

# Rethinking History

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## *Rethinking History's* essential tension: between theoretical reflection and practical experimentation

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ARTICLE



## *Rethinking History's* essential tension: between theoretical reflection and practical experimentation

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### ABSTRACT

This article proposes a story of *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* since its founding in 1997. It analyses the journal's contributions to historical theory and practice in the past, examines the situation in the present and projects some challenges for the future. It focuses on the idea that the original ambitious project proposed by the founding editors has led the journal to engage with an essential tension between tradition and innovation, along with another tension – between theory and practice – deliberately generated by its editors. It argues that one of the decisive contributions of the journal has been to encourage historians to innovate and experiment without falling into a sterile utopianism. This way, historians may come to terms with new ways of representing history via digital platforms without necessarily rejecting the traditional prose-narrative genre.

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A change of guard was announced in the first issue of *Rethinking History* of 2018. After more than two decades of generous service, the founding editors Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone decided to pass the editorship of the journal to Patrick Finney and Kalle Pihlainen. This succession process as well as the opportunity to commemorate the now more than two decades since the journal's foundation inspires me to revisit the journal's contributions to historical theory and practice, to examine its situation in the present and to project challenges for the future.

In this essay, I will focus on the idea that the original ambitious project proposed by its founding editors has led the journal to engage with that *essential tension* between tradition and innovation referred to by Thomas Kuhn (1977, original from 1959), along with another tension – between theory and practice – deliberately generated by the editors. From my position as a historian, a theorist of history and a member of the *Rethinking History's* Editorial Board, I will analyse how these academic

issues have been negotiated in the last twenty years and discuss how they might be developed in the future.

The essay is divided into three sections. The first will examine the disciplinary, intellectual and historiographical context in which the journal was originally conceived. I will revisit the mission statements proposed by its founding editors, outline the central trends of its evolution and examine its theoretical and practical contributions to the discipline of history. In the second section, I will examine the extent to which the journal's original statements and specific mission have been accomplished. In particular, I will focus on the foregrounding of new forms of historical representation, the generation of experimentation and innovation in history and the extent to which the balance between tradition and innovation – and between theoretical reflection and practical experimentation – has been achieved. Finally, in the third section, I will discuss the challenges that the journal may face in the future, as it enters another decade of the twenty-first century, one of increasingly complex cultural, intellectual and historiographical demands.

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What was the prehistory of *Rethinking History*? As Keith Jenkins has recently recounted, Heather McCallum, the Routledge history editor, met with Alun Munslow, Patrick Joyce and Keith Jenkins in the summer of 1995 to discuss the establishment of a new journal which would reflect the postmodern 'turn' in historical theory, and which would challenge the theoretical and practical doxa with regard to the discourse of history then dominant in academia in Britain, the USA and elsewhere. McCallum had asked Jenkins to attend in order to help her choose between Munslow and Joyce as editors for the proposed journal, not least because he had previously suggested to her that either of them would be, in their different ways, excellent for that job. At the end of the meeting, once Munslow and Joyce had left, McCallum and Jenkins remained to make the decision. Munslow was chosen, and his enthusiasm, energy and understanding of the field, as well as his desire to think beyond the conventional, gave the new journal, named *Rethinking History*, a flying start.<sup>1</sup>

Once he accepted the job of founding editor, Munslow assumed the task of articulating the ideas from his meetings with Jenkins and Joyce. The journal was finally established in 1997. Interested in nineteenth-century American culture, Munslow had already been grappling with the nature of history while working on his *Discourse and Culture: The Creation of America, 1870–1920* (1992). He then published his challenging *Deconstructing History* (1997c), which clearly pivoted towards postmodernist history and proposed a radical rethinking of the discipline. The themes, approaches and perspectives in this book shaped the newly founded journal, which evidences Munslow's scholarly methods: radicalism in

theoretical expositions, the desire to challenge established conventions in the discipline, and the search for innovation and experimentation in historical theory and practice.

Munslow undertook the mission of confronting, in his words, ‘the key issues on the discipline’s agenda’ (1997a, 1). He used the dialectic and dichotomic language of manifestos as he described the current essential tensions of the historical discipline. At this founding moment, most historians continued to base their research on traditional, empiricist and modernist postulates, while a few influential academics were pushing for an innovative and postmodernist agenda. This tension, which to a certain extent has always been a part of the academic landscape, was, at that time, particularly intense. The force of the tension at that time might only be equalled by the German historicist rupture in the mid-nineteenth century regarding the traditional narrative historical mode.

Aware of this historiographical context, Munslow encouraged historians to find ‘new ways of doing history’ and to ‘rethink’ history itself (1997a, 15). *New* and *re-* were assumed to be the two key processes to be developed not only in theoretical reflection on the discipline but also in the practice itself – as made explicit in the journal’s subtitle: ‘The Journal of Theory and Practice.’ Munslow concluded that this operation of ‘rethinking history’ meant ‘expanding the study of the nature of history in all its forms and conceptualization, [and] questioning the boundaries of how we study the past’ (1997a, 15–16).

During these early days of the journal, Robert A. Rosenstone (as he has reported to this author) came across an announcement that a new journal was in the works and that its editor was interested in ‘new ways of doing history.’ Rosenstone had not heard of Alun before, but wrote to say he could be counted on for this fascinating project. Since he had finished his innovative experiment *Mirror in the Shrine* (1988) and was entering his long-time engagement with history and film, he was seeking colleagues and a venue interested in innovative history writing. Rosenstone was at that time (and still is) a versatile historian who had worked on various historical genres, always at the margins of the areas privileged by traditional history. His unconventionality was built on three solid historical projects: a monograph on the American Leftists who fought in the Spanish Civil War (*Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion and the Spanish Civil War*, 1969), a biography of John Reed, an idealistic American who rocked public opinion with his testimonial masterpiece, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919), on the Bolshevik takeover (*Romantic Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed*, 1975) and an experimental biography of three Western travellers to Meiji Japan (*Mirror in the Shrine: American Encounters in Meiji Japan*, 1988).

Rosenstone had learned, particularly through working on his book on Japan, that ‘it is easier to foresee a new way of doing history than to actually create one’ (Rosenstone 2016, 131). In my view, this quote well conveys Munslow’s and Rosenstone’s complementary perspectives, which led to the journal’s success and reflects its mission of engaging with both theory and practice: Munslow more inclined to the former and Rosenstone to the latter. The complementarity between the two founding editors reflects the second sense in which I use the concept of *essential tension*, beyond the original idea explained by Kuhn, of examining the tension between tradition and innovation. The focus here is more on the tension between theoretical reflection and practical experimentation.

Munslow has always applied his capacity to challenge the status quo to break with disciplinary conventions, and Rosenstone has demonstrated an inexhaustible energy for materializing his historical intuitions, from his unconventional biographies (1975, 1988) to his experimental autobiography (2016). I believe that Rosenstone’s affiliation with the California Institute of Technology for half a century, along with his own intellectual restlessness, has oriented him to this anxiety for possibilist, realizable experimentation. He is persuaded that academia can become a straitjacket for historians, limiting the expression of what they aspire to say about the world, the past and the present. Historians then need to find other forms and other modes of discourse that, often, lead them to deliberately break the rules of a game that strikes them as too conventional, formalistic and even arbitrary, to the point of distorting the reality of the past – which is precisely what those rules aim to preserve. This led him to seek new forms of writing aligned with that thematic and interpretative heterodoxy, while still faithfully respecting the methods that historical research and historiographical consensus requires.

Rosenstone’s first public appearance in the journal was in the third issue of the first year. He and Munslow always signed those founding editorials separately, even as their agreement on the points discussed was evident. He began that editorial by explaining his decision to join Munslow in the project as stemming from ‘the desire to help create a forum in which theorists and writers of history will have a place to meet, read, react to, and learn from each other’s works’ and in

the hope that this journal will become that missing venue where historians, young and old, can try out something new, can indulge in experiments in writing, experiments that expand the voices in which the Historian can speak, that bring us into new relationships with the traces of the past. (Rosenstone 1997, 232)

Rosenstone also encouraged historians to innovate, to think outside the box, since he believed that they ‘felt constricted by traditional, discipline-sanctioned modes of telling the past, historians whose desire was to create a past with new and innovative strategies, a past more suitable to a contemporary sensibility’ (1997, 228). He concluded that,

The pages of *Rethinking History* are open to all sorts of new historical writing: we await Expressionist, Surrealist, Dada, Process, Postmodern, or other kinds of Histories whose name or form has not yet been conceived. We believe that the writing of History can be an art, and that innovation in any art calls for boldness, audacity, and the courage to try things that can seem strange, even to the author. (1997, 232–233)

The journal has remained faithful to its foundational mission as outlined by the editors in the early issues. I argue that the continuity and perseverance of the two founding editors in their own ideas – refreshed and immeasurably enriched by the arrival of the successive US editors, David Harlan and James Goodman – and their natural openness to novelties have strengthened the journal during these last two decades. To me, the mere existence of the journal would have been justified for the sole reason that it has been able to transgress two previously established – but not necessarily healthy – disciplinary academic rules: that a non-conventional journal cannot succeed in the scientific rankings and that, in James Clifford’s and Paul Rabinow’s words, ‘to write in an unorthodox way, one must first have tenure’ (Clifford 1986, 21). *Rethinking History* has certainly defied the first rule, since it ranks high among academic publications. As to the second, many of us found in the journal a welcoming area for conversation and debate from the beginnings of our careers as historians. This was made possible by the editors’ conviction that ‘everybody knows in the depth of his or her own heart that in disciplines such as our all that really counts happens in the seclusion of our studies,’ as Frank Ankersmit (2003, 433) puts it. All we have to do is rescue them from forgetting, and to provide them with appropriate forums for debate.

Those who have published on innovative and experimental subjects or with such approaches in the journal during the last twenty years include many young scholars and historians from nations and schools previously situated at the margins of the discipline. The journal has also welcomed work from non-academics, something that has been especially the case in the issues on ‘history as creative writing’ regularly edited by James Goodman. These authors attended to the editors’ call to ‘anyone with an interest in the study of the past. It is an important dimension to the Journal that our pages be accessible to anyone who cares to demonstrate reasoned argument about the historical Project’ (Munslow 1997b, 111). The editors sought, from the start, to avoid the formal and rigid academic jargon which

separated the writing of history not only from its potential readers but also from the past it tries to represent. In 1979, in his influential article on the revival of narrative in history, Lawrence Stone diagnosed this tendency towards jargon among professional historians:

One further reason why a number of 'new historians' are turning back to narrative seems to be a desire to make their findings accessible once more to an intelligent but not expert reading public, which is eager to learn what these innovative new questions, methods and data have revealed, but cannot stomach indigestible statistical tables, dry analytical argument, and jargon-ridden prose. (1979, 15)

David Cannadine, another historian considered conservative in epistemic terms, similarly claimed, at the beginning of the millennium, that 'much history today is written in dismal prose or impenetrable jargon which can only be understood by a few aficionados and which fails utterly to reach a broader public audience' (2002, 11).

Yet, in spite of these and other stimulating ideas from professional historians, *Rethinking History*'s founding editors were aware that the task they assigned themselves would not be easy. First, they acknowledged that 'as a professional group ... we tend to be driven by the force of our methodological habits' (Munslow 1997b, 113). They were up against that secular conservative propensity of the discipline that implied 'a worrying tendency for historians to be dismissive of almost any theory or revisionist method or philosophy that challenges the traditional ways of our thinking' (1997b, 116). As a consequence, the editors encouraged 'the writing and submission of articles that address the multiplicity of philosophies of history that are being constructed, and also the growing variety of ways in which the past is explained, evidenced, interpreted, narrated and demonstrated,' (1997b, 117) and 'submissions that experimentally address such first principle issues in practice' (1997b, 116). *Rethinking History*'s project could not have been more idealistic and ambitious.

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*Rethinking History* sought primarily to make historians aware of the complexity of the historical operation, and to promote formulas and models that would respond to this complexity. This reflects one of the main challenges that the linguistic turn and postmodernism launched, as Gabrielle M. Spiegel explains,

The principal effect of the 'linguistic turn,' for historians, has been to alert us to the mediating force of language in the representation of the past, and thus to help us to understand that there is no direct access to historical events or persons, so that all historical writing, whether medieval or modern, approaches the past via discourses of one sort or another. (1997, xvi)

One year before the creation of the journal, Brook Thomas had encouraged historians ‘to pay more attention to the problem of finding a form appropriate to the complexity of a past that our accumulated historical evidence indicates is not unified, but diverse, conflicted, and multiple’ (1996, 176). Three years later, Munslow presented the same idea in the journal’s editorial in the following way: ‘The conversion of the content of the past through the form we give to it, what we might call the process of creating the-past-as-history, can be conceived in many different ways’ (1999, 130). The multiple subjects and genres deployed by historians and theorists of history in the journal’s 22 volumes have responded to this first challenge. The essays include theoretical perspectives on the linguistic, literary and narrative nature of history; articles on memory studies; history and the web; history and technology; experimental histories; invitations to historians to narrate their own experience; performative history; and analyses of non-conventional historical genres such as gaming history, graphic histories, film history and historians’ autobiographies, among others.

The endorsement of innovation and experimentation became another of the key challenges in the mission of *Rethinking History*. The journal’s innovative mission upended the existing tendency towards disciplinary inertia and conventionalism, leading to the reemergence of the essential tension. The editors were convinced of the need to blend, rather than set at odds, the old ways and the new: ‘To understand what historians are doing today – our practice – we should, therefore, direct our attention to the discipline’s foundational models or paradigms’ (Munslow 1997b, 111). Yet they understood that they were required to promote a necessary reformulation of those foundational models:

Any lurking feelings of editorial self-satisfaction must be contained and soon rejected in the face of the still powerful juggernaut of conventionality and mainstreamism in historical thinking and practice. I am not saying history should be turned into an entirely new discourse that abandons any connection with past reality. To do that would be to dump the past itself. History is, after all, our only organized access to it and the successes and sufferings of previous generations. But I am saying historians should not just re-tread the old axioms, principles, conventions, standards, practices, customs, canons and epistemological beliefs. (Munslow 2001, 355)

Following this second challenge, the journal created new sections that would not only convey the *effect* of unconventionality, but also perform it. One of them is the section ‘Exchanging Ideas,’ which includes, among others, a valuable epistolary conversation between Frank Ankersmit and Mark Bevir, focused primarily on Bevir’s book *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Bevir and Ankersmit 2000). The section ‘Invitation to Historians,’ in turn, allows the historian to blend the ‘autobiographical and the theoretical as part of her ongoing attempt [Rosenstone is here referring to Elisabeth Deeds Ermarth, one of the contributors] to reconfigure what we mean by



historical time' (Rosenstone 2001a, 193). Finally, the section 'Experiments in Narrative' is conceived as a forum of interchange and promotion of historical experimentation:

One might well ask at the outset: why experiment? Who cares? Why is it important? (...) To me, there seem to be two reasons for experimenting with historical narrative: the personal and the theoretical. These cannot, of course, be separated. They come together in all of us who write history. (Rosenstone 2001b, 411)

This challenge connects with that which Hayden White posed in 1966, in his essay 'The Burden of History,' where he complained that when historians speak of the *art* of history,

they seem to have in mind a conception of art that would admit little more than the nineteenth century novel as a paradigm [and] eschew the techniques of literary representation which Joyce, Yeats and Ibsen have contributed to modern culture. There have been no significant attempts at surrealistic, expressionistic, or existentialist historiography in this century. (White 1966, 126–127)

Rosenstone noted that, 'thirty-five years after they were written, White's words still stand as a challenge to historical writing' (2001b, 413). He had actually sought to face the challenge of experimental history with his *Mirror in the Shrine* (1988). This project suggested that, to create a suitable biography for our times, historians need to attend to the intersubjectivity of our own scholarly activity (Passerini 2000, 413). Since continuity poses one of the crucial challenges to experimentation, *Mirror in the Shrine* passed the test. It might be considered a pioneer of a new form of multi-layered historical texts, which now include, among others, Elinor Langer's *Josephine Herbst* (1983), Greil Marcus' *Lipstick Traces* (1989), Richard Price's *Alabi's World* (1990), Greg Denning's *Mr Bligh's Language* (1992), James Goodman's *Stories of Scottsboro* (1994), Luisa Passerini's *Autobiography of a Generation* (1996) and Jonathan Walker's *Pistols! Treason! Murder! The Rise and Fall of a Master Spy* (2007).

These books are landmarks for the evolution of the discipline and serve as markers for historiographical analysis and training for new historians. Indeed, the journal continued to highlight more experimental approaches to history, notably, for example, the ways in which historians use film, graphic narratives, digital media and virtual platforms to engage with the past. In the first two decades of the 2000s, interest has shifted from experimental ways of narrating history to new genres resulting from new technology. Three clear examples are the Forum organized on 'History and the Web,' containing five articles that describe how history websites have evolved since their appearance ten years earlier and explain why/how they could transform the landscape of history (Brown 2004, 253–342), a special issue on how history is being transmitted through

new historical genres and new digital platforms (Aurell 2015), as well as all the articles on film, graphic novels and digital platforms published by the journal.

Nevertheless, to complete this examination, it is important to also mention the dangers with *Rethinking History*'s challenging mission. Some new forms of history proposed by the journal have not developed beyond what we might view as interesting possibilities. A case in point would be *The Arcades Project* (Summer 2001) that aimed to create

a new kind of History, to be sure, one that I would like, provisionally, to call a Cubist History – the Arcades and the world which gave birth to them seen from multiple perspectives which cannot be reconciled and should not be ignored. Not by anyone who cares about writing the past in new ways that attempt to seize a greater measure of its multi-dimensionality. (Rosenstone 2001a, 193)

No one can deny this project's audacity, but the passage of time has shown that, in this case, this experiment did not go beyond a hypothesis.

Another experiment, in the third issue of volume 3, was one in which various historians commented on Marie Theresa Hernández's article (1999, 289–307), published in that same issue. The problem was not with the quality of the article being discussed – a fascinating story based on ethnographic research on Mexican American history – but with the need to justify the critical comments on an article 'that is itself a work-in-progress' (Mason 1999, 317). Ultimately, those comments serve as interesting reviews and critiques of that article, rather than actual 'experiments in history.' *Rethinking History* certainly challenged tradition when the editors asked Hernández to publish a work in progress rather than a final version. But the experiment was unsuccessful since the result was, inevitably, one of unveiling the review process rather than of proposing a new way of doing history.

These are, among other minor trials, such as the section 'Poetry' (Koeninger 2004), some of *Rethinking History*'s experiments that would at least have deserved better justification. Yet these things happen in science: experiments fail. And these missteps show that we cannot reduce experimental history to a radical and holistic critique of the process of writing history without adding a positive proposal, a realizable project able to engage the audience. And this is one of the challenges that, in my view, *Rethinking History* should confront in the future, as I will explain in the next section.

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In the last two decades, *Rethinking History* has gained solid scholarly recognition. Nevertheless, there are two major issues that the journal has not yet come to terms with, and which may be among its future challenges.

First, there is still some reluctance within the discipline to admit that *Rethinking History* is a 'conventional journal' of theory of history. Historians and theorists respect the journal because of its experimental function, its innovative proposals and its high standards of quality, but many still consider it to be a kind of maverick within the discipline. And perhaps that should be the case, considering the journal's basic orientation and founding mission to strive for 'non-conventionality.' But I feel that a journal like this – or other analogous forums for disciplinary encounters, theoretical discussions and challenging debates – *should* exist in any academic discipline to resist inertia and accommodation.

Second – and, to me, more importantly – the journal is highly valued as a sophisticated forum for the circulation of new theoretical ideas and an arena for radical research. However, its avant-garde experiments and innovative practices have not yet achieved general acceptance within the discipline. Here Rosenstone's diagnosis is accurate: investment in innovation has its price, and historians are particularly aware of the difficulty of pushing the discipline forward:

Why there has not been more innovation in historical narrative is not a difficult question to answer. For one thing, we are well acculturated into one way of doing things, a tried and true way that brings rewards, grants and publications. For another, one has to wonder whether innovation pays off – professionally as well as intellectually. Anybody who dares experiment has to worry: What will my colleagues think of me? What will reviewers say? Will I be laughed out of the profession? Even if you are not in the profession, the problem of changing the form in which we tell the past can call down a firestorm upon one's head. (...) The most primary fear to innovating is even simpler: can I get published? (Rosenstone 2001b, 414–415)

Having experienced historians' natural reluctance to innovation and experimentation, the journal's new editors and other Editorial Board members should also be aware that good intentions are not enough. Idealism should not be confused with utopianism. The new editors and the Board should examine which aspects of the innovation and experimentation promoted during the last two decades have been fruitful, which of them have been less enduring and what areas of historiographical innovation should be promoted.

My point here, which I will try to develop in this last section, is that one of the (paradoxical) dangers for *Rethinking History* is that of falling into narcissistic academicism – which is exactly what it has fought against from the beginning. The journal may be considered 'the sole historical journal that welcomes innovation and experimentation,' at least in its essential mission, as Rosenstone (2001b) claims. Yet isolation and a single-minded pursuit of innovation require external challenges. In an activity with so evident a social dimension as history, this confrontation comes not only

from inside academia – from other scholars of history – but, crucially nowadays, from the outside: from readers’ reception. To be sure, *Rethinking History*’s Editorial Board – so varied in historiographical tendencies, ranging from Gabrielle M. Spiegel’s and Peter Burke’s middle ground to Keith Jenkins’ and Frank Ankersmit’s radicalism – should keep serving not only in its function as a guarantor of the academic excellence of published essays, but also in preventing the journal from utopianism, disengagement from reality, elitism or isolationism. The aim of innovation is not innovation per se, but more profound and contemporary engagements with reality, and a turning into conventional the portion of innovation that the passage of time and the establishment of tradition have shown to be a positive asset for the discipline. In order to consolidate what has been achieved, the revolutionary spirit that inspires innovation must also ponder the moment at which activism should cease – thus allowing, in turn, new energies to develop new innovations.

The founding editors were certainly aware of the danger of letting history fall under the rule of ‘innovation for innovation.’ When Rosenstone and Munslow gathered the most experimental contributions published between 1997 and 2000 in *Experiments in Rethinking History*, they clarified that

none of the works in this collection are innovations undertaken for the mere sake of innovation. (...) Certainly none of the authors included in this collection has, like some we may call postmodernists, given up on historical knowing. They simply realize that such knowledge must sometimes be expressed in new ways. (Rosenstone 2004, 2)

This seeking of a middle ground between tradition and innovation, between respect and critique, is particularly relevant in a discipline marked by continuous and intense intellectual shifts: ‘no one has changed the course of History as much as Historians,’ Ian Steele states (quoted by Jenkins 2003, 367). Geoff Eley’s *A Crooked Line*, for instance, outlines a personal ‘journey through the shifting landscape of historical studies during the ensuing decades’ – from traditional to optimistic social history, and from renewed cultural history to defying postmodernism (2008, 5; Aurell 2016, 225–233). Rosenstone’s *Adventures of a Postmodern Historian* revises the way ‘the personal bleeds into the historical,’ aware that ‘in recent decades the subject matter of our work has broadened enormously’ (Rosenstone 2016, 2). In this shifting historical and epistemic landscape, described by Howard Zinn in his autobiography as a ‘moving train’ (1994), it is particularly important to achieve a *sense* of innovation – ‘sense’ both as suggesting ‘good sense’ and some practicality in direction, and a ‘keen sense’ or sensitivity for adequate content – which necessarily involves tradition since

Only investigations firmly rooted in the contemporary scientific tradition are likely to break that tradition and give rise to a new one. That is why I speak of an 'essential tension' implicit in scientific research. (...) The successful scientist must simultaneously display the characteristics of the traditionalist and of the iconoclast. (Kuhn 1977, 227)

By arguing in favour of this essential tension between tradition and innovation, I also include that necessary radical critique defined by Barbara Johnson when commenting on Derrida's *Dissemination*:

A critique of any theoretical system is not an examination of its flaws and imperfections. It is not a set of criticisms designed to make the system better. It is an analysis that focuses on the grounds of the system's possibility. The critique reads backward from what seems natural, obvious, self-evident, or universal in order to show that these things have their history, their reasons for being the way they are, their effects on what follows from them and that the starting point is not a (natural) given but a (cultural) construct, usually blind to itself. (Johnson 1981, xv)

Yet this radical critique functions for societal rather than academic purposes since, as Joan Scott has argued, we all have to try to protect ourselves against that dangerous moment in which

any legitimating authority – even one founded on these ideals [of democracy, liberty, equality, and justice] – will become so invested in its own power that it will resist innovation and attempt to put a stop to history; the opening to a different (and by definition better) future is protected (though by no means guaranteed) if critique can continue to operate. (Scott 2007, 34)

Societies must remain open to this radical critique – even against what becomes 'politically correct' in the new scenario created by the effect of that critique. But my point is that in history, as discipline and practice, the platform from which the critique is launched is essentially innovative; but its foundations are established on tradition. Only thus can we ensure that the persistent dissatisfaction of critique referred to by Scott, which is the basis of its efficacy, does not fall into utopianism. This is the spirit behind *Manifestos for History*, a collective volume clearly inspired by the work done by *Rethinking History*: 'being both loyal to history and dissenting from it,' and performing 'an act of both fidelity and rebellion' (Jenkins, Morgan, and Munslow 2007, 1).

Yet, and to be more specific, once the journal has achieved this balance, it should continue to focus on the search, promotion, and production of *new forms* of representing and transmitting the past. Historians could engage more thoroughly with the new emerging ways of articulating history around digital platforms and with other popular forms such as historical performances, graphic narratives, gaming history, museums, films and TV series. These new forms are challenging the traditional mode of historical

prose with their capacity to reach a massive audience. Professional historians would be well advised to think about how history resides, to a substantial degree, in its representation.

Historians have always been involved in such creative and innovative forms of collaboration with novelists and artists (Davis 2003, 45–48; Rosenstone 1995, 19–44). As Ann Rigney argues, this collaboration is more crucial than ever as we enter a multimedial world, ‘where blockbuster fiction has arguably as much power as academic history to shape widely held views of the past (or in seducing people into forgetting history altogether)’ (2007, 158). This is the only way professional historians may regain cultural authority ‘in a world where so much emphasis is placed on the do-it-yourself, perform-it yourself, approach to the past’ (2007, 158). I cannot imagine myself developing a screenplay, writing an historical novel, designing a video game, planning a museum or drawing a graphic narrative. But I strongly feel the social responsibility to provide artists and programmers with the historical tools that will give their work reference and reliability.

The demand for historical content may be observed in gaming and television, though one wonders if interest is less in the past itself than in the past as an analogy for the present. Yet we should take advantage of this growing interest in the past and participate in the production of these new forms of history. The themed issue ‘History in the Graphic Novel,’ edited by Hugo Frey and Benjamin Noys (2002), the collective volume *Manifestos for History* (Poster 2007, 39–49) and ‘Historical Genres in the Twenty-first Century’ (Aurell 2015) point to a key direction. Not by chance, the top altmetric score of the journal is Dawn Spring’s article ‘Gaming history: computer and video games as historical scholarship’ (2015; see also Chapman 2016; Kapell and Elliot 2013) and the top-cited article in *Rethinking History* to date is Vanessa Agnew’s ‘History’s affective turn: historical re-enactment and its work in the present’ (2007) – both topics fully connected with the digital turn and the new context in which history is being enacted by historians and consumed by readers.

This ‘digital turn’ (in sources, methodologies, platforms, genres and representations) should not replace but complement the previous linguistic and cultural turns of the last fifty years. I believe that conventional forms of producing history such as monographs, biographies, autobiographies and articles will remain – and that monographs may still continue to function as the paradigm of exhaustive and systematic research. Yet we should recognize that these new forms of history are shaping not only the discipline but also the general public’s access to it, justifying their recognition by academics. And this relevance should be proportionally reflected in historians’ training, academic incentives and merit in publications. As David Harlan has noted,

there was a time – not very long ago – when we could simply teach our students how to read and write historical monographs, as if that were the only game in town. But those days are well and truly over. If we really want our students to develop a sense of the past that is personally sustaining and politically relevant we must teach them to be thoughtful, resourceful and critical readers of *all* the ways in which their societies represent the past. The profession's interest in theory may be receding at the moment, but it won't be receding for long. (2004, 494)

These ideas are evident in a rereading of the essays published in the journal in the last two decades. Frank Ankersmit makes a more impassioned case when he says that

Most narrativists (...) discovered in literary theory their intellectual arsenal. I would be the last to say that anything is wrong with this, but it cannot be doubted that this seriously handicapped historical theorists in their effort to make sense of the writing of history. More specifically, it may explain why there has been no real progress in our discipline since White. For let us be quite honest and candid about this: *we are still doing essentially the same things that White had already put on the agenda some thirty years ago*. Progress is only to be expected when some young colleague, still unknown to all of us, will hit upon some hitherto unnoticed field of intellectual endeavour and discover there the tools promising new and important insights into the nature of historical writing. (Ankersmit 2003, 434, emphasis added)

Ankersmit is right in emphasizing Hayden White's influence on what has been published on theory of history during the last forty years, although he may be going too far in his reduction of the current debates of historiography to the question of the literary and narrative nature of history, and to what this admittedly crucial theoretical move implies. No one denies the centrality of this debate, which many of us will continue thinking, writing and publishing about, and I hope *Rethinking History* will continue serving as a forum for these theoretical discussions. But the future of history, and its innovation and experimentation as required by *Rethinking History's* essential mission, should not be, in my view, confined to it: more attention might be given to the new forms in which history is being produced, transmitted and received today.

In one of his foundational statements, Rosenstone declared that the journal sought 'to rethink history from different perspectives' (Rosenstone 2001a, 193). It is obvious that a journal on the theory of history such as *Rethinking History* will never reach a general audience beyond specialists. Nevertheless, the journal may provide historians and other storytellers with models that inspire them in their writings, creations, representations and productions. The efficacy of the historical operation lies in the author's creative potential rather than in the genre selected or the platform used. Who can deny, for instance, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*' power to create a new



historical model through its ‘stylization, figuration, and allegorization,’ as White noted? (White 1992, 41)

I am aware that, as Hilary Lawson points out, ‘the search for alternative modes of representation is not an easy one’ (quoted by Pihlainen 2002, 179). The new editors, Kalle Pihlainen and Patrick Finney, have identified this challenge. Pihlainen explains his regret that some of the new theories associated with White’s turn were ‘crude simplifications’ as they deserve ‘a more generous reading’ (Pihlainen 2002, 179). A more ‘generous reading’ seems to me an appropriate approach to *Rethinking History*’s future challenges, since it embodies the necessary opening of minds and liberation from prejudice, to move

theoretical discussions of historical representation beyond its traditional focus on individual works and to focus on the circulation of knowledge and representation through the culture at large. (...) What is needed at this point, however, is not more reflection on how professional historical practice can be transformed from within, but a greater understanding of the cultural mechanisms by which it intersects with other cultural practices. The interesting question is no longer ‘How far can historians go in incorporating aesthetic models into their own practice or extending their activities to other fields’ but ‘How are they to talk to their neighbours?’ How can a fruitful interaction between various practices be achieved without all differences being obliterated? This means thinking of historical practice in modular terms, as a series of ‘hinges’ between different elements, rather than as something homogeneous or continuous. (Rigney 2007, 156–157)

This proposal will allow *Rethinking History* to continue to fulfil its mission of disciplinary awakening, challenging professional historians to ‘ensure that their insights play into public discussions down the line, that their critical voice is heard in regard to illusions about the past, and that they help others to make informed judgements’ (Rigney 2007, 158). While rethinking and reshaping their own discipline and practice, historians will think creatively of new ways to link their discourse with other forms of expression in various public domains. They will be more aware that, at the very moment in which Western historical thought and Western academic history seems to have reached its peak, popular history has captivated massive audiences. As Harlan puts it,

it is not professional history that will shape historical consciousness in the future but the yet-to-be-defined relationship between its own highly specialised representational strategies and the unconstrained profusion of popular histories that are being thrown up by various indigenous cultures around the world. (Harlan 2007, 108; see also Burke 2002, 17)

Popular culture is thus challenging traditional history to go beyond its established margins.



Lawrence Stone's memorable comment in his seminal article on the return of the narrative in history – 'No one is being urged to throw away his calculator and tell a story' (Stone 1979, 4) – acquires new relevance today. We may alternatively say that 'no one is being urged to throw away his/her prose historical narrations and produce a digital history.' It is not about exclusion, it is about complementation: Natalie Z. Davis' and Rosenstone's passionate involvement in the films *le Retour de Martin Guerre* and *Reds* as historical advisors as well as their experience with the traditional prose historical narrative in the respective monograph and biography show the way. When Davis was questioned about her main role – historian or filmmaker? – she claimed both (Davis 2003, 45–48). And Rosenstone has always argued that film is not about what is *more* or *less* historical but about what can be said about the past through film that perhaps cannot be achieved in historical prose (Rosenstone 1995, 19–44).

I will conclude this article by arguing that *Rethinking History's* position not only brings with it the necessary mission of renewing the ways in which history is conceived and practiced, but also carries the responsibility of not falling prey to the snobbism of considering innovation and experimentation as absolute values in themselves. If these values are not tempered by possibilism, the question of realizability and practice, the historical discipline runs the risk of losing, once more, the interest of the readership and of failing in its basic mission of providing society with historical consciousness. To quote Stone again, historians of a generation ago turned to narrative because of the

desire to make their findings accessible once more to an intelligent but not expert reading public, which is eager to learn what these innovative new questions, methods and data have revealed, but cannot stomach indigestible statistical tables, dry analytical argument, and jargon-ridden prose. (1979, 15)

One of the major challenges historians have to face today is the inescapable necessity of the coexistence of traditional prose-narrative and the new forms of history that different digital platforms permit. This is again a matter of inclusion rather than exclusion: scientific, narrative and digital languages can coexist, each of them with its specific function. When I was editing the themed issue on new historical genres and platforms in the twenty-first century (Aurell 2015), I wondered what a conventional historian like me, and a medievalist trained in the stricter heuristic rules of the discipline, was doing working on such a subject. At first, I decided to postpone thinking about this further – then I came across Ann Rigney's work, and noticed that one of her seminal texts was about the rhetorical nature of historical representation (Rigney 1990). This helped me realize that theoretical reflections on narrative in history have naturally led us to the appreciation and promotion of history as it is produced on digital platforms. In light of this realization, the essential tension between

tradition and innovation that I argued for at the beginning of this article can be viewed in new and perhaps more suitable terms as the tension between theoretical reflection on the narrative nature of history and practical experimentation with the new digital forms in which history is being produced.

Ultimately, the proper tension between theory and practice, well reflected in the subtitle of the journal, is what is at stake. To me, it is not an anecdotal fact that Pihlainen's theory-oriented approach is complemented by Finney's more practical-oriented work – in replication of the original Munslow–Rosenstone theory–practice division. The responsibility of the new editors is certainly immense – or, in their own words, in a more ironic postmodern mood, they 'face a formidable but exhilarating challenge' (Finney and Pihlainen 2018, 1). They are aware that this challenge is to be undertaken not only on theoretical but also on practical grounds. And this is where, as I already suggested, Ankermit's judgement about what has been done (or not done) after White may be too severe: no one can deny that *some* work has already been done after White's magisterial intervention. But, equally, no one can deny that history is awaiting the kind of disciplinary renovation or rethinking that occurs with each generation. The new editors are clearly committed

to preserving the key qualities and traditions that have made the journal such a success: its relentlessly questioning attitude, its openness to intellectual innovation and experimentation and its enthusiasm for thinking otherwise about the past. (...) A changing of the editorial guard offers a suitable opportunity for stock-taking, and for refocusing and renewal. (Finney and Pihlainen 2018, 1)

Likewise, historians will hopefully be ready to assume new challenges, even as they hold on to the conviction that, whatever the innovations they undertake and the kinds of languages and platforms they use, 'ultimately it is not the facts that make us what we are, but the stories we have been told and the stories we believe' (Rosenstone 2005, xv). The power of our stories is what will preserve the unified notion of the historical discipline and will govern its future challenges.

## Note

1. This is based on a private email from Keith Jenkins to Kalle Pihlainen (3 October 2018), with express permission to use for this account.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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