

## CONTENTS

<b>Contents</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>Humour, Memory, and the Transformation of Discourse</b>	<b>3</b>
PAPER FOR THE FOURTH CHMR CONFERENCE, JUNE 2007	
EYOLF ØSTREM	
<b>Humour and Transformation of Discourse</b> . . . . .	<b>3</b>
Discourse and the Historical Narrative . . . . .	4
The limits of possible truth . . . . .	4
Relativism vs. essentialism . . . . .	4
The relevance of history . . . . .	5
Transformation . . . . .	6
Humour . . . . .	6
<b><i>Spartacus</i> and the parodic presentness of the past</b> . . . . .	<b>7</b>
<b>Humour, history, and memory</b> . . . . .	<b>II</b>
Between 'now' and 'the past' . . . . .	II
a) The Transcendent Constant – God or truth . . . . .	12
From 'Now' to 'Present' – Linguistic/discursive historiography . . . . .	13
Privatspråksteorien: no access to personal experiences . . . . .	13
Memory as the storehouse of the Present . . . . .	14
From 'Present' to 'History' . . . . .	14
Extending memory – the 'as if' . . . . .	14
Spartacus: between Present and History . . . . .	15
Eavesdropping – history as narrative . . . . .	15
Historical truth . . . . .	16
<b>Difference between humour and ToD</b> . . . . .	<b>17</b>



# HUMOUR, MEMORY, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF DISCOURSE

PAPER FOR THE FOURTH CHMR CONFERENCE, JUNE 2007

Eyolf Østrem

WHEN I SAW *Spartacus* for the first time, I was struck by how ridiculous many of the scenes were, even though it was clear that it was seriously meant – very seriously – and that what made it ridiculous was not so much the costumes, the hairstyles, or the acting, but something less tangible. It was a rather unspecific reaction on my part, but it seemed important enough that I made a note of it, and it has been rummaging in my semi-to-subconscious. In this presentation, I will try to approach this feeling, and use it as a point of departure for what is my main aim: the presentation of some thoughts about historical understanding.

This may seem over-ambitious, and I'm not sure how pc it is to theorize these days, but as something between a declaration of intent and a warning, let me just say that I don't believe one can learn anything about history by approaching it through a theoretical perspective, but I do believe one can learn a lot about the present through a theoretically founded consciousness about what it is that we do with the past, how we do it, and what for.

In short: I find *Spartacus* ridiculous because when I watch it, I witness a certain kind of 'Transformation of discourse', or at least a closely related phenomenon, which I find illustrative of some central ingredients of historical understanding.

## HUMOUR AND TRANSFORMATION OF DISCOURSE

- *discourse* (→ closely related to a notion of narrative historiography in the White tradition)
- *transf.* (→ implies a notion of constancy across the transformation)
- *Latterlighet og trans. of disc. er nært beslektede: det er de samme egenskaper ved et fenomen som gjør det morsomt og som lar det fremstå som en diskurstransformasjon.*

## Discourse and the Historical Narrative

or: it is in the nature of the concept that it cannot be defined, because, in conformance with Gödel's incompleteness theorem, a definition would be self-referential

= narrative

There are many ways of defining discourse. Two approaches I find particularly productive. The first is the extension of the originally linguistic concept into the social sciences and the humanities, which is mainly associated with Foucault and Ricœur, where 'discourse' can be taken to refer to linguistic expressions above phrase level: the over-arching system of interpretation which determines the understanding of a phrase, as a *speech-act*, thus going beyond the isolated, syntactic-semantic meaning of the cluster of words of which the phrase is composed.

This joining of *thought* and *act* means that in a study of e.g. the Middle Ages, the primary focus will not be on describing various practices alone (such as the rituals of the Medieval Latin Church), nor on outlining systems of thought, doctrines, philosophies, or theologies *as such*, but with the connections between ideas and practice — the mutual dependence between what people *do* and what they *think*.

= performance/action

### *The limits of possible truth*

Foucault's use of the concept of discourse is mainly concerned with social structures of power. It has been taken further by a scholar such as Judith Butler, who in her own political, gender-based and power-oriented line of thought has given a brief definition of discourse as the limits of acceptable thought, or speech, or possible truth.

The notion of 'acceptable/possible truth' is useful not only about queers, women, or other groups who are stigmatized through language itself and through fundamental societal patterns, but also about e.g. a Gregorian chant. It would probably not have been possible for a medieval monk to imagine 'Puer natus' sung as a concert piece, because nobody had ever done that or thought of it in such terms (and those 'terms' didn't even exist); but conversely, is it at all possible for us to imagine, even given all our knowledge of monastic culture *and* about modern-day concert culture, what our monk has been doing while singing it, without having spent a whole life chanting from daybreak to dawn (or – even if one oneself was not a monk – without there being people in society with an important function in defining said society who had done so)?

Thus, the limits of possible thought/truth is set by how, in a given society, or cultural sphere, it has been natural or possible to think about a certain action or thing, also regardless of im- or explicit power structures or ideologies.

= possible narratives  
(about actions?)

Acceptable, then, translates into 'sensible, understandable within a society, having been done', and 'truth' merely the highest degree of acceptability.

### *Relativism vs. essentialism*

This relativization of the concept of truth has consequences even for historiography. Given that our path to the true historical object is blocked in ever so many ways, is it still possible to salvage history and the historical object? It can be hard to let go of notions of truth, fact, tangible evidence. But it is even more difficult to maintain its relevance *as* something historical. That history is created at any time by the present which looks at its past, is either a truism – e.g. for 'postmodernists', 'culture relativists', and 'leftist historians', or a red herring – e.g. for those who put the former labels on their adversaries, and who claim that 'We Create History' is sloppy language and fear the dissolution of norms

and fragmentation of values as the necessary consequence of the constructivists' renunciation of truth as a criterion.

The debate between Hayden White and Roger Chartier is a good representative of these positions. White is known (or notorious) for tearing down the dividing lines between historical and other narratives, so that 'historical facts' are not available to us as such, only by taking place in a history, a narrative, and only in the form in which they participate in such a narrative. [Against White's narrative historiography and insistence on regarding historiography as a literary genre, Chartier insists that history is commanded by an intention of a principle of truth. He sides with authors such as Lynn Hunt who plead for a 'new theory of objectivity' which is 'an interactive relationship between an inquiring subject and an external object.']<sup>1</sup>

The difference between the two standpoints is not whether different images of for example the Middle Ages *can* be constructed, but whether the Middle Ages can at all be anything *other than* a construction which must be appropriated – thus: does there exist a Middle Ages which is immune to changes and constructions?

Again, an opposition between the positivist's and the relativist's attitudes can be sketched, in a form which may well be schematical and presumably do not exist in pure form, but which indicate different emphases. The Positivist says: By renouncing the factual as the basis for historical presentations, we also renounce the only criterion there is for security to our claims, and the field is open to Nazi revisionists.

Against this, the relativist may say: A relativist historiography takes history *more* seriously than a positivist one, because it is conscious of what historical writing should be all about: concept formation and identity. In such a perspective, an 'historical' truth, however true it proves to be, in itself and as such is meaningless. The burden of proof rests on the positivist to explain why we should spend time and energy on scrutinizing the ink in medieval manuscripts.

### *The relevance of history*

This is to say: it is my contention that *historical material must be relevant to the present in order to be relevant at all*. I don't mean this in the simplistic sense, that only the exciting, interesting historical survivors which can be applied to our glorious contemporaneity is good enough. I would rather put it the other way around: by appearing as interesting, the material has already proven a certain relevance to the present, and one of the historian's goals is understanding why this is so: to make sense – to himself, and to his surroundings – of materials, incorporate them in a recognizable and meaningful story/narrative.

I believe this to be the case even when the greater perspective has temporarily faded from the attention of the scholar deeply enmeshed in the excitement over the material. But fundamentally, the historian is a storyteller. The story may be of a special kind, with rules which differ from those of the epic poet or the novelist, but the difference is one of rule systems and not the relation to fact.

Or, put differently: 'fact' is not a criterion for ascribing to the historical narrative a special ontological status, but a literary element in a story.

I don't consider this a cop-out in the face of the impossibility of reaching a true historical account: the defeatist tone in the question 'Is the historian *just* a

<sup>1</sup> from [www.christianhubert.com/hypertext/narrative.html](http://www.christianhubert.com/hypertext/narrative.html)

storyteller?’ is based on false premises: being a story-teller is all the historian can aspire to, but it’s a high aspiration.

### Transformation

In a radical version of narrative historiography, a historical account does not differ fundamentally from any other moral, exemplary story: its *truth claims* would be no more or less relevant than they are for fairytales. Their *relevance* of history and historical facts is found in their exemplary character, fulfilling the function of a model (‘We can learn from history’).

Another starting point, slightly more ambitious on behalf of the historical data, is to assume some kind of *continuity* which lets events transcend their transience and exert an influence even after they have vanished in time, not only because we choose to take them into account, as the postmodernist would have it.

gjør det tydeligere her hva  
de to campene er

When we at the centre talk about ‘transformation’, it is implicitly placing us in the second camp. Even though the immediate associations of the word ‘transformation’ go in the direction of change, at the core of the word lies the notion of *something* passing from one form, one realization, to another. The question then becomes what this something is, and how the transition comes about.

#### cf. Mette’s introduction

When the two keywords are combined to *Transformation of discourse* – which may entail both the transformation when a motif (e.g. a cross-dressing christ) is brought from one discourse to another (from the discourse that is “Lucca” to “Scandinavia”; from the liturgical space of crucifixes to the aesthetics of the bearded lady, etc.), and the transformations of the motif, of its meaning, and of the discourse itself that that entails – this is to say that the main point is not the transition of a certain contents from one setting to another, but the switch from one framework of understanding to another: the transition from one narrative to another.

### Humour

This finally brings us to humour.

3 main definitions: Aristotle: superiority. A psychological: suspense > release, causing laughter. The most general, going back to Schopenhauer, and the one that I will use, is that it arises ‘from the bisociation (double association) of an item in respect of two different and incompatible reference frames or interpretive matrices at once’.<sup>2</sup> One might say: when an element may belong to two different discourses at the same time, and the fun occurs when the transition from one to the other is surprising, and they are incompatible, or – to incorporate the “superiority”-model which goes back to Aristotle – when a hierarchization is displayed between the two, which is favourable for the watcher/listener (e.g. when someone falls off a chair. . . where the switch is between every-day-life sitting up and the extraordinary “suddenly lying on the floor”).

Cf:

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia, Koestler’s version of the incongruity theory, a descendant and elaboration of Schopenhauer’s

Masochist to sadist: 'Hurt me!'  
 Sadist: 'No . . .'  
 Masochist: 'Do it again!'

This is an interesting joke in our particular context, because it also illustrates of Austen's 'How to do things with words'.

The key to bringing it in here, is of course the notion of two different reference frames – or discourses. This should mean that there is a close connection between the (perhaps involuntary) humorous and the historical “transformation of discourse” which may be worth looking into at least as a heuristic tool: they both presuppose two distinct discourses, and some element, motif, or historical object which can be perceived within both.

### *Spartacus* AND THE PARODIC PRESENTNESS OF THE PAST

*Spartacus som utgangspunkt for en modell som forener trans. og disc. – som forener den konstans som transformasjon innebærer, med den relativisme som en diskursbasert historiografi innebærer.*

Spartacus is funny on three levels, which all have to do with its historicity.

Made by the young Stanley Kubrick based on a screenplay by the blacklisted Dalton Trumbo.

Summary: the lifelong but strong, righteous, and noble slave Spartacus is sold to a gladiator trainer. He thus escapes the slow death in the Libyan mines only to face a quick and violent one in the ring. The roman senator Crassus comes to be entertained by a fight to death, and ends up buying Spartacus's true love Varinia, and Spartacus starts a riot, first among the gladiators, eventually gathering slaves from all over southern Italy. The Romans send army upon army to stop him, but he remains victorious until the ruthless but brilliant Crassus, supported by Pompey and Lucullus finally defeats him in a bloodbath. The 6,000 survivors are brought in chains to Rome and crucified along the last miles of the Via Appia. Varinia, who gives birth to Spartacus's child during the final battle, is again brought to Rome by Crassus, who tries to win her love, but his power and luxury cannot conquer her love for Spartacus and for freedom, and she despises and pities him for it. With the unexpected help from the cunning and mischievous senator Gracchus, who takes every opportunity to oppose Crassus, she escapes with her baby. On the way out of the city, she passes the cross where Spartacus is dying. End of story.

We will see two scenes:

- first the beginning, where we see the misery of the Roman slaves and the cruelty with which they are treated, despite which Spartacus is a remarkably healthy man with perfect teeth and an cheeky haircut.
- Then the scene the night before the final battle, when Crassus demonstrates a clear understanding of the historical implications of these events, and Spartacus wanders among his slave army and sees nothing but signs of true humanity: loving geriatrics in a tight embrace; smiling children, and semi-savages who are all courtesy and civil grace, now that they have won their freedom.

This is comical in three areas, which all have to do with the relation to history.

On the first, simplest level, we may react to the silly haircuts, the makeup, the glaring inconsistency between the doomsday perspective on the misery of the poor slaves, and the health they radiate in all the 'walking among the liberated'-

scenes. We may also frown upon the battle scenes, which seem hopelessly outdated compared to films like *Braveheart* – a comparison it is natural to make also in terms of the contents – which they are, of course. And some of you may react to the medievalish calligraphy on Spartacus's remarkably exact map:



This is all screaming '1960'. To be fair, that's hardly surprising. But on the very first level, consisting of *the means to tell the story*, the modern viewer is already alienated. This is all the more remarkable, since this is the level which should have been the most transparent – the envelope in which the message is delivered.

The humorous clash here is with the expectations of what scenes like this are supposed to look like (there is also a touch of Aristotelian 'superiority')

\* \* \*

The second level is a broadening of the former, applied not just to the tools but to what is being said: more specifically, the gaze at the past, as it shines through inadvertently. That is: where there is no direct sign of the gaze in what is *being told* – the film-makers don't *tell us* explicitly that 'this is how it was back then' – but where the choice of motifs and narrator's perspective reveal how they have looked upon their past without it ever being said so.



- Here, one might point to the blacklisted screenwriter's leftist orientation, as a reasonable explanation of the predominant motif of struggle against system-immanent oppression, which lies behind the personal struggle between Spartacus and Crassus over Varinia, which the oppressor loses, and in the description of the Roman slave economy, where both the slaves'

conditions and the cruelty of the guards seem slightly exaggerated – further emphasised by the narrator’s voice, preaching about the disease of slavery which plagued the otherwise glorious roman empire; and Spartacus dreaming about its abolition, a dream which would be fulfilled only 2,000 years later.

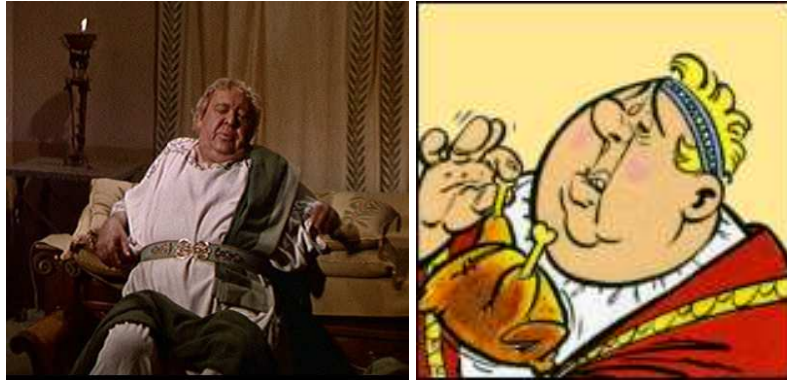
- The motifs that are predominant – heroism, nobleness, love against odds, and the struggle for freedom – are not unknown in today’s film world, but in the way they are presented, there seems to be a constant undercurrent saying: people are the same at all times, hence this story is relevant, it tells us something about ourselves.
- The soundtrack deserves to be mentioned: it is an awful mix of the pompous, modernist leitmotif-style which was in vogue in Hollywood at the time, and which won the composer six Oscars and a nomination this time around, and attempts at historical correctness or at least plausibility, with ethnic and historical instruments on a large scale: These instruments included a Sarrusophone, Israeli recorder, Chinese oboe, lute, mandolin, Yugoslav flute, kythara, dulcimer, and bagpipes.

Again, a gaze which in its original setting would have been transparent – I assume that when it was made, the way to present the story in *Spartacus* and what the story is about would have appeared as plausible to the audience – for *us* viewing it now, calls attention to itself, so that what *we* see is not what is before the eyes of the beholder in such a way that we can pretend we have taken his place; we see *the eyes* of the beholder, and in a case like this, there isn’t necessarily beauty there.

\* \* \*

The third level is *the active, conscious relationship with the past*. It comes to the fore in the two little references in the snippet we have seen:

- ‘. . . he who shares this tiny moment of history with your honour?’
- ‘I’m not after glory. I’m after Spartacus. . . . However, this campaign is not alone to kill Spartacus. It is to kill the *legend* of Spartacus.’
- also: in the general attitude to historical correctness, at least in some details.
- in the skillful introduction of historical figures and events, through which the story is tied to schoolbook-knowledge, and thus achieves a double goal: giving the film credibility by association with what we already ‘know’, and giving the dry facts of the schoolbook knowledge a face, a wider context, a deeper understanding of the internal events in Rome as well as in the empire at large. Caesar’s role as a prime example. Den gir følelsen av en direkte, umiddelbar, internalisert tilgang til materialet: en fot innenfor, som gjør at også de andre elementer i det historiske materiale fremstår mere gjenkjennelig.
- but also Gracchus’s hairstyle, which looks like something the stylist has copied from a statue, and which, incidentally, has been lucidly recaptured by Uderzo in the image of a namesake: Pleindastus Gracchus (*plein d’astuces*, a fitting description of Gracchus in the movie):



On this level, it may actually work: Peter Ustinov's little reference to the historic moment, in the middle of a mock-humble negotiation, is nothing but charming (and the part won him an Oscar), but Crassus's pathos-filled wish to crush the *legend*, which – as we all know by now, especially having watched the movie – was where he ultimately failed. It makes me crack up every time – it's just too much.

The Ustinov quip works because his comment displays an ironic distance to its own presentation (both on the part of the 'real' Lentulus, had he said something like this, but also and primarily the character in the film, who thereby points to his own role as a participant in a historical movie), and this distance can (be made to) coincide with our own distance to the film itself and its out-dated present.

Cf. another 'historical' movie which takes this to the ultimate consequence: *Much Ado about Nothing*, where the distancing works like a brechtian move which perhaps is necessary in order to be able to play a Shakespeare comedy at all: so much ironic distance is generated, that our natural distance to the Bard melts into this, and the highfalutin dialogue and the twisted story become elements on a par with the slapstick humour of the deck chair episode, the inimitable Michael Keaton, the timeless-but-some-time-in-the-past costumes, and the cliché-like beginning.

Crassus's remark could have been interpreted in the same way: as an aside to the audience, acknowledging that the movie itself is a self-referential witness to his failure.

But when I hear it, I hear it as a serious remark: a programmatic statement from the representative of the all-crushing power about its intent not only to govern the bodies and lives of its subjects, but its thoughts too, its history, its legends. This was an immediate reaction on my part, but it was strengthened when I learned that the script was written by a blacklisted writer, who used the story of *Spartacus* to make a statement about freedom from oppression. Also, the delivery – magnificently played by Laurence Olivier – is dead serious, and the scene seems to conform with a theatrical tradition with a clear distribution of types of characters. Crassus definitely belongs on the serious side.

Crassus's statement, thus, becomes a desperate and futile wish, upon which history has passed judgement: love, valour, and freedom conquer cruelty and oppression in the end.

\* \* \*

In sum, the humour in watching the film now appears through the clash of expectations and frames of reference in meeting its explicit and implicit gaze at the past. The technical shortcomings, even though they are most immediately

noticeable, are just a small part of this: what we react to is not mainly that our predecessors in the backwards-looking trade were less skilled than us, with less of a flair for authentic costumes, convincing 'old' film music, correct historical accents, and authentically uncomfortable stockings. We may chuckle at this *too*, but other things are more important. Most striking is the mixing up of the roles of past and present in the two-step look at the past when we, now, watch *Spartacus*.

Within its own frame of reference, as a film made in 1960 for a 1960s audience, it is the Present's look at its own past.

For us, however, it is a film which itself belongs to the past, *our* past, looking at another past even further back, a past which we share, but which we also have our own views on.

It ends up parading its own presentness in relation to the past. The presentness which in 1960 was obvious, transparent, today appears as a mock-present, an illusory Now, trespassing on our territory by boasting its own gaze at *our* past.

In this our meeting with the past's perception of its own past, as it comes to explicit expression in a historical movie, it becomes apparent that it can never work as an *extension* of our present, but only as a *distortion* of it, because its implicit insistence on its own presentness, becomes a barrier, a distancing for us, instead of the transparency of familiarity it originally had.

Thus it might be said that the humorous effect of looking at the past through *Spartacus* is equivalent to the distorted images in a house of mirrors.

This can be taken further: cf. history as a critical mirror: we are looking at ourselves when we look at history; looking through spartacus, creates a distorted self-image

## HUMOUR, HISTORY, AND MEMORY

### Between 'now' and 'the past'

The problem with the conflict between solipsistic relativism and simplistic essentialism in relation to history is perhaps founded in a too un-nuanced relationship between the two – between the individual life world and historical material. If on the one hand we have the Kantian subject who is principally unable to relate directly to anything other than *Das Ding für mich*, and on the other a mass of objectively definable material – if that's all there is, there is no way from one to the other.

The 'Now'

?

The 'Past'

This is where historical objectivism breaks down: in trying to tie historical understanding to the objective status of the remains, and to see the historian's task in brushing off these remains, establish facts, and complete the puzzle where some pieces are missing, by reconstructing the missing pieces and filling in the picture, so that we in the end stand with a correct, authentic picture of the past, or – should we still not have found all the pieces – at least the theoretical possibility of getting there.

I am not disputing the objective character of the historical traces as such, only that it should be enough to warrant our connection to the past.

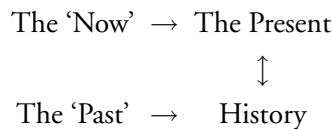
a) *The Transcendent Constant – God or truth*

Fundamentally, the question of continuity in history hinges upon *constancy*: some element which enables or effects the transition from one inaccessible to the other. Plato saw this in the real existence of the ideas, and while the Aristotelian tradition, which lies at the heart of much later philosophy, is less certain about the real existence of the ideas, has no problem with assuming a direct connection between concepts and real things. Kant's epistemology is an elaboration of this, which rejects the possibility of knowing the thing *an Sich*, but still counts on its having essential properties independently of the sensing subject.

In all these variants of essentialism, the essence of things remains a problem, and none of them can solve the problem of what kind of authority the historical object has.

Interestingly enough, the medieval theologians-philosophers get around some of these difficulties, by being forced to deal with God as an essential element of understanding, but an element which lies beyond the tools that understanding itself provides. They may seem overly preoccupied with deep speculation about minute distinctions between different kinds of being — *esse, ens, essentia, esse essentia* and *esse existentia*, and so forth. The philosophically uncomfortable concept of God forces upon the medieval thinkers the premise that things are not as simple as one might think: there is always something beyond human reason. 'Socrates is wise' has no logically deductible meaning, because 'wise' — just like any other concept — is infinitely undefinable. From a modern, relativist perspective, their reason for thinking so — the dogmatic reference to God — doesn't necessarily make things much better, but yet: the notion that human rationality has limits, has interesting similarities with e.g. Wittgenstein's language phil. and Gödel's shattering of mathematical truth with his incompleteness theorem.

I will take this as a point of departure for another model for the path of continuity between the Now of the sensing subject and the Past.



**Now:** represents the level of immediate, unprocessed sensual stimuli, the stream of *experiences*, which on the one hand is all that we got, on the other is utterly, principally inaccessible.

**The Present:** represents the totality of that which is present to the individual, i.e. the 'now' as processed through language, and the traces of previous nows in *memory*.

**History:** represents the *story* which is unrelated to the 'now'. I.e. the story of which one does not oneself have direct knowledge. Or conversely, that aspect of the past through which it has a presence in the now.

**The Past:** parallel to the now in time: the unprocessed mass of events which we may assume have taken place (concession to the objectivists), but which is beyond access, just as the now is (with the possible difference that concerning the past, there isn't even the raw sensual data).

Thus, even though the 'now' and the 'past' are the only elements which — potentially — have some kind of real existence, they are also the least interesting in terms of historiography, whose goal is not to lay bare actual events in the past, but to join the Present and History. The rest of this paper is an at-

tempt to outline why exactness of our understanding of the past is nevertheless important.

Thus, not a radical relativism, nor realism.

### From 'Now' to 'Present' – Linguistic/discursive historiography

#### *Privatspråksteorien: no access to personal experiences*

When I call the sensual experiences principally inaccessible, I do so with reference to a Wittgensteinian language philosophy. An important premise in his reasoning about meaning is his stance on the question of private language: is such a thing possible, and – related to this: what about things like pain – isn't that directly accessible by the subject who experiences the pain? The 'Cartesian' who is Wittgenstein's imaginary opponent in the PU, argues that *I* am in a privileged position to decide if it is true that 'I know I have pain'.

Wittgenstein's fundamental notion is that *meaning is use*, which, in Dummett's and Quine's elaborations means that it is impossible to mean more than or sth. else than what can be communicated to other competent language users. Wittgenstein further argues that we can have no private concept of anything – not even things like pain: when we moan or say 'I have a toothache', these are not expressions of a conceptual contents which can have a truth value at all, except as necessary truths, i.e. a tautological statement – they are parts of pain behaviour. In order to make sense of it and of the sensation the expression is about – one needs language, and *there*, the concept-less state of our feelings is irrelevant. I.e., the answer to the question: 'Does an infant without language *know* that it is in pain?' depends on what it means to *know* such a thing. If meaning is use, the significance of pain behaviour (or the ritual crossing) is that it enables us to form expectations about connections between sound events – words – and actions or experiences – gradually internalized and learned through repeated exposure to such a connection and the habitual fulfillment of the expectation.

What is obvious in this perspective is that neither private sensations nor 'near-universals' can be more than a starting point from which the processes of interpretation can lead in radically different directions.

Further, that thought itself depends on language and thus on the collective of language users. Any concept is fundamentally historical, in the sense that it comes from the outside, as a guest, into the life of the individual language user. Thus, already in the interaction between the now and the present – in the subject's dealing with his or her own existence in the processing of sensual data – the collective plays a central role.

We can leave these questions aside, together with the question of the role of near-universals as a possible basis for continuity (experiences which can be assumed to be shared by most or all members of a culture, even by all mankind, because they stem from the physicality of human beings ['Seltsamer Zufall, daß alle die Menschen, deren Schädel man geöffnet hat, ein Gehirn hatten!' Wittgenstein, 59]). But there are some interesting corollaries which are relevant for the study of history:

- Can an infant without language remember pain?
- Can we have thoughts without memory?
- Norbert Elias and his thought-provoking suggestion that even the physical functions of man may not be entirely free from the bonds of society and civilization: how do we *know* that our perception – even the purely

Synaesthesia: the poetic as that which extends the limits between pure sensation and conceptualized: the kind of imprints that lie at the outskirts of what is common; the sudden flashes of memory re. a smell or a piece of music.

physical one – of red is in any way equivalent to that of the troglodyte or the medieval monk?

- And what about *Spartacus*? Is the joy of lying the arms of the one you love the same now as 2,000 years ago? Is the fear of dying bigger now – that death seems more remote from every-day life – or was it bigger then – when it made its presence felt more strongly? Does love function the same way? Who knows?

#### *Memory as the storehouse of the Present*

*Memory* has a central role here as the mediator between material from the senses and non-experienced, conceptually transmitted experience. The steady flow of sensual perceptions does not remain immediately available to the consciousness, but is formed, shaped, weighed, measured, selected and placed in various narrative categories in memory. Cf. Augustine and time.

Without going into how memory concretely works, I find it a useful notion to regard it as the storehouse of narratives which are actualized in the Present.

#### From 'Present' to 'History'

##### *Extending memory – the 'as if'*

I have made frequent references to the transparency of a narrative about the past, and the degree of familiarity with which we encounter it. I would like to call this the *'as if'-character of historical understanding*. This refers to the way a historical narrative – i.e. a narrative about that which we don't have memories of our own – can be incorporated into the historicization of our own experiences in memory – 'as if' they were actually based in our own experiences.

How far this appropriation of the memories of others can go through a conscious process of interpretation, such as the historian's metier, is an open question, if the unmediated transparency can ever be reestablished, but through the interpretation (and the formulation of it in a narrative) one can at least indicate *how* a familiarity might be reached. The strength of the ensuing 'as if' will depend partly on the coherence of the interpretation, its correspondence with other narratives, and the density of connections with them.

It is in principle irrelevant whether the event one incorporates took place six hundred years ago or yesterday: it must in any case be worked into the individual user's language world and resonate with notions that are already processed, or *prefigured*, to use Hayden White's term from *Tropics of Discourse*.

This may stretch all the way into the area of the personal Present: i guess we have all heard stories about something we have experienced ourselves, but without recognizing the story. I.e. the lines between Present and History are blurred.

Jan Assmann uses the term communicative memory for a memory which is slightly wider than the exclusively personal memory. He defines it as 'memories which relate to the recent past . . . memories which a person shares with his contemporaries'. He argues convincingly that this first extension of personal memory, which extends up to roughly 80 years or two-three generations, is central to how oral cultures arrange their historiography: a threshold between 'living memory' and recollections which either take on a mythological character, or have to be stored through external means. Following up on Assmann's line of thought, one may wonder if this urge to extend memory backwards into the

*known unknown* – the time which we don't *know* but know *of* – is part of human nature, or if it has been created by the *ability* to store memory externally through the invention of writing – is writing the cause or the effect of this urge?

*Spartacus: between Present and History*

This can be concretized in relation to *Spartacus*: if one takes nobleness, heroism, and self-sacrifice for a higher goal, such as freedom and love to be the movie's central themes, one might say that *Spartacus* is a representation of these themes before a contemporary public, but when the original communicatory situation which is implied in 'representation' (i.e. someone presenting something for someone) is lost, when that which might have eased the transition from memory to history by providing an 'as if' of transparent familiarity, instead creates an alienating distance – when the representation becomes part of the 'envelope' and not of the 'message' which is (re)presented – the representational function also tends to disappear. Again, there is the potential – or danger – of a humorous shift, this time from envelope to message.

One further point is of interest concerning *Spartacus*, which may be what more than anything else gives it its ridiculous character. For many viewers it will not *just* belong to history but also have a place in the Present. And even for a viewer like myself, who wasn't born in 1960, it still lies within Assmann's communicative memory. In this case, one's consciousness about the distance – the 'envelope' character – is likely to enter into conflict with the inclination to incorporate what one sees directly in one's Present, since it already has a foot there. This will in turn lead to an ongoing clash with the many conflicting signals of distance and unfamiliarity.

One may perhaps compare with glasses: up to a certain point of nearsightedness, the eyes can adjust and try to focus, but in the long run, the strain causes headaches (this corresponds to the situation in *Spartacus*). If one's eyesight grows weaker still, one will have to wear glasses – perform some kind of interpretation, in the awareness of the distance – which will improve one's vision, on the whole.

*Eavesdropping – history as narrative*

Rather than being a dialogue with the past, history is the art of eavesdropping.

This is again drawn from the language based notion of continuity:

Ideas don't wander through the ages, nor are they transmitted wholesale as entities that are transplanted from one age to another. Instead, they are, at every point in time, in every one of those conversations which have eventually brought them to our notice, being taken up from *those* recipients' past, incorporated, remodeled, and finally used in new texts, which in their turn have been taken up by the next reader, and so on, in a chain of interlocutors. Thus, there is no common notion which runs through the history of some concept or institution, but – to draw on Wittgenstein's description of family resemblances – a continuum of overlapping texts and readings, like fibres in a thread.

når vi beskjeftiger oss med historie, tyvlytter vi til samtaler, og hvorvidt vi kan innlemme dem i vår egen forståelsesverden, som "as if"-erfaringer, avhenger av om de virker gjenkjennelige

verken et middelalderdrama eller et ikon er representasjoner for oss - de er det for 'kompetente deltagere' i en samtidig diskurs, som vi så kan (og ikke kan mer enn) tyvlytte til, eventuelt tilegne oss, enten direkte eller indirekte gjennom alle de andre diskurser som disse elementene også tilhører: den samlede liturgi- og kunsthistoriske kunnskap i vesterlandsk kulturliv og forskning; deres plass i en religiøs praksis; osv.

When the 'correctness' of historical data can nevertheless become important, it will be so as the result of a social contract, not something which is based on ob-

jective qualities of the historical data. I so happen to live in a culture in which the 'historical narrative' has a certain privileged status (whereas in other cultures, the 'storyteller's' trade has a similar function also live in a culture which uses history as a source for legitimization and self-realization). In some sense or the other, I *have* to relate to the Reformation, Kant, and Mozart, both as a person and as a historian.

\* \* \*

### *Historical truth*

This, then, is the function of historical truth, in the sense indicated above (Butler): not in any metaphysical sense, but a symbol/signifier of the interconnections within the web of intricate lines and connections in meaning between the things we experience and hear about.

The difference between a stone in the woods and the stone on top of the Cheops pyramid is that the latter is part of a narrative with branches to countless others, whereas the stone in the wood isn't, even if it was a 'fact' that it had once been used to kill a king. *Now* they are both part of a story – *this* story – but the Cheops stone is still of far greater historical significance, not because of what it *was* – for the poor king and his family, the other stone would have been far more important – but for what it *is*: a part in a web of interconnected narratives.

*This web is principally limitless and open in all directions, and it is not given to us, as individuals, to decide where in the web a breach is important and where it is not.*

Hence the validity of a statement about Holocaust is important, not because of whether or not it conforms with what actually happened, but because by introducing a breach in the web of narratives – e.g. by consciously or unwittingly suppressing established facts – would be to distort the relationships between the stories, hence to distort the possibility of making sense of concepts which have been formed, perhaps, under the influence of the events we are suppressing, and hence, we distort our own ability to make sense of ourselves. It may not necessarily be fatal – a 'revisionism' involving e.g. that someone was born April 9 and not the eighth may be inconsequential – but in principle, there is no way *I* can decide for myself that it is.

The final extension of the notion of transparent familiarity is concerned with the distortion that is unavoidable when we, from our vantage point, read a text like Augustine's doctrine of grace and time. It is unavoidable because there is no way we can avoid our own concepts, no matter how aware we are of their anachronism.

The only reason to be interested in historical events is that they are the antecedents of our own time. But at any particular moment in (past) time, their role as antecedents is not yet realized, not even relevant to the people who did have shares in the moment. To study history, in other words, is to study antecedents without consequences.

When this is a problem, it is precisely because of the risk of the same kind of humorous shift as in Spartacus, when the notions we bring into the reading clash with other notions which are implied by the text we read but which are incompatible with our own. I don't believe this can be solved by a reception history in the traditional sense, of the study of the reception of a work or an idea through the ages.

Rather, it is an attempt at delving into a certain period, without *pre*-ceptions about what followed, but instead seeing these authors as examples of what it has been *possible or natural to think and write* at a certain point in time, given the

conglomerate of discourses and practices which has been *their* point of departure.

\* \* \*

To sum up: a narrative historiography is good enough, also in preserving the value of the historical object:

- the historian tells the stories that enable us to tie History to the Present. These cannot be purely fictitious – disregard or be too far removed from the other narratives that we already know,
- because they will then invite the “Spartacus” effect: create a humourous clash of systems of understanding.
  - siden grensen mellom Pres. og Hist. dessuten er udefinerbar,
  - dermed også gir oss mulighet til å knytte "Now" til "Present":
    - \* historiens identitetsskapende funksjon);

## DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HUMOUR AND TOD

How do we avoid the danger that our study of transformations of discourse (ToD) is a ridiculous exercise? How do we know which it will be the outcome when we form our narrative: whether it comes through as meaningful (lets itself incorporated in the collected narratives in memory, either directly or indirectly through ‘as if’ memories); whether it remains unintelligible (i.e. without any noticeable connection between the historical discourse and the Present); or it appears as comical (i.e. reveals a surprising conflict between two meaning systems which are viable separately but not together)?

I would say that

- it does run that risk (cf the Pope’s silly hat), but that
- the *difference* between humour and ToD is the warrant: it doesn’t *have to* entail a snap from one meaning system to another (Det er mao *ikke* snakk om fullstendig inkompatible meningssystemer (for så ville det ikke kunne finne sted en transformasjon, bare en shift) og det er derfor ikke helt analogt til humor, men grunnforståelsen er den samme), and
- the constancy element of the transformation may mean that there isn’t really a split in the first place; the endurance of whatever element is seen as transformed, may prevail over the change.
- thus, again, the main part of such a study may turn out to be the tracing of certain ideas – not so much *through* ages but *within* certain periods – not the pointing out of change or differences.

This is at the same time a heuristic to check for the soundness of such an analysis: the less attention is given to

- a careful explanation of how one narrative may have been taken into another;
- which interlocutors along the way have brought them into *our* conversation, and
- which conglomerate of discourses the element has belonged to in each of the conversations to which we have been eavesdropping;
- and how;
- and finally: how it relates to other current discourses which have not been relevant in a previous historical setting,

the greater the risk of ridicule.

The 'humour' test may then be a check on where this danger applies (possibly to all historical narrative), and on how to avoid it: by being clear about the above steps.

It may also be a useful heuristic tool: when something strikes us as odd, funny, inconceivable, that may be precisely where one should go beyond the initial reaction (to stay in the eavesdropping metaphor: 'I must have misheard what I overheard'; 'The text must be corrupt', 'They can't have meant it like that' etc) and see it as a potential point of departure for an analysis of transformation of discourse. As the paleographer's dictum goes: 'If you think that strange letter is just a spot on the paper – look again: it's never just a spot.'