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# A New Historiographical Path: Recovering Arthur Danto's Narrative

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### Abstract

This article proposes Arthur Danto's 'analytical narrativism,' and his conceptualization of history as representation, as an unexplored path which can be an alternative to the development of postnarrativism from Hayden White's 'figurative realism.' Danto's historiographic can shed some light on postnarrativism and on the present-day dilemmas which cloud the academic debates around the writing of history. The article also highlights the need for interdisciplinary dialogue.

### Keywords

Historiography. Philosophy of Historiography. Postnarrativism.



## Navigating the Dead-End of History

The academic debates on the discipline of history have consistently moved away from the everyday practice of historians. If we consider the contemporary traits of what Harlan (1989) called the epistemological crisis, in which the general public questions any discourse, we might see this trend with some concern. Mockumentaries, historical fictions and new, AI-generated fake videos, blend facts and fiction, further undermining the credibility of any historical narrative and exacerbating public skepticism toward historical scholarship. This blend comes as no surprise: as Noiriell (1996) warned some years ago, the risk underneath the use of the narration in history is that of stripping historical discourse of referentiality.

Establishing the current crisis of referentiality in historical discourse as its backdrop, this article focuses on how postnarrativism approaches the topic of the truth of historical statements. In particular, I would like to explore Danto's analytical narrativism as an alternative path to the postnarrativism based on Hayden White's theories. Since Danto's proposal preserves the highlights of narrativism while avoiding postnarrativist skepticism, it might prove to be useful to leave the dead-end of history and to face the risks akin to today's epistemological crisis.

The need of finding solid alternatives to mainstream postnarrativism is not new. Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen reopened in 2015 a discussion about the nature of historical knowledge, its rational evaluability, and the methods needed for its evaluation with *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography*<sup>1</sup>. Shortly after, Paul A. Roth and Kalle Pihlainen (Domańska et al. 2019), Stefan Berger, Nicola Brauch, and Chris Lorenz (Berger et al. 2021) made significant contributions to the topic. In fact, all of them struggled to find an alternative to narrativism. As Kowalewski (2017) or Tozzi (2023; and in Domańska et al. 2019) have showed, this struggle is another revival of the problems akin to the analytical philosophy of history.

Postnarrativists have predominantly anchored their scholarship in Hayden White's theses (see Pihlainen, 2019 or Kuukkanen, 2021). Those who do reference Arthur Danto often restrict their citations to his *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Danto, 1965) and do not profit from his other works. Such choices lead to a misrepresentation of narrative and to problematic explorations of its meaning. Critics of narrativism have largely overlooked Danto's revival of the concept of narration, which is crucial for fully appreciating his thesis on the end of art.

The Archives of Arthur Danto at Columbia University provide evidence of Danto's

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1 Although Kuukkanen defended postnarrativism, Rogacz (2018) has shown how his position ends up falling within the ambit of his own criteria of narrativism: constructivism, representationalism and holism, returning to a prenarrativist model.



contributions to historical theory immediately impacted academia, including Hayden White, with whom he maintained a correspondence between 1965 and 1966<sup>2</sup>. Recent scholarship, including works by Snyder (2018) or myself (Cascales, 2019), has begun reassessing Danto's proposals, revealing that the perceived contradictions are not as problematic as previously thought. Reintegrating the Dantian narration concept can catalyze a similarly vital and productive interdisciplinary dialogue, particularly within postnarrativist debates.<sup>3</sup>

To achieve this, I will begin by exploring and comparing the positions of Hayden White and Arthur Danto. Subsequently, I will elucidate White's position, given his pivotal role in precipitating postnarrativist discourse. This will be followed by an in-depth analysis of Danto's stance, which provides a conception of narrative in history which preserves referentiality. This comprehensive perspective will ultimately illuminate alternative pathways that may clarify contemporary historiographical challenges.

## Danto, White and the Birth of Narrativism

Positivist and scientific philosophy of history were in vogue when Arthur Danto and Hayden White started their academic careers. At the time, the prevailing model of explanation was Carl Gustav Hempel's scientific model of historical explanation (Hempel, 1942), also referred to as the Covering Law Model by Dray (1957). Danto (2013, p. 109) acknowledged this fact in an article where he points out how White and him studied at Wayne State University under the guidance of William J. Bossenbrook. Danto's career began in analytical philosophy of a scientific nature. His approach to history was guided by the desire of examining what makes historical knowledge possible. He was faced by the two prevailing tendencies of his time: on the one hand, positivist and realistic approaches, which sustained it was possible to gather all past events as they had happened; on the other, substantivist models, which believed history could be approached as a meaningful totality.

Hayden White, for his part, also discussed Hempel's model and ended up distancing himself as far as he could from any scientific ideal. According to him (White, 2000), Hempel's was not the right model for history. When White delved into the depths of the philosophy of history, he was not so much interested in reflection on abstract concepts but rather in discussions about the cognitive

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2 In the "Arthur Coleman Danto manuscripts, 1958-2011," letters of academics, reviews of his book, conference invitations and requests for translation, and the royalties of the numerous copies are available. (I thank the Librarians of Columbia University Archives.)

3 Beyond the postnarrativism, numerous historians, such as Reinhart Koselleck, Jörn Rüsen, Quentin Skinner, and Carlo Ginzburg, have contributed to this dialogue through methodologies that bridge history and philosophy, thereby fostering interdisciplinary exchange.



reach of history. However, as he relates in an interview with Erlend Rogne (2009), he engaged in that debate from a completely different perspective, one mainly focused on linguistics.

Both Danto and White revalidated narration as the best model for the historical field. However, while the latter continued to reflect on history, greatly shaping the discipline's self-understanding, the former left the area to focus on questions regarding art. The theories of White played a decisive role in historical aestheticism, feeding the notion that history cannot be related to reality, but rather to historical constructions. This distrust endures today. Yet, the concept of narrative does not inherently lead to these conclusions. Returning to Danto's narrativism offers alternatives to postnarrativism in current historiographic discussions.

The backgrounds of both thinkers influenced how they approached the linguistic analysis of narrative and, consequently, their understanding of the entire historical process. White founded his theories on structuralism and literary criticism, which resulted in his tropological analysis of historical writings. This interest in the rhetorical and tropological dimensions of language led him to sustain that it is the rhetorical framework what creates meaning. According to Danto (2003, p. 111), however, the difference between their approaches went beyond the difference between logic and rhetoric: "How different could be derived from Hayden's hospitality to the ideas of poststructuralist writing, which had no appeal for me. My approach, then and now, was an amalgam of ordinary language analysis and philosophy of science in the Logical Positivist vein."

Danto's philosophy of analytic history focuses on the logical aspects of language, not on its rhetorical dimension. Danto's interest in logic convinced him that narrative is always articulated retrospectively: a narrative can only be written after considering the beginning and end of a given account. But there are more divergences. Danto's approach may seem more nuanced than White's, implying that finding an adequate form for historical statements would also suffice for adequately capturing the past.

After his "Hegelian turn" in the 80s, when he was no longer working in the Philosophy of History, Danto's "narrative realism" intensified by postulating the existence of objective historical structures which must be considered when constructing narratives. This "narrative realism" demands an objectivity that can scarcely be achieved due to language limitations. However, to understand this approach, it is crucial to take the Hegelian perspective and see how Danto combines historicism, or historical contextualism, in which life unfolds, with logical essentialism, where the reality of concepts or certain events is understood transhistorically. This approach allows Danto to update Hegel's ideas and resolve tensions that help him account for the situation of art in history, but it can also be applied to other historical realities.

For his part, White is not at all naive about the objectivity of historical knowledge. Although



defending the referentiality of history, he rejected the idea that there are fundamental structures on which historical accounts should be based. White opted for a “figurative realism” centered on rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions, assuming that the historian assigns significance to historical events by introducing them into a plot. For White, history is a way of presenting reality that transforms an event into a historical fact. No historical account, therefore, can escape its condition as a construction. The construction of history is not just a representation of reality, but the process of making sense of that reality. Historians construct narratives that not only represent facts, but also interpret and contextualize them within a broader framework of historical meaning. Language ceases to be a simple means of communication and becomes a substantial agent in the production of historical knowledge. Hence, Munslow (2006) characterizes White as a deconstructivist and Danto as a pro-narrativist.

The importance which White granted to language, like other authors partaking in the linguistic turn, has redefined the relationships between historical discourse and the past. The notion of causal explanation, which had governed history for decades, was displaced in favor of the concept of ‘narration.’ This “new philosophy of history,” as Ankermit (1986, p. 1) calls it, does not imply that historical statements lack referentiality, but rather points to the particular reflexivity introduced in historical practice. The relevance of language in their discipline has led some historians to focus only on formal and rhetorical aspects, which provoked a challenge for historians to reflect on the philosophical aspects of their discipline more deeply.

### ‘Emplotment’ and History

Hayden White was not only influenced by positivism, but by literary theorists such as Kenneth Burke (1941), Erich Auerbach (1946), Northrop Frye (1957) and Roman Jakobson (1971). Jakobson had conducted studies on the linguistic and narrative structures of language. White appropriated these authors’ literary theory to construct his own thesis regarding the writing of history. In fact, in his seminal article ‘The Burden of History’ (White, 1966), he compared the work of literary figures and historians, noting that the imagination of the former surpassed that of the latter. Literary critics had the most significant influence among these three groups of authors. This led him to analyze the problem of historical representation in a very particular and refreshing way, giving more importance to the form than to the content of historical narratives.

In particular, White (1973, p. 2) set out to analyze the justification of historical thought, starting from the consideration that historical work is “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest





of explaining what they were by representing them." In this sense, it seems clear that White and Danto share the practice of starting the analysis of historical knowledge from the fact of language. Both speak about the past rejecting the innocent scientific point of view —deadly to history— which thinks of language as something transparent (White, 2014, p. 97): "The 'scientific' status of history was saved but at the cost of history's demotion from its traditional role as *magistra vitae* to that of a second-order, fact-collecting enterprise."

Danto (1999) was interested in the logical aspect of historical statements; White, in its tropological aspect. For this reason, he starts from the rhetorical dimension of history, analyzing the work of historians as verbal structures. In other words, he understands historical narrative as developing under the usual fictional tropes of literature (shaped from emplotment). In this sense, the conception of White goes beyond Danto's, since it underlines that narration is needed to show a causality in facts and that, in consequence, the narrative plot itself (emplotment) gives meaning to history. Facts are sewn into a historic fabric thanks to the rhetorical structure. But if facts do not exclusively depend on theory, but also on a given plot, but how can historians identify and correlate them? As Roth (Domańska et al., 2019, p. 545) points out, this debate is about what is possible to say about the past and how to talk about it.

White's proposal was daring: it purported that historians plot out facts. The type of narration which emerges depends on how facts are plotted out. In this sense, historical narration is not just based on what the historian wants to tell us, but rather it "depends on a deeper element, which is almost unconscious and irrational, with which the historian undertakes an especially poetic act... White conceives of history by prioritizing discourse, narration, and linguistic articulation above its supposedly scientific nature" (Burke et al., 2013, p. 299).

White distinguishes, as does Danto, between chronicle and story. While, in a chronicle, events are organized chronologically, he argues that a story is based on the events selected by the historian and on their understanding and arrangement as a process. Historians do not carry out this processual ordering from scratch. Rather, they are inserted into a culture, where they use their imagination to understand and express how events have occurred. In this sense, historians construct a plot of events that constitute the narrative story: "The difference between 'history' and 'fiction' resides in the fact that the historian 'finds' his stories, whereas the fiction writer 'invents' his. However, this conception of the historian's task obscures the extent to which 'invention' also plays a part in the historian's operations" (White, 1973, p. 6-7).

To account for the poetic character of historical language, White orders historical narratives according to their plots, aligning tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) and ideological currents with them. Therefore, the expression "tropological" must be understood as the assumption



of a poetic nature instead of logic. Finally, White (1973, p. 29) analyzes the different historiographical styles representing a particular combination of emplotment, argument, and ideological implication.

White shows how different linguistic structures, inserted pre-critically in our consciousness, function as the skeleton of any text. White's use of the term "precritically," which should be understood in the Kantian sense of "a priori," as a kind of knowledge independent of experience that influences knowledge of any kind. A priori conditions, understood in terms of form and structure, transform mere facts into historical narration and, therefore, into historical knowledge. The formal component, the discursive form, is the foundation of a historical account. This is the reason why White focuses on the formal analysis of language; and it could also explain why post-Whitian historiography has opted for literary formalism rather than for philosophical substantialism. Finally, these decisions explain the literary drift of contemporary history's and its subsequent problems in accounting for the referentiality of its statements (Ankersmit, 2009).

In this way, White presented historical discourse as a literary artifact. In fact, starting with *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), White began to practice more literary criticism. Many scholars understood this as the dissolution of the boundaries between history and literature. Some (Lavagnino, 2014) have even highlighted how historians' ideology influences the construction of narrations. However, *Metahistory* did not intend to unite history and fiction literally; instead, it compared history to literature to emphasize the specificity of historical discourse. White wanted to highlight the poetic context of history and the relevance of the historian's labor when composing a narrative and not advocate relativism or epistemological skepticism. Koselleck (2002, p. 42) also said that White avoided falling into relativism but, at the same time, offered a metahistorical pluralism "of linguistically facilitated interpretations of the world without thereby sinking into a historicizing relativism and without validating techniques of reduction based on criticism of ideology as final statements."

The specificity of historical narration is not found in its form but rather in its referentiality: it is an account of an event that occurred in the past. Remitting to a reality external to the text does not endow it with significance; instead, it provides the text with the formal coherence necessary to enter the realm of narrative. Hence, two levels must be distinguished in every historical discourse: the explicit level of the data to which it refers and the implicit level of assumptions. The latter, which operates as a pre-critically accepted paradigm, corresponds to the deep structure of historical imagination, which White calls "metahistory." As Clark points out, "Every work of history has embedded within itself a metahistory insofar as the author has already chosen, well before the so-called writing stage, the tropological mode in which the book is to be composed" (2004, 99). Thus, imagination plays an essential role in writing history, as the subtitle of *Metahistory* points out: *The*



*Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (see Bakhtin 1981).

The crucial role of imagination in White's theory was not meant to invent history but to highlight the importance of historians. As Roth (Domańska et al., 2019) points out, this reclaim calls historians to increase their moral responsibility, because they are no more ingenious about the "conditioned character of the historical discipline" (White, 1978, p. 29). In this sense, Tozzi (Domańska et al., 2019, p. 553) points out how White pretended to save history, not to destroy it. Hayden White firmly argued that historians must never forget the referentiality of their affirmations. He often made clear that this aspect differentiates historical narration from other types of narratives, such as fiction or myth, where real references to space and time are not important, and also the author, their knowledge, or intentions can be disregarded. This is seen, for example, in the distinction he makes in *The Content of the Form* (White, 1978, p. 2), between "discourse that narrates" and "discourse that narrativizes:"

While they [the historians] certainly narrated their accounts of the reality that they perceived, or thought they perceived, to exist within or behind the evidence they had examined, they did not narrativize that reality, did not impose upon it the form of a story. And their example permits us to distinguish between a historical discourse that narrates and a discourse that narrativizes, between a discourse that openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it and a discourse that feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself as a story.

Although White insists that history is distinguished by referentiality, his tropological model does not explain why this is so, as Ricoeur (2000, p. 328) pointed out. Hence, his latest books show a turn towards phenomenology and hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup> In *Figural Realism*, White reflects on the relationship between the past and historiographic practice. He (White, 2000, p. 27-42) delves into it with the question of realism, analyzing the relationship between different "realist" representations of the same historical phenomena from which different ways of rewriting history result. The chapter dedicated to Erich Auerbach (White, 2000, p. 87-100) is especially significant because it includes the notion of "figural realism" and a dialogue on mimesis. In fact, it clearly shows how Auerbach

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4 Paul Ricoeur's (1984) *Time and Narrative* helps to understand the referential anchor of history. Drawing on the ideas of Heidegger and Gadamer, he explores how the understanding of time and narrative structures can provide a robust framework for anchoring historical narratives in reality.



influenced Hayden White by emphasizing the importance of narrative and the concept of “figure.”<sup>5</sup>

For White, figural realism does not allude to a naive consideration in which it is possible to capture completely the truth or the past. His reflections clarify why a definitive version of the past cannot be reached. Namely, agents in the present always represent history, which will inevitably be rewritten again and again. This underscores the idea of contingency in historical narratives, where the interpretation of events is subject to change based on new perspectives and contexts. Understanding does not imply that we have an adequate representation of reality. However, trying to understand reality presupposes the hope that, at some point, we can approach it more adequately. This aligns with White’s concept of the practical past, where historical construction is about representing reality and creating meaningful interpretations. However, that depends on the historian and the criteria he follows, which have changed throughout history. Therefore, the figural realism of historical representation makes it difficult to speak in terms of truth or falsity in what concerns narrative discourse.

Taking all this into account, it is easy to understand why White’s theories questioned modern historiographical principles, putting them in a severe bind when it comes to preserving the veracity of historical accounts and opening the door to post-modernism. For some intellectuals, such as Elizabeth Clark (2004, p. 86), there is no doubt that the recovery of narrative returned to “impose coherence, continuity, and closure on the messiness of life and of the historian’s sources.”

However, Hayden White reduced the possibility of evaluating history rationally for the most important contemporary historians, such as the philosopher Paul A. Roth (1992) showed. Kuukkanen (2015) also follows this argument, pointing out the paradox that no history can exist without narration. Still, when there is narration, there can be no epistemic evaluation. In other words, according to Kuukkanen (2015, p. 30-49), if empirical research takes the form of historical narration, then it cannot be rationally evaluated, and empirical research cannot take the form of a story if it is to be rationally evaluable. Understanding this dilemma is crucial, as it represents the main issue where postnarrativists are stuck. In particular, Kuukkanen showed narrativism as a limited vision since narratives are interpretive constructions. Kuukkanen is committed to moving beyond narrative and returning to epistemic concerns centered on the veracity of history before the recovery of narrative, as Kalle Pihlainen has also suggested.

What does veracity mean in this context? Pihlainen (2013) argues that truth in history is not a discovered fact but a narrative construction. This requires a solid argumentative basis and a serious

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5 This idea reconstructs links between texts, works, eras, and their antecedents, connecting verbal expressions to historical influences. White adopted this to explore how narrative form shapes historical meaning, blending Auerbach’s influence with his own theory.



investigation to avoid falling into tendentious creations. Therefore, everything falls on ethical and political responsibility in representing the past, avoiding ideological simplifications or perpetuations, as he defends in conversation with Domańska, among others (2019, p. 569):

Beliefs about the purpose of history and its legitimate subject matter need to be continually negotiated: hence we cannot hide behind a disciplined, epistemic search whereby meanings are somehow discovered intact and pure or sidestep accountability by appealing to an imaginary 'anything goes' relativism. Instead, as historians, we are called to assume responsibility for the consequences of history presentations and to practice history with care. Despite the radical implications.

After White, many historians reduced their task to writing historical accounts that did not try to provide a reliable version of what might have happened in the past, simply because they believed that it was not possible. Although they are not entirely skeptical, they remain extremely conscious about what it means to work with history.

The questions about what the past and reality are, as well as how they both can be talked about, are still open. In the next part, I analyze Danto's analytical narrativism as an alternative path to preserve narrative and a connection with reality in history.

## An Alternative Path: Analytical Narrativism

At the beginning of his career, Danto fought against substantivist philosophies. He distinguished between descriptive and explanatory theories and showed how both misuse historical statements. For Danto, "historical language" only refers to past event. He distinguishes it from the "language of time" in general. Historical language is correct when what is said to have happened took place before its being said. This seemingly obvious distinction invalidates many historical statements which are not limited to past events, but instead include interpretations of facts in the future.

Although Danto remained close to Hempel's theory, he wanted to go beyond it. This desire led him to explore narrative sentences; in fact, Danto's dissertation, which he presented in 1952, was entitled "Acts and Histories." Already in this dissertation it is possible to see the relation between two of the main topics of Danto's research at that moment about action and history. As Uebel (2019) has shown, Danto was not convinced with his explanations. He rewrote the main text to publish as



### *Analytical Philosophy of History in 1965.*

Faced with causal explanations, Danto (1965, p. 141) tried to show how narrative structure is already “a form of explanation” that is both adequate and broadens the horizon of explanatory models since it “describes and explains at once.” This contribution turned the Hempelian idea of historical explanation into “explanation sketches” by introducing “narrative sentences” (Danto, 1965, p. 141). This was the first time the concept of ‘narration’ was proposed as the model for history, well ahead of similar presentations by historians. Let us see its principal characteristics.

A narrative requires events, whether close or distant in time, to happen before the time when historians assemble their discourse. This premise expresses a limitation in understanding past and present events, since they remain beyond a certain perspective that allows historians to assess the most significant facts. Historians cannot be contemporary to the events they are discussing; in this sense, narrative requires reflection. A meaningful narrative can only be offered once a fact is in the past or, in other words, once the scope of its consequences can be seen. This is the “significance” Danto (1965, p. 11) refers to when he argues that the historical significance of an event can only be established in the context of narrative retelling: “To ask for the significance of an event, in the historical sense of the term, is to ask a question which can be answered only in the context of a story... Stories constitute the natural context in which events acquire historical significance” (White, 1965, p. 11). It can be concluded that, in some way, the significance or the meaning of present events remains invisible to those contemporary to them. As a result, there are no definitive descriptions, a conclusion which Hayden White would reach after Danto.

Hence, future events, or the discovery of unfamiliar past events, expand previously unforeseen possibilities of understanding, causing us to revise our understanding of the past. Only by starting from the successive consequences of events can these facts be assigned the significance corresponding to them. The continuous rewriting of history is a consequence of the finite character of the scope of events’ consequences and the possibility of their reinterpretation (Lavagnino, 2015, p. 44). For this reason, it is relevant to consider the risk of presentism because, as Hartog (2015) pointed out, the tendency to privilege the present affects our relationship with both the past and the future.

History is formed in cohesive wholes: historians weave events together and, in doing so, they construct narratives. According to Danto and White, historians’ interpretations stem from their imagination. While acknowledging history’s constructed nature, Danto insists on logical coherence and fidelity to facts. Thus, this does not imply a whimsical imagination creating arbitrary accounts. Instead, Danto (1965, p. 122) implies that “the relationship between a narrative and the materials which initially support it is, in a sense, familiar to students of Peirce, abductive.” The historian



"abducts" the significant elements and builds a story with them (White, 1965, p. 122). Historians do not invent stories, as a superficial reading of White's theory seems to suggest; instead, they infer them through real facts. As Habermas (1988, p. 33) pointed out, thanks to Danto's concern with underlining too much the importance of narration, understanding, and interpretation, his analytical philosophy of history does not engage with literature, but with hermeneutics.

Secondly, reflecting on interpretation leads to the configuration of a text. As we have seen, weaving a historical narrative is not just a matter of setting out a list of events, but of ordering them with a view towards an end; it entails arranging them purposefully. This arrangement grants coherence to a story and ensures that events are explained. As Danto (1965, p. 255) points out, "The *skeleton* of a narrative has this form: / . / . / . / . / ... /!" This form links different events to an end, excluding other events that are irrelevant to that specific narrative. Consequently, as Danto (1965, p. 255) asserts, narrative sentences are the most suitable for historical explanations.

Lastly, against the image of the "ideal chronicler," who lives through an event, collects all the data, and orders the facts chronologically, according to the order of causes and effects, and makes a copy of the "reality," Danto (1954, p. 88-99) privileged a historical labor which orders the facts using interpretation, selects significant facts and structures a narrative according to them. Narration differs from chronicling in that it does not relate to "everything" but a selection (a representation). This selection does not follow a causal scheme; rather, the historian selects an event as a beginning and a different event as a conclusion (Carroll, 2022). History is not a bin in which events are accumulated; rather, events are intertwined thanks to an end, which gives them a conclusion. The order of the narration has a specific sense that differs from fragmentary visions of history, such as those of Benjamin (2010). It can also be transformed by changing the starting point or its end, especially if, as Danto defended in relation to art, the linear progression of history comes to an end (Cascales, 2019, p. 116-120).

The linguistic character of history in Danto must be understood within the system of human representations (visual, linguistic, or cognitive representations).<sup>6</sup> Within language as representation, three levels can be distinguished within language: causal, semantic, and philosophical. As Carrier (2022, p. 321-322) has shown, these three dimensions do not constitute a hierarchy, but a triangular diagram.

The first level, causal language, is the relationship between the world and the subject, and causes are connected with their effects on the world. Still, here the truth or falsity of propositions is not

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6 Also, Tucker (2004, p. 47) defends a philosophy of historiography that relies "on the cognitive values and theories of historiography to discover the historical emergence of the conditions of historiographic knowledge."



at stake. Secondly, there is a relationship between subject and representation in semantic language, and there is the semantic evaluation of the statements. The linkage between these statements and the rest of the causal states is analyzed at this level. It is essential to highlight, as Ankersmit (2022, p. 134) does, that, while being is internal to the subject, this second relation conserves an external relation: "Without external relation, the mind would be a mere cartesian *ens cogitans*, not an *ens representans*;" or, as Danto (1989, 13) somewhat ingenuously states, "representation presupposes the existence of an outside world to which we can have access."

The third level is that of the philosophical language. According to Danto (1968, p. 15; see also 1989, p. 31), "philosophy is essentially located in a space between language and the world." This level examines the relationship between representations and the world, evaluates the distribution of values ascribed by the same semantic concepts, and analyzes "the links and correlations revealed in the secondary plane of language" (Lavagnino, 2015, p. 40). In other words, at this level, the causal and representational levels of causal relations are simultaneously evaluated. It is here, therefore, where notions such as truth and error are at stake. By asking ourselves about a truth or an error, we are no longer working only bi-directionally between language and the world, but we are conceiving language in a representational way; we are seeing it from the outside (Tozzi, 2007, p. 119). We can only have a concept of reality when we place ourselves in front of it. Without its representation, we remain part of reality; once we stand opposite to it, we can see it. This approach opens the discussion beyond mere correspondence with the mere reality or 'truth as correspondence,' which is very problematic in history, as Imaz-Sheinbaum (2022) argues.<sup>7</sup> In sum, Danto's theory makes it possible to stand at the linguistic level, keeping a link to reality.

When Danto refers to language as something internal to the world, he is thinking especially of history and science. These disciplines use language to expand the world's inventory, name the new elements of reality that they discover, and explain how events occur in reality. In this sense, Danto accepted that history creates representations that increment the world. Ankersmit (2022, p. 135-136) points out how historians have to create representations to talk about history:

The existence of the historical period (as a representation) is the condition for the existence of the historical period (as a represented) and vice versa. It is as if the hierarchy between a representation and the represented (i.e., what the representation

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<sup>7</sup> Imaz-Sheinbaum (2022, p. 262) proposes that instead of focusing on factual correspondence, historiography should value understanding as a key normative criterion because it "involves the skill of integrating diverse elements into a coherent whole."





represents) has been reversed as if the sitter for a portrait could only come into being with the portrait(s) that have been painted of him.

According to Danto (2007, p. 305), this is possible because language and reality share a structural similarity, not assimilation or dissolution. In this way of considering language, the reference to the world is at stake, but not the truth or falsity of the statements. It is not that in any scientific field, the distinction between appearance and reality does not matter, but that when it is made, philosophy is being done, and not just science. It is, in fact, the philosophical discipline that is concerned with differentiating between representation and reality without itself offering a representation of reality" (Tozzi, 2010, p. 131). Philosophy thematizes representation as different from what is being represented. This feature is essential to understanding the role of philosophy in the dissolution of the problems it faces.

This approach can elucidate several persistent issues, particularly in the ongoing debates within postnarrativism. For instance, Kuukkanen (2015, p. 112) advances a non-representationalist approach, in which historical narratives are seen as complex arguments that integrate multiple perspectives and evidence without claiming a direct correspondence with historical reality. In this sense, historical narratives must be evaluated based on their internal coherence, their ability to integrate diverse historical elements, and their ability to offer a persuasive and meaningful interpretation of the past: "A work of history can be evaluated in terms of its rhetorical dimension, its epistemic dimension, and its discursive dimension," (Kuukkanen, 2015, p. 148).

I agree with Kuukkanen: narratives should not be viewed as faithful reflections of reality, and that historical theses should be considered in their various dimensions. However, it is still necessary to wonder about their truth. This is essential because if truth is not present at least as a possibility, how can we rationally evaluate historical theses and avoid the ideological biases that are so prevalent today?

In Danto's analytic narrativism, mere representations can be told from artistic representations thanks to philosophy's presence in and outside the world. This differentiation helps to distinguish between historical and literary narratives. Their difference does not lie in the truth of the statements that make up narratives, nor in the fact that their referents exist. Whereas history keeps its referentiality to the world, literature remains self-referential. The statements of history are taken as constitutive of reality and, in consequence, maintain an internal relationship with the world. Using Danto's example, it can be said that both historical and scientific languages contribute to construct a 'map' of reality.



However, artistic representations, literature included, do not contribute to this map: their function is not to refer to reality—quite the contrary. By the very fact of their being representations, spectators are able to contemplate in them the world from the outside, as a totality, understanding things that they do not consider in everyday life. According to Danto, the self-referentiality of literary narrative, and not the epistemic evaluation which judges a given narrative to be true or false, provides the criterion to distinguish literature from other types of narrative, particularly historical ones.

Danto considers that history uses language in an internal relation to reality in its totality and that, therefore, it has a referential character, although the aesthetic dimension is there.<sup>8</sup> The Dantian consideration of history avoids the risk of dissolving as mere literature. Moreover, according to Danto, philosophy is responsible for elucidating the questions of truth or falsity of statements in history. He is not arguing that philosophy as a discipline must perform this work. Rather, Danto stresses the fact that, independently of the discipline carrying it out, this labor can only be done from a philosophical perspective.

## Conclusion

Arthur Danto's analytic narrativism illustrates that it is possible to integrate narration in historical writing while maintaining referentiality and addressing the pursuit of truth. In contrast, Hayden White's rhetorical and aesthetic emphasis has led many to adopt a constructivist perspective on history, which diminishes the role of referentiality. This shift is partly due to the inherent complexity of asserting truth within an academic discipline focused solely on the past. Danto's approach leverages narration without sacrificing truth, enabling an evaluation of historical statements in terms of truth or falsehood which does not change the reality of what happened in the past. His proposal, which navigates around narration and imagination while incorporating philosophical metalevels, offers a robust alternative.

Danto's emphasis on the logic of narrative is pivotal. He viewed history as a continuum of interconnected events requiring coherent explanation. This linguistic operation functions on causal, semantic, and philosophical planes, evaluating value distributions and discerning the truth or falsity of statements. While historical narratives retain an internal relationship with reality, literary narratives, and artistic representations allow readers to view the world from an external perspective. Danto's distinction between literary narratives, based on their self-referential nature, and historical

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8 More recently, Aurell (2024, p. 310) has also highlighted these dual and complementary dimensions: "History is [...] not reduced to an ideological or narcissistic exercise, but to an aesthetic operation well rooted in the epistemology that every activity of historical category requires."



narratives, based on their referential truth, contributes significantly to the postnarrativism debates. It also enhances our understanding of the complex interplay between language, representation, and reality in historical knowledge. Furthermore, it underscores the critical role of philosophical reflection in historical practice.

This article presents an alternative path to assist historiography in moving beyond postnarrativist discussions, which increasingly diverge from historians' practical work. While philosophical distance can provide a comprehensive view, straying too far risks losing sight of essential details. Thus, fostering greater dialogue between the philosophy of history, historiography, and the practice of history is crucial. Effective dialogue requires a genuine openness to understanding the methodologies of other disciplines.

This work advocates for a constructive dialogue between the philosophy of history and historiography to enrich discourse and broaden the scope of the epistemological evaluation in history. It posits that historians should actively engage with philosophical theories, drawing inspiration from intellectual luminaries. Conversely, philosophers must acknowledge the theoretical contributions of historians, recognizing them as the practitioners of the historical craft. In this context, for example, Aurell (2024) highlights contemporary figures who have become pivotal in this interdisciplinary exchange, including Leo Braudy, Peter Gay, John Clive, Jack Hexter, and more recently, Ann Rigney, Paul Ricoeur, Alun Munslow, Frank Ankersmit, Philippe Carrard, and Lionel Gossman. These scholars have adeptly illuminated the connection between narrativism and scientific history. Furthermore, like White and Danto, they have facilitated intellectual exploration and provided pathways forward, enhancing our understanding of historical and philosophical complexities.

By integrating these interdisciplinary perspectives, we can address the challenges posed by postnarrativism and foster a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of historical knowledge. This approach ensures that the discipline remains relevant and rigorous, capable of addressing both past and contemporary issues with a depth that only such a collaborative framework can provide.

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