individuality, choice and creativity; on the contrary, the moment of enunciation is an ever-present opportunity for choice and even creativity and an expression of individuality more complex than anything allowed to the 'founding subject' of history and its growing *anomie*.

Our job in the Discursive Condition is not to find results independent of usage but to find ways to make our usages independent and not slavish. We already 'are difference', just as Foucault says (1972: 131); in the systems we inhabit our place is unique and our opportunities to act are immediate and ongoing. The question is thus no longer the old modern question, how do we 'make a difference'? The only question is the postmodern one: do we, by the choices we constantly make each time we 'enunciate' this rather than that, make the differences we intend and want to make? In the Discursive Condition individuality is a process not a result – an idea already familiar to J. S. Mill in the mid-nineteenth century. In the uniquely limited discursive situation, and only there, lies the immediate power to change usage within the available systems.

The second change brought by the Discursive Condition has to do with the historicist and empiricist idea of accuracy in the sense of 'evidence' consisting of 'facts' and even statistics. The Discursive Condition reveals the invented nature of such 'facts'; the truth to the saying of Benjamin Disraeli that there are lies, damned lies and statistics. The idea that 'evidence speaks when victims can't' – contained in the subtitle to the popular, retrograde TV series *CSI (Crime Scene Investigators)* – simply denies the presence and power of language; in other words, the collectively established semiotic conditions of meaning and value. This denial is precisely what *CSI* accomplishes in a visual system (putatively 'science') consisting largely of eyedroppers subjecting liquids to mechanised tests. Human readers are scarcely necessary in this world of self-evidence; all they do is work the mechanism. Sounds a bit like The Market, really – another mechanism that we can supposedly

trust to work its results with marginal human input. In fact, The Market is a recognisable example of the way conventional history fosters thinking in terms of resemblances instead of differences: positing structures and essences that mask their fictionality and their function. (Adam Smith certainly would turn in his grave, twice, to see his ideas used to justify the very syndicalist and corporate evils he railed against.) Relinquishing 'evidence' does not at all mean losing precision; far from it.

For example, certain narrative practices in the Discursive Condition give tremendous value to detail (the 'detail is all'; Nabokov, 1969: 76) precisely because that detail is not required to establish a generalisation and thus to produce an abstraction that supersedes its materiality. Instead of being ephemeral servants of that abstraction, material details in the Discursive Condition become irreducible alphabets of construction. Like the poetic echoes in Shakespearean language, the details of semiotic usages specify the powers of multiple semiotic structures that call attention to the pattern-making, meaning-making rules of construction quite apart from the specific pattern or meaning. Detail does not get lost in the Discursive Condition *because the difference it makes is precisely what grounds the system of meaning and value*. The basis of order is difference, not resemblance. In discursive practice detail always has that kind of irreducible precision. The stories of Borges, Kafka and Nabokov are full of precision precisely because they do not serve empiricist rationalisations. Precision leads nowhere; as Alain Robbe-Grillet says of Kafka, 'there is nothing more fantastic than precision' (1989: 164-5).

Finally, the writing proper to the Discursive Condition is inhospitable to the kind of emergent causalities that underwrite conventional historical explanation and its sponsored ideas of 'growth' and 'progress' in everything from education to economics. In the Discursive Condition what we can know stops at the limits of the discursive system or set of systems within which we operate; even science must take the measuring system into the measurement. In the Discursive Condition history cannot rely on its usual alibi, causality, but it does have new options to pursue: for example, identifying and studying the differential relationships – the systemic values – that constitute the possibilities of particular operating codes, as at Enron, or the Pentagon, or the World Trade Organisation; or studying what kinds of value the operating codes enable or foreclose; or studying the differences between operating codes.

Foucault's work remains the gold standard when it comes to such writing. He establishes his investigative field not in terms of serial causalities but in terms of blocks which provide a basis of comparison. For example, when considering penal practices in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), he calls our attention to the differences between the practice of public execution and the practice of imprisonment. He does not need to posit a historical field unified by neutrality in time because he is not interested in how one changed into the other – something that may have happened fairly suddenly as other

cultural balances shifted in the large, imbricated, unrationalisable scene of cultural practice. What interests him is the conjuncture, the comparative opportunity, the point of difference. It is a focus entirely foreign to the founding subjects and unfolding causalities of conventional history. In this kind of historical writing the emphasis rests on comparative systems, on comparative code. Difference, not resemblance.

What, then, about 'the' past? That past in conventional history is constantly turning our present into a graveyard beneath our feet. 'The' past belongs to the common-denominator universe of empiricism and thus functions as a dematerialised launcher in the perpetual disaster of receding time. The Discursive Condition forecloses on that disaster by treating various 'pasts' as a present function in this or that system of meaning and value. Given the obviously multiplied and complex nature of our own present conditions, it makes no sense to assume that 'the' past was any less complex and multiplied, or had a more secure identity than our present. As in Borges's 'Garden of Forking Paths', pasts pullulate in every present, but not all pasts in all presents. Pluralising the past in this way is not at all the same thing as consigning it to 'point of view', that creature of historical conventions. There is only this past or that past, functional in some codes but not others. This just means that anything described as 'the' past, as Einstein said of time itself, is a function of a system, not an envelope containing it. This allowance for alternative codes is not something conventional history can accomplish because, by convention, its code is *the* code; that is what makes its formalities so powerful (Ermarth, 1998b). The Discursive Condition pluralises code and thus pluralises 'the' past which has different functions in different codes.

This is the kind of thing that drives conventional historians nuts, and I feel for them, I do. But the problem with their rationalist agendas is that they have allowed them and their cultural functions to remain unquestioned for too long. Meanwhile, unnoticed, the world has moved on, and in it our mental tools, derived so substantially from conventional history, are increasingly inadequate. As Václav Havel remarked some years ago, there is no point in 'looking for an objective way out of the crisis of objectivism' (Havel, 1992). Our sense of cultural vulnerability involves the large methodological issues raised here, not just small, rectifiable problems of tactics or even policy. We have lost our common denominators in the Discursive Condition. Get over it. The options are not worse, just different. Instead of seeking to objectify 'reality' and thus finally to close off the play of difference that sustains meaning and value, why not consider the advantages of mapping the differential systems of meaning and value that function so powerfully in actual affairs? At the moment, conventional history just ignores them.

The Discursive Condition thus releases the past from the dialectical causalities to which conventional history confines it. In Foucault, and more brilliantly in the various artists who have been revising the narrative formats of Eurocentric culture for more than a century, the play of difference remains open and, with it, multiple possibilities. In this multiplied discursive condition

what is past is an iterative, ever-present, ever-renewed capability that can lead in several directions and that is neither lost in the disaster of receding time nor trivialised by a world historical future. Once 'the past is no longer part of a dialectic' it can confess its function in the present (Ermarth, 1992: 133). The focus of attention shifts from the secondary picture or resemblance and moves to the primary arena of enunciation and practice, and to the recognition of differences within and between codes. That recognition is not 'knowledge' in the conventional sense: not the outcomes of causal sequences in which the detail is only interesting as the carrier of a generalisation and something to be kicked away once it yields that product. The Discursive Condition even offers new ways to conceptualise time: for example, as rhythmic iteration (Ermarth, 1992) or as punctuated equilibrium (Gould and Eldridge, 1977).

The Discursive Condition thus offers us new mental tools for writing the history of discursive formations, especially an ability to recognise systemic values and the subtle differentiations that constitute them. In the United States we could use a whole lot more of this in the approach to contemporary political and educational problems which currently border on the Kafkaesque. The need for experiment with method is urgent and the stakes are high. The universe of historical 'fact' and determinable causality is more circumscribed and limiting than any actual materiality or practice. There is no way to turn that complexity into conventional history, or into any other explanatory result, except by suppression and exclusion. The Discursive Condition requires acknowledgement of that limit and, in so doing, opens a new and productive gap between discursive system and enunciation: not a gap between 'past and present' to be filled with emergent causalities and the data that confirm them; but a gap between potential and enunciation that invites creativity and remains always open. Creative opportunity appears in that gap which is literally the space of choice: closed, limited and personal, yet respectful of the collective intelligence, the social memory, contained in the semiological systems available to individuals every moment of every day. Which choices we make from the occupation of our unique discursive circumstances are up to us; they can be original and new, or conventional and repetitive. But this is a moment of opportunity for the discursive historian who describes material practices in order to find and focus the systems of meaning and value that inform and sustain those practices. *A list of new methodological rules might include the following:* emphasise difference rather than resemblance, especially the differences that define this or that discursive system of meaning and value; be sure your narrative line sponsors digression-and-return more than progress and production; forswear any pretence of 'naturalness' in the enterprise of writing history; seek the contrasts between cultural systems, not causalities that produce them; develop key elements into figures or patterns, not structures, causalities or resemblances; value any past as a function of present systemic iteration; never say 'individual' or 'fact'; always write in a personal voice; never stick to one disciplinary ambit.

The moment of enunciation need not be, and usually is not, particularly creative; but it is the immediate and ever-present moment of choice where creativity becomes possible for those willing to act anew. Not everyone can alter conventional usage in whatever medium; in other words, not everyone can be an artist. But the choice is always present and immediate. In this way the Discursive Condition rescues creativity and art from the cultural marginality forced on them by the Enlightenment and returns them to the heart of social renewal.

In long-gone eras, when historical writing was the front guard of a new political and religious order (Tudor England, for example) or a new social order (the nineteenth century, for example) it may have taken courage to write history because it was a new and potentially blasphemous thing to confront vested authority with an alternative system. Today it takes no courage to collate sources to the point of coma and hide behind them like a legionnaire behind the forward phalanx. What takes courage today is to make the cultural syntax, the discursive system, appear (just as the surrealists proposed), and then to interpret the discursive systems that operate in everything from domestic life to the global economy. And to do so in one's own voice and with the humility borne from knowing that interpreting is like breathing – it goes on every moment in every mind. A history adequate to the Discursive Condition will redefine individuality in terms of its true complexity and discursive function; it will find new latitude in the description and comparison of codes; and it will rematerialise the present moment as the restricted but infinitely rich site of choice, creativity and renewal.

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5 'Humani nil alienum'

The quest for 'human nature'

Beverley Southgate

Introduction

The formulation of a manifesto for 'history' for the future involves not only speculation but advocacy – not only a theoretical presentation of one's hopes and fears but some practical ideas of what one might do about them. All too often, and especially of late, it seems to me that the philosophy of history has become detached from its practice – taking off into scholastic-style 'cobwebs of learning' that seem of little relevance to toilers in the field; and at the same time those toilers (empirically orientated historians) themselves have had minimal impact on the way people actually live their lives. I shall start, then, with a diagnosis, and some attempted assessment of where, educationally and culturally, we are and where we seem to be heading; and then, in the light of that, propose my own remedy, or treatment, or manifesto which – at the risk of reducing tension by revealing my plot at the outset – will be based on the Roman poet Terence's idealistic embrace of all things human.¹

Diagnosis

As he surveyed learning in the early seventeenth century, Francis Bacon criticised the then current emphasis on 'theory' at the expense of 'practice'. Intellectuals, or philosophers (whether metaphysical or moral or natural), were, he raged, imprisoned within an ancient framework of thought, or 'paradigm', which not only predetermined the parameters within which thinking could be done but preordained its purpose. The categories into which ideas had to be integrated were essentially those of Aristotelian metaphysics and – in the context of the long-enduring Thomist synthesis of Aristotelianism with Christianity – the *point* of any knowledge gained thereby was ultimately theological, not so much material as spiritual improvement. After centuries of constraint within that conceptual straitjacket, thought had turned in upon itself – spinning intellectual cobwebs of admirable fineness, but lacking any pretence of material utility or profit. It was, then, as Bacon insisted, time for a revolution – an intellectual and moral upheaval