

# The poetics of history or hatching an ugly duckling: research in mode $\sqrt{2}$

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To excuse oneself before there is occasion is to accuse oneself,  
and to draw blood in full health gives the hint to ill-will.  
An excuse unexpected arouses suspicion from its slumbers.<sup>1</sup>

Such was the counsel, eloquent as ever, of Baltasar Gracián y Morales (1601–1658), Spanish baroque author and jesuit bad boy, to the readers of his instruction in *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*. Three and a half centuries later, I have still not learnt his lesson. I will begin by excusing myself, that is – just as I did at the conference where this article was first presented.<sup>2</sup>

If the following discussion may seem a little out-of-place, please bear with me. I am, after all, a stranger of sorts to the academic context of artistic research: a cat among pigeons, as the saying goes – or, perhaps, a pigeon among cats, considering my background in the faculty of not-so-fine arts (that is, the humanities).

A stranger – but, as I just pointed out, only one of sorts. The point of departure for what follows is, in fact, my very own contribution to the recent artistic research project *Passion for the Real*, a yet to be published essay entitled *Film, historia: konfrontationer*.<sup>3</sup> A comparison – or even, as the title has it, a confrontation – between the respective epistemologies of film and history. More specifically, in bringing the academic discipline of historiography face to face with the documentary genre of compilation film, I attempt to delineate a kind of intermediate territory of knowledge where research in the arts can take (and has already taken) place. As Johan Öberg recently put it, what is most interesting “takes place on the middle ground” – in this field, as in every other.<sup>4</sup>

1. “El escusarse antes de ocasión es culparse, y el sangrarse en salud es hazer del ojo al mal, y a la malicia. La escusa anticipada despierta el rezelo que dormía.” Gracián, Baltasar, *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*, Juan Nogués, Huesca, 1647, aphorism 246 (<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/servlet/Sirve-Obras/02493842322571839644424/p0000002.htm>, retrieved 2009–12–18). With the exception of a slight modification to the sentence structure, the English translation follows that of Joseph Jacobs – most recently reprinted as *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, Shambhala, Boston, 1993.
2. *The Art Text. Writing in and Through the Arts* took place on October 9, 2009 at the Faculty of fine, applied and performing arts, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.
3. Slávik, Andrej, *Film, historia: konfrontationer. Utkast till en händelsens poetik*, to be published.
4. “Interessant ist vielmehr das, was sich im Zwischenbereich abspielt.” Öberg, Johan, “Differenz oder ‘différence’? Zwischen forschungsbasierter Praxis und praxisbasierter Forschung”. In C. Caduff, F. Siegenthaler & T. Wälchli, *Kunst und künstlerische Forschung. Musik, Kunst, Design, Literatur, Tanz*, Jahrbuch Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, vol. 6, Scheidegger & Spiess, Zürich, 2009, s. 42–3. I have taken the liberty to dispense with the cursive in my quotation.

My discussion draws mainly on the theories of German cultural critic and *émigré* Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966) and above all on his last, unfinished work in the philosophy of history, but it also deals with practical contributions such as Esfir Shub's pioneering compilation about *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), Alain Resnais' masterful exposure of the Nazi death camps in *Night and Fog* (1955) and Jean-Luc Godard's idiosyncratic video work on *The History of Cinema* (1988–98). By sketching out lines of connection between these diverse points of reference, I try to provide groundwork for prospective collaboration between anthropologists, historians, and filmmakers – all under the aegis of artistic research.

Now, it goes without saying that such a broad academic collaboration is bound to remain quite unfeasible as long as the disciplines involved are not prepared to kill some of their most beloved darlings. To take myself as an example, historians should see current debates on research in the arts as an opportunity to pinpoint the implications of their own traditional forms of representation – in short, of the inescapable 'literariness' of history. The narrative aspects of the historian's craft have been the topic of considerable controversy over the past couple of decades, but as of yet, these debates don't seem to have had any decisive impact on the way in which historians actually go about their day-to-day work.

One reason for this is probably that 'narrativism' (an unfortunate name indeed for a theoretical position that highlights the narrativity of historical writing only to disavow its epistemological value) generally proceeded from rather abstract questions on, for instance, the nature of historical explanation or the adaptation of social science models to historical inquiry. In my mind, a more fruitful approach is the one attempted by Jacques Rancière in his essay on *The Names of History* (1992). Without having gone to the trouble of really surveying all the relevant literature, I dare say that this book deserves to be read and discussed to a far greater extent than it has to date.

Certainly, you won't find a philosopher of Rancière's stature backing down from the big epistemological issues prompted by scientific historiography. What sets him apart from the narrativist camp is that he has the guts to actually plunge into the thicket of historical writing as practiced by historians themselves.<sup>5</sup> He performs this impressive feat under the heading of what he calls "*a poetics of knowledge*", concisely defined as "a study of the set of literary procedures by which a discourse escapes literature, gives itself the status of a science, and signifies this status".<sup>6</sup>

The literary procedures by which a discourse escapes literature? Such a statement will, no doubt, seem like blatant self-contradiction to those still entrenched in the traditional epistemology of historiography. They will no doubt prefer, as Rancière notes, "to remain

5. Admittedly, this is precisely what Hayden White did in his much-discussed *Metahistory* (1973). His main thrust, however, takes him in an altogether different direction: whereas White tends to see narrative form as an obstacle to truth, Rancière considers it as a precondition for just the kind of truth specific to history.

6. Rancière, Jacques, *The Names of History. On the Poetics of Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1994, p. 8. As to the original, see *Les noms de l'histoire. Essai de poétique du savoir*, Seuil, Paris, 1992, p. 21.

in convenient ignorance of what literature means, in order to be in greater ignorance of what literature does here on behalf of science”.<sup>7</sup> Such a position might have seemed tenable in the Sixties, when some historians even hoped to exorcise the last remnants of literature from their discipline with the help of statistical and computational methods; today, however, it is nothing short of ludicrous.

“What the reassuring proscription of ‘literature’ seeks to ward off”, according to Rancière, “is simply this: by refusing to be reduced to the mere language of numbers and graphs, history agreed to tie the fate of its demonstrations to that of the procedures by which common language produces meaning and causes it to circulate.” And this task, as he immediately points out, “will always assume a choice with regard to the powers of language and its linkings”. The actual problem, from this point of view, “is therefore not to know if the historian does or doesn’t have to produce literature, but what literature he produces”.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the need for a poetics of history.

So, history apparently belongs to literature – and yet, just as apparently, it doesn’t. Bringing out the literary aspects of historical writing, we should not forget that history and literature remain opposed to one another in crucial respects. They share a common origin in the tradition of rhetoric – but they settled their respective scores with this venerable predecessor in radically different ways. Following Rancière, we can describe history as an “antiliterary literary work” (*travail littéraire anti-littéraire*), a form of literature that consciously abstains from the liberty and liberties of unfettered imagination.<sup>9</sup> But at times, one’s loss is one’s own gain. If we are to believe our French cicerone, “the radicality of [history’s] impoverishment has led it to explore more radically the powers available to language”.<sup>10</sup> The notion of *arte povera* readily comes to mind.

Taking Rancière’s line of argument as my own point of departure, I would argue that the oh-so-traditional academic discipline of history should actually be considered as a form – that is, one among others – of artistic research, and hence that the historical text is already an ‘art text’ to the full extent. What I would *not* argue is that historians generally recognise this fact. On the contrary, as history has transformed itself into a science, it has tended to ignore (or at least take for granted) precisely those discursive capacities that make historical writing possible to begin with. Seen in this light, the history of historiography becomes a pertinent point of reference in current debates on the academisation of art – with regard to the risks as well as the opportunities involved. After all, history too was once an art, even if only in the pre-modern sense of the word.<sup>11</sup>

Or, to phrase my assertion as a question: will history remain the black sheep of

7. Rancière, *The names of history*, p. 47 (cf. *Les noms de l’histoire*, p. 99 –100).

8. Rancière, *The names of history*, p. 100 –1 (cf. *Les noms de l’histoire*, p. 203).

9. Rancière, *The names of history*, p. 99, and *Les noms de l’histoire*, p. 200.

10. Rancière, *The names of history*, p. 9 (cf. *Les noms de l’histoire*, p. 23).

11. For an up-to-date and well-written account, see Grafton, Anthony, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.

both science and literature – or could it, instead, turn itself into an ugly duckling of research in the arts, thereby helping to bridge the often remarked-on gap between this nascent field and the all-too-long-established humanities? To this end, I wish to propose a line of inquiry, which I have come to call *historical aesthetics* as a platform for qualified collaboration among researchers in the fine arts and the humanities. In one sense, this would be a quite old-fashioned, perhaps even untimely enterprise, drawing as it does on the same concept of sensory experience (*aisthēsis*) that served as the main point of departure for philosophical reflection on the arts in Enlightenment thought up to and including the work of Immanuel Kant.<sup>12</sup> But yesterday's old-fashioned often becomes all-the-rage tomorrow. Nietzsche, of all people, even prided himself on being untimely.

By historical aesthetics, I intend an inquiry into the forms of experience – or what Rancière, in one of his more well-known works, has described as the “distribution of the sensible” (*partage du sensible*) – that continue to shape and direct our impression of the world.<sup>13</sup> This would be a truly integral history, a kind of historical anthropology potentially spanning all times and all places. Rather than adapting to either first or second mode research practices, it would entail a *mode*  $\sqrt{2}$  – not halfway in-between, nor just slightly off centre, but operating instead in a wholly different (‘irrational’) domain – thereby “putting the scientific compass into spin”, as Rancière has phrased it.<sup>14</sup> From this autonomous vantage point, both time-tested procedures of scientific rationality and perceived demands of the present situation may be revealed and interrogated.

But whereas the kind of research I have in mind can be described as ‘irrational’, it is in no way unreasonable. In the same sense, what mathematicians have chosen to designate as irrational numbers (of which  $\sqrt{2}$  was probably the earliest known example) are no more unreasonable than the so-called rational ones. And this is neither a species of empty scientific rhetoric, nor a mere play on words. Just as the irrationals can never be evenly divided without leaving a remainder, research in this ‘irrational’ mode is characterized by its acknowledgment of the inevitable surplus of meaning – and hence, of the ambiguity – that any historical analysis inescapably gives rise to. In my mind, it is our responsibility as historians to disclose this ‘remainder’ in our writing, if only by means of literary style.

This practical solidarity with the ambiguity inherent in our source materials in no way implies a laxness with regard to scientific discipline. On the contrary, “the poet of vagueness can only be the poet of exactitude” (*il poeta del vago può essere solo il poeta della precisione*), as Italo Calvino has observed with the writings of Giacomo Leopardi in

12. For a terse introduction to the idea, see Kjørup, Søren, *Another Way of Knowing. Baumgarten, aesthetics and the concept of Sensuous Cognition*, Sensuous knowledge no. 1, Bergen National Academy of the Arts, Bergen, 2006.

13. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum, London, 2004.

14. Rancière, *The Names of History*, p. 74 (cf. *Les noms de l'histoire*, p. 151). The expressions ‘mode 1’ and ‘mode 2’ were introduced by Michael Gibbons and his co-authors in their book on *The New Production of Knowledge: the Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* (1994), and have subsequently been applied to research in the arts.

mind.<sup>15</sup> But discipline is not by definition the same thing as method, just as exactitude does not require a rigid set of techniques to be applied regardless of the situation at hand. In actual fact, discipline and method may even stand in opposition to one another, in the sense that an all-too-established method precludes the very need for discipline.

In the widest sense of the word, we can certainly describe the forms of presentation of all kinds of science as 'literary'. But history alone is literary in the qualified sense of utilizing the narrative strategies of literature. However, history is not the only academic discipline to draw on and, more importantly, contribute to our knowledge of the past. This last objection is as valid as it is acute.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, while many other disciplines are instrumental to historical research, it is reasonably the sole responsibility of the historian to assess the literary procedures by which the findings of this multifaceted research may be composed into a historical narrative. In my mind, it is precisely this responsibility that sets history apart from the social sciences – and that, at the same time, ties it to artistic research.<sup>17</sup>

At this point, I seem to have deviated slightly from my line of reasoning. To sum up, allow me to once again quote Rancière on the literariness of history: “The question of the poetic form according to which history can be written”, he points out, “is [...] strictly tied to that of the mode of historicity according to which its objects are thinkable.” For historiography, that is to say, style is substance – at least to a certain extent. Indeed, the main argument of Rancière’s book is that the ‘poetics’ invented by Jules Michelet, the founding father of French historical writing, is essential to the modern idea of a nation-based and people-centred history, “the genealogy of the subject France and of the form Republic”.<sup>18</sup>

So much for modern history. Today, however, there is no one to follow up on that decisive step which Michelet took in the mid-nineteenth century: as the old poetics is gradually being deprived of its validity, we still lack a new poetics to take its place. “Frightened with such an invention, contemporary history can only prohibit itself from thinking about the very forms of the historicity with which it is confronted” – and, by implication, about the literary forms that may answer to this historicity.<sup>19</sup>

But, on second thoughts, why would a new poetics of history have to confine itself just to literary forms? This is where, at least in my mind, *The Names of History* comes up short. Speculating about potential models for contemporary historiography, Rancière

15. Calvino, Italo, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 60. As to the original, see *Lezioni americane. Sei Proposte Per il Prossimo Millennio*, Garzanti, Milano, 1988, p. 61. In both quotations, I have taken the liberty to change the initial letters from upper to lower case.

16. I owe it to Erik Andersson, who participated at the *Art text* conference.

17. For a discussion of the relation between these two fields, see Andersson, Erik,

18. Rancière, *The Names of History*, p. 101 (cf. *Les noms de l'histoire*, p. 204).

19. Rancière, *The Names of History*, p. 101 (cf. *Les noms de l'histoire*, p. 204–5). His very first example with regard to these ‘forms of historicity’ is, in fact, “the forms of sensory experience” (ibid.).

can only think of modern authors such as Gustave Flaubert, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Claude Simon – the standard literary fare of the narrativist camp, that is, only with a side order of French *haute cuisine*.<sup>20</sup> With my own discussion of the relation between film and history in mind, this stylistic menu is lacking in choice. Why, indeed, frame the question of poetics as one of styles rather than media – and why not turn to Esfir Shub, Alain Resnais or Jean-Luc Godard for inspiration?

This is exactly what Rancière himself does, not in *The Names of History*, but four years later, in an article entitled *L'historicité du cinéma*.<sup>21</sup> Here, the French philosopher explicitly ties the medium of film in general – and documentary, singled out as *cinéma par excellence*, in particular – to that, “certain *idea* of history” that he has already delineated in the aforementioned essay.<sup>22</sup> In doing so, he perceives it as, “a specific mode of the sensible” – and, even more specifically, as “the mode which abolishes the opposition between an interior world and an exterior world, a world of the spirit and a world of bodies, which abolishes the oppositions of subject and object, of nature scientifically known and sentiment endured”.<sup>23</sup>

While Jean-Luc Godard, faithful to a long-standing tradition in French theory of film, would probably describe this abolition in quasi-religious terms, Rancière takes a decidedly more sober stance: “[T]his equivalence of the interior and the exterior, of the spiritual and the material, of the scientific and the sentimental carries a different name, a name which is less compromising than that of mystery or mystique”.<sup>24</sup> Namely? His lapidary answer is simply – *esthétique*.<sup>25</sup>

And how, in its turn, should this ambiguous term be defined? The most succinct statement that I can think of is: *the study of what takes place on the middle ground*. If nothing else, such a definition has the undeniable benefit of raising more questions than it answers.

20. Rancière, *The Names of History*, p. 100 (cf. *Les noms de l'histoire*, p. 201–2). Joyce and Woolf have already been digested by, among others, Hayden White: cf. Kansteiner, Wulf, “Hayden White's critique of the writing of history”, *History and theory*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1993, p. 285 (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505526>, retrieved 2009–10–06).

21. Rancière, “L'historicité du cinéma”. In A. de Baecque & C. Delage, *De l'histoire au cinéma*, Éditions Complexe, Paris, 1998.

22. “certaine *idée* de l'histoire” Rancière, “L'historicité du cinéma”, p. 45.

23. “certaine *idée* de l'histoire” Rancière, “L'historicité du cinéma”, p. 45.

24. “cette équivalence de l'intérieur et de l'extérieur, du spirituel et du matériel, du scientifique et du sentimental porte un autre nom, un nom moins compromettant que mystère ou mystique” Rancière, “L'historicité du cinéma”, p. 52.

25. “Elle s'appelle tout simplement esthétique.” Ibid. Since I could not find an elegant way of rendering the slight ambivalence of the French term *esthétique* – noun or adjective? – in English, I have settled for the French spelling.

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