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The Practical Past as a Field of Metahistorical Approach. Some Remarks on the Contemporary Situation of Historical Theory

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Abstract. The narrative theory of history that studies historical works from the viewpoint of their narrative, rhetorical devices, and ideological strategies highly emphasized the necessity of renewing historiography. In his early essays, the trend's founding father, Hayden White, positioned history between art and science or fiction and reality and defined the role of historical theory as a kind of "critical historiography" that is both a criticism of actual historical works and a prescriptive theoretical approach with which the contemporary historical discipline can reform itself. This renewal basically meant a formal reorganization with which the historical works and the historical discipline itself could come closer to literature by using narrative methods and rhetorical devices of recent literary works and films. However, after the 1990s, White and his followers had to face some radical problems that compelled them to rethink the role of recent historiography and their theoretical positions as well. Firstly, the so-called "new" historiography did not actually come into existence, or at least not in a way they suggested. Secondly, new forms of "unofficial" history, from varieties of public history through conspiracy theories to contemporary historical fictions, forced to reconceptualize the task of historical theory and its approach to the social and ideological functions of "official" history. Analysing some recently published works of this trend (above all, Hayden White's concept of "modernist event" and his distinction between two forms of the past, theoretical and practical), my essay tries to define the situation of historical theory among the forms of contemporary historical experience.

Keywords: theory of history, public history, conspiracy theories, practical past

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Introduction: Historical Theory as Critique of Historiography

Modern academic historiography has regarded itself as both science and art since its establishment in the nineteenth century. It is a science because its aim is to represent the past realities objectively and an art as well since this representation can be accomplished only with narrative tools of language. While the main methodological guiding principle for historiography was defined as purging its language from rhetoric and producing an objective, scientific approach, the implicit task of the historian was to retell the story of the past events as they actually happened. Thus, according to the classical view of historical discipline, the historian is a chronicler of past events, and his or her main task is to study the past objectively and to communicate impartially its true, real story for the present.

One does not need too much explanation that this approach has become quite old-fashioned since theoretical viewpoints have asserted almost the opposite for decades. The founding father of modern historical theory, Hayden White, in his masterpiece, *Metahistory*, which was later considered a book that made the "paradigm shift" in the field of history possible, emphasized provocatively that historical texts are some kind of fictions due to their formal, narrative aspects. In White's view, the past is only a chaotic mass of facts and events for us, and so historians create an intelligible but necessarily fictional story from that chaos by framing it with some culturally prearranged narrative patterns. These narrative plot structures are connected to some specific philosophical explanatory methods and ideological implications, and thus history cannot be a science in the strict sense, but it is situated somewhere among science, art, philosophy, and politics; it is all but at the same time none of them entirely (White 1973).

Thus, from the beginning, this theoretical approach tried to challenge the traditional position of historical discipline by questioning its scientific character. It had a twofold stake in challenging the traditional, objectivist view of history: firstly, to introduce a critical, self-reflexive perspective into academic historiography, to elaborate the methodology and analytical tools of this "metahistorical" view and, secondly, to encourage the development and renewal of historiography. However, after the 1990s and the new millennium, several new historical or quasi-historical directions appeared, which have transformed some connections between historical theory and historiography. The theory had to face up to the fact that historiography did not change radically, and the role of theory remained marginal in the historical discipline. At the same time, both theory and academic history had to recognize that some new competitors appeared, mostly from the popular culture and the political area, which demanded to rethink the contemporary role and possibilities of historiography.

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In my essay, I aim to analyse this situation closer and show a significant approach by which a contemporary historical theory can continue its "metahistorical" perspective and analytical methods and rethink its point of view as well. Firstly, I will sketch briefly some important basic preconceptions of the historical theory about the function of the narrative form in history and the task of theoretical historiography. Secondly, I will examine the historical field and discourse after the new millennium, comparing some new or unofficial historical explanatory methods and narratives with the academic historiography. Finally, by analysing Hayden White's last book and his distinction between two approaches to the past, I will draw some conclusions about the possible task of the contemporary theory of history and its relation to the tendency's original aims.

Theory and Practice in New Historiography

In another famous early essay, entitled *The Burden of History*, White analysed the cultural situation of history in the twentieth century and expounded that the greatest challenge of historiography is mainly a formal problem. When the modern academic historical discipline was established in the nineteenth century, it borrowed some basic narrative and representative strategies from the contemporary realist novel (e.g. omniscient narrator, metonymic prose style, using reality effects, etc.). It was modern in the nineteenth century but, according to White, in the century of Proust, Joyce, or the nouveau roman, the realist style of historiography became obsolete, so it could not represent the contemporary view of reality or perspective of history. According to White:

> when historians claim that history is a combination of science and art, they generally mean that it is a combination of *late nineteenth-century* social science and *mid-nineteenth* century art. […] If this is the case, then artists and scientists alike are justified in criticizing historians, *not because they study the past*, but because they are studying it with *bad* science and *bad* art (White 1966, 127; emphasis in the original).

Thus, White's theses had both descriptive and prescriptive aspects. They were descriptive analysing the narrative strategies and ideological implications of given historical works and were prescriptive as well since he emphasized the necessity of renewing the representational, narrative methods of historiography. This kind of narrative philosophy of history was flourishing especially from the mid-70s to the end of the 80s, and White with his followers (Dominick LaCapra, Hans Kellner, Frank Ankersmit, Keith Jenkins, etc.) underlined both aspects of the theory. Consequently, the theory had become the "bad conscience" of

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historical discipline by continuously analysing and criticizing certain works of historiography and trying to encourage historians to write new, more modern and groundbreaking works. They continuously pointed out that the historical discipline had to abandon the naïve idea of objectivity and reshape its own position in the cultural and social fields. This reshaping could only be accomplished with new, formally innovative and more experimental texts that accept the "semi-fictional character" of historiography. Therefore, theorists of history usually tried to define the new trend of history and historiography with the rhetorical device of underlining the "postness" of our historical culture. They emphasized that our culture has "stepped beyond" the traditional view of history, and one no longer can believe in "the great metanarratives of the nineteenth century;" thus, we have to "rethink" our traditional views of the past and the representations of these views. The practical consequence of this rethinking process would be, and has to be, the change of historiography's prose style and narrative methods, and so one of the main tasks of historians is to write some "new," "unconventional" historical works (see Berkhofer 1997, Jenkins 1991, Fay 2002). But in the academic field of history the separateness between theory and practice increased, theorists mostly just read and examined texts of historians but did not carry out actual research, while historians continued writing traditional, so-called "realist" works and mostly did not care about theoretical questions.

However, to legitimize itself, the theory had to find some "modern" or "postmodern" historical works demonstrating these very recommended directions and new representative methods. The theory attempted to apply two strategies to show that a new, both formally and epistemologically progressive historiography had already existed. The first tactic is to find some such works from recent historiography and to point out that there are some actual revolutionary efforts to reshape the discipline. But almost all essays analysing the contemporary "modern" or "postmodern" historiography mention the same four or five books as instances of the groundbreaking, formally innovative wave of history, such as *Dead Certainties* by Simon Schama or the microhistorical works of Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Zemon Davis (Schama 1991, Ginzburg 1980, Davis 1983). It is worth mentioning that sometimes theorists interpreted these works radically differently than the authors themselves. For example, while Dutch philosopher of history, Frank Ankersmit regarded the field of microhistory as an example par excellence of postmodernist historiography, microhistorians intensively denied their so-called "postmodernity;" in fact, Carlo Ginzburg was one of the most radical critics of Hayden White's approach (Ankersmit 1994, 162–181; Ginzburg 1992).

The second strategy is to acknowledge the unchangeable conservatism of the discipline and try to find the cases of "new historiography" in other areas of culture, notably in the fields of art. For example, Robert Rosenstone, who started his career as a "traditional" historian and moved later towards the direction of theory and

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"experimental" historiography, pointed out a similar fragmentation in historical discourse and also emphasized the lack (or at least rareness) of groundbreaking, formally innovative actual historical works. According to the author, the cause of this phenomenon is independent of whether the actual historian is conservative, traditionalist, or reformist but indeed ensued from the nature of historical discourse and the expectations of the discipline *and* the society from historiography. If a given historian wants to move up the academic ladder, and, of course, everybody wants, he or she has to write so-called "traditional" works corresponding to the scientific and rhetoric rules of the discourse. Thus, the "real," innovative historical books paradoxically do not originate in the field of historiography but come from literature, film, or graphic novels. In one of his essays, Rosenstone lists some contemporary documentary films as examples of new historiography that are innovative both formally, due to their uncommon narrative strategies and self-reflexive characteristics, and thematically, since they prefer to represent minorities and formerly oppressed, silenced subjects of the past (Rosenstone 1995).[1] In another text, among others, he mentions some graphic novels (Art Siegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*) and two of his own semi-historical, semi-fictional books (a fictional biography of Isaac Babel, *King of Odessa* [2003] and a personal historical account of three generations of his own family, *The Man Who Swam into History* [2005]) illustrating the new, experimental historiography (Rosenstone 2007).

Similar conclusions are formulated by the Canadian literary theorist, Linda Hutcheon from another direction. Analysing the main tendencies of the novel in the second half of the twentieth century, Hutcheon identifies a trend or movement, which she calls historiographical metafiction. While there are many different works that can be classified into this category, from García Márquez through John Fowles, Thomas Pynchon, and Umberto Eco to Julian Barnes, Christoph Ransmayr, and Lawrence Norfolk, they are comparable with each other due to their reflexive historicity. Hutcheon explains the metahistorical dimensions of these books from two directions: on the one hand, from the contemporary, mostly poststructuralist, theories of language, culture, and society and, on the other, from the historical criticism of Hayden White and his followers. Her book is about the history of literature; so, she emphasized only implicitly that these novels, as historiographical metafictions, can be interpreted as history also since they represent more progressive and contemporary visions of history than recent academic historical works themselves (Hutcheon 1988).

Consequently, historical theory has to (and tries to) face up a situation when its recommended approaches or stylistic and narrative strategies have mostly been represented not by works of historiography but films, literary texts, or graphic novels. But there is another challenge with which both theory and academic

1 His examples are mostly independent documentary films, e.g. Jill Godmillow's *Far from Poland* (1984), Ross Gibson's *Camera Natura* (1986), or Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory* (1991).

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historiography have had to deal with for the last decades – namely, some new approaches to the past that have been generally called as instances of "public history," gaining ground and becoming more and more popular.

Public History as Fashion and Challenge

Nowadays, some historians look at the cultural position of history anxiously as being very fragile and unstable. In the 1980s and 90s, the historical discipline saw the critical theory of White and his followers as one of its most dangerous challenges, but currently the real competitor of academic history has come from another cultural field, namely from popular culture and political ideologies. The main opponent of history can be called "public history," and this umbrella term covers the far-reaching varieties in which contemporary popular historical attitudes or interests can appear: e.g. historical novels, films, videogames, popular historical magazines, historical reenactments, conspiracy theories, etc. Of course, most of these tendencies are not new; for example, the genre of the historical novel was born in parallel with historiography, and a lot of different fields and strategies of historical representation have developed since the end of the eighteenth century. As Stephen Bann analysed thoroughly in his book, *Clothing of Clio*, a special historical attitude (or, as he calls it, historical mindedness) came into existence in the nineteenth century that appeared in lots of areas of Western culture from historiography through historical novels, plays, and operas to museums and antiquarianism (Bann 1984). But nowadays a relatively new trend of historical mindedness seems to emerge that approaches history via media of popular culture and from the perspective of populist political and consumer attitudes.

The common feature of these tendencies is their present-orientedness since the past becomes subordinate to the interests and ideologies of the present. It is not a new phenomenon since many historians and theorists pointed out that the historical fashions and issues in the nineteenth century were operated mostly by attitudes and political interests of the nation-state. A good and thoroughly analysed example of that was the phenomenon of "the invention of tradition" guided by political intentions to create common identity to the nation (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). But while historical attitudes of the nineteenth century were driven by mostly nationalist interests, in our contemporary culture, besides nationalism, a strong consumer and market-oriented attitude is operating.[2] In other words,

2 Of course, I am well aware that the problem is more difficult, and the changing role of nationalism in the globalized world and the connections between nationalism and public history should be analysed in a more detailed way. But because the aim of my essay is different, here I was just able to signify the moving direction of the historical forms and practices and their nature as commodity in the marketing system.

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varieties of public history are working as commodities, and they have values and prices in the marketing circulation; therefore, these historical approaches are specialized predominantly in popular, fashionable, and easy-to-sell topics and trends (in more detail, see de Groot 2009). One can mention relatively many but limited numbers of fashionable historical topics whose cultural circulations are determined mostly by the trends and rules of our consumer society. For example, shortly after the American television network, *History Channel* started broadcasting in 1995, it got the nickname "Hitler Channel" in popular slang because it transmitted so many documentaries on Hitler and WW2. The main problem with public history is that it simplifies the past, blurs its unfamiliarity, and reframes history to a familiar, easy-to-consume object. David Harlan identified one of the most spectacular problems with popular history as "while real history reconstructs the past as a foreign country, a place where they do things differently, popular history … reconstructs the past as a theatre of the present, a costume drama filled with people you already know, people you can relate to, people, like Bob and Jane next door" (Harlan 2007, 120).

Some instances in public history are relatively "innocent," for example, reenactments or renaissance fairs that can be accused only due to their simplifying attitudes or, as in the case of historical reenactments, because they try to familiarize the past from our present-oriented perspective. But some phenomena can be explicitly harmful and dangerous, for example, the alternative, conspiracy-based, historical explanations from which the most ill-famed is the Holocaust denial. Strategies of Holocaust denial can throw light upon some attitudes of direct political versions of public history. The most spectacular characteristic of Holocaust deniers' tactic is to imitate the institutional structure and rhetoric of sciences showing itself as an exact copy of historical discourse with their books, publishing houses, "official" institutes and journals (Institute for Historical Review and its periodical, *Journal of Historical Review*), conferences, and "experts" of topics whose names sound as much authentic in this discourse as famous historians in academic historiography (David Irving, Robert Faurisson, etc.). Thus, the Holocaust denial wants to show itself as an instance of historiography with radical but considerable alternative explanation of history. The deniers call their viewpoint as revisionism, claiming that it is "simply" a corrected, revisited version of history, although maybe more radical than the "traditional" view of history. However, the explanatory logic of Holocaust denial is not similar to the interpretive ways of historiography but follows the special logic of a conspiracy theory. This very popular kind of historical explanation works with a strategy that Umberto Eco called overinterpretation, which creates arbitrary connections among facts of a given event with the help of an already existing and generally ideological (mostly extremist) preconception. The other important aspect of a conspiracy theory is its implicit philosophy of history representing a basically

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meaningful and understandable world where the transparency of history was confused by an evil force that has created "official" (and, according to the conspiracists, necessarily false) interpretations of past events (see Eco 1992, Keeley 1999). The conspiracy-theory-based quasi-historical narratives appear almost in all fields of our culture from popular novels and films (e.g. *The Da Vinci Code* and its continuations and rip-offs) through alternative explanations of recent past events (e.g. 9/11) and politically supported, paranoid enemy making to some literary works that show and ironically debunk the fictional logic of conspiracy (Danilo Kiš, Umberto Eco, see Boym 1999).

The Holocaust denial as a conspiracy-based explanatory method works with two strategies. On the one hand, it tries to show the uncertain elements of official historical works, which were mostly caused by various but explainable factors (differences between the testimonies of traumatized survivors, the lack of actual order to Final Solution from Hitler, etc.). On the other, by questioning the accepted explanations, it tries to interpret the events with a far-right ideologically framed narrative ("the Holocaust was a fictional global conspiracy of the Jews who use this intentionally generated universal remorse for their political aims"). Thus, here the very recipe of conspiracy theories works too: a secret conspiracy tried to confuse the clear explanation of history creating a "fiction" about the mass murdering, but the "real," unofficial historians reveal the "true" story (in more detail, see Kisantal 2017).

Moreover, some academic historians emphasized that the fragmentation of history, the emergence of popular forms and alternative historical explanations are closely connected to the "anything goes" spirit of postmodernity. As the British historian, Debora Lipstadt, writes in her famous book on the Holocaust denial:

> the deniers do not work in vacuum. Part of their success can be traced to an intellectual climate that made its mark in the scholarly work during the past two decades. […] Various scholars began to argue that texts had no fixed meaning. […] It became more difficult to talk about the objective truth of a text, legal concept, or even an event. In academic circles some scholars spoke of relative truths, rejecting the notion that there was one version of the world that was necessarily right while another was wrong. (Lipstadt 1993, 17–18)

Although the author does not mention Hayden White (she cites the literary critic Stanley Fish and the philosophers Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam), one can easily connect this kind of viewpoint with White's relativist conception of history. If all historical works are fictions, and there is no external point from which any historical narratives could be seen as more legitimate than other, then, for example, conspiracy-based historical explanations could also be considered as

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authorized competitors of academic historiography. Thus, according to the critics of popular histories and contemporary conspiracy-based historical explanations, theoretical relativism could be dangerous since it challenges the authority of institutional historiography. If a historical narrative written by a professionally trained historian is only one possible story among the other narratives circulating in culture, then believing in historical truth cannot be possible anymore, and simpler and more spectacular popular histories become widely accepted.

In the 1990s, a great dispute about the representation of the Holocaust took place in which critics of White argued that the relativist perspective of his theory allows legitimizing far-right-wing representations of the Final Solution or the Holocaust denial. White tried to defend his standpoint by introducing a special kind of event called as "modernist" that determines the representational strategies. According to the author, the modernist event is a peculiar phenomenon, typically recent or contemporary that is special in its scope and traumatizing effects. The Holocaust was the paradigmatic modernist event, but there were other incidents of this kind as well (wars and historical catastrophes in the twentieth century) continuously affecting our contemporary situation. In White's opinion, a modernist event determines its representational strategies as far as it cannot or, more precisely, is not allowed to be narrated by the classic, realist devices but only by modernist or postmodern narrative and rhetorical procedures (White 1992, White 1999). It seems that White had to restrict the radicalism of his theory since by introducing the concept of modernist event he emphasized that historical events themselves or, more precisely, *some kind* of events can determine the strategies of representation. To understand correctly the significance of the modernist event and the late White's viewpoint in the connection between past events and representational methods, one needs to analyse in more detail the central distinction introduced in his last book, namely the difference between the historical and practical past.

The Practical Past

The basic distinction that White presents in his last book, *Practical Past*, is connected both to the earlier mentioned prescriptive character of theory and to the position of history in our culture. He distinguishes two possible views of the past, called historical and practical pasts. Both terms were borrowed from a British philosopher, Michael Oakeshott, who in his essay from 1967, *The Emergence of the History of Thought*, contrasted these two versions of the past. While the historical past is the research field and construction of historiography, an objective, scientific account for the past, the practical past is history viewed from the perspective of our present, a past which all of us carry around with us and which creates our present

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identity. These are, of course, only ideal types of our possible attitudes to history, and, in Oakeshott's terminology, practical past is mostly a negative category, a quasi-mythical vision of history serving mainly present interests (Oakeshott 2004 [1967]). However, according to White, the connections between the two versions of the past are much more difficult. Whereas the historical past cannot be an objective representation that is independent of interests and ideologies of a given historian, the practical past is not even a simple mythical or present-oriented viewpoint, but it can also present a relevant attitude to the history. Neither of these two past versions equals to the real past as it actually happened since while the historical past is an abstract creation of historians, the practical past approaches our history from primarily an ethical viewpoint, trying to answer our present questions and problems with the help of past examples. As he states:

> The historical past is a theoretically motivated construction, existing only in the books and articles published by professional historians; it is constructed as an end in itself, possesses little or no value for understanding and explaining the present, and provides no guidelines for acting in the present of foreseeing the future. […] We call upon the practical past of memory, dream, fantasy, experience, and imagination when confronted with the question: "What ought I (or we) do?" The historical past cannot help us here, because the most it can tell us is what other people in *other* times, places, and circumstances did in their situation at *that* time and place. This information contains no warrant for deducing what we, in our situation, in our time and our place, *should* do in order to conform to the standard set by that categorical imperative which licenses our belief in the possibility of morality itself. (White 2014, 9–10)

Thus, while the historical past is construed by the *scientific*, the practical is interpreted by the *moral* discourse. The practical past can manifest itself as collective memory, heritage, and other versions of history. White sketches the historical situation when, in the nineteenth century, history, establishing itself as a new discipline, made itself independent of the practical past. Following the analyses of Reinhardt Koselleck in his book *Futures Past* (Koselleck 1990), White pointed out that history at first separated itself from the earlier, rhetorical-based historiography and also from the philosophy of history since both of them were closely connected to the practical dimension of the past. The new academic historiography referred to itself as a strict, objective science, and condemned practical past as a mythical attitude with which a given period tries to reframe the past and to connect that with its own interests.

However, in White's opinion, the practical past has (or can have) a dimension which is as significant as the historical past or, in any cases, can represent more

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relevant attitudes by its ethical character. White analysed two contemporary historical novels, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), to point out the historical relevance of the literary texts' representation. After all, some novels can show versions of or approaches to the past, presenting our historical attitudes and being able to reshape them as well. They show fictional accounts of the past but with their literary devices, and especially with the ethical and political attitudes represented by these strategies, they can reshape and restructure our practical past visions. It is no accident that both analysed novels have strong moral stakes representing two socially and culturally challenging periods of the past. Sebald's novel on searching for identity after the great cataclysm of the Second World War and the Holocaust can fit well into the category of the modernist event. The protagonist's, Austerlitz's quest for finding his identity among buildings, fragments of memory, and half-narrated stories of the past metaphorically represents our special attitude to our history after the war and the Holocaust. However, with Morrison's work, White steps further in reshaping and widening the concept of modernist event to a more general category of practical past since the topic of *Beloved*, the nineteenth-century slavery is not a modernist event in itself but is *modernized*, made more contemporary by the novel. This modernization can be accomplished only by fictional devices with which the novel was able to withdraw from the historical past and instead represented the ethical character of the practical past. At the end of the essay, White analyses one of Morrison's statements in her "Foreword" to the fourth edition of the novel. Morrison describes that she had to invent her protagonist's, Margaret Gardner's thoughts and "plumb them for a *subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual* in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's 'place'" (quotation and emphases by White 2014, 22). In White's view, the emphasized part of sentence means "a subtext that was true in its *historical essence* but not strictly factual." He continues as follows:

> Here we come to the real problem that confronts us in trying to theorize the relation between the historical past and its practical counterpart. For our interest in the practical past must take us beyond "the facts" as conventionally understood in historical thinking. Indeed, it must take us beyond the idea that a fact, whatever else it may be, is identifiable by its logical opposition to "fiction," where fiction is understood to be an imaginary thing or product of the imagination (White 2014, 23; emphases in the original).

In other words, according to White, with the act of fictionalization, Morrison could paradoxically remain faithful to the past, however, not to the historical but

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the practical past. Consequently, these novels can represent an authentic, genuine vision of the past, not despite their fictional character but precisely by that. Thus, this authenticity is not understood as a strict factual correspondence to the historical past but as an ethical attitude to the past and to our present at the same time.

Conclusions: Theory and the Practical Past

The hardly hidden aim of Hayden White's last book is to turn over the hierarchy between the two versions of the past and give back the value to the practical past that it had possessed before the academic historiography was established in the nineteenth century. One might admit that White's arguments can be relevant to the great literary texts, films or artworks, in other words, to the masterpieces of art. However, what is the matter with the earlier mentioned problem, with the routinized patterns? Undoubtedly, White restricted his approach only to the so-called "great works," but that does not mean that this viewpoint could not be applicable to other versions of contemporary popular history too. David Harlan argues that one of the tasks of recent historical theory is mapping the contemporary historical discourses, media, and practices and revealing the connections among them, pointing out latent and manifest ideologies and prejudices. As he emphasized, historical novels, films, or reenactments are not substitutes for historiography; they are not necessarily challenges of, it but public and academic histories are different forms of representing the past; they can be influenced by each other and together can shape our practical attitudes to the past and the present. As he summarizes the present situation and the task of contemporary historiography:

> A new and in ways a more vibrant history is being produced outside the walls of academy, by novelists, memoirists, autobiographers, comic book authors, filmmakers, curators, and the like. […]
> What we need now is a map of our rapidly expanding area of responsibility. Such a map would, first and most obviously, identify the major forms of historical representation, both established and emerging, and explain the advantages, limitations, responsibilities peculiar to each one. Second, it would, hopefully, describe the codes and conventions that govern representation and evaluation in each of the realms – thereby reminding us of what we already know but too often forget: that the criteria for evaluating any representation of the past must be both media-specific and genre-specific. […]
> Finally, such a map would help us understand the relationships *between* a culture's various modes of historical representation. (Harlan 2009, 181–182)

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Thus, one of the main tasks of a theoretical historiography is to study and analyse the contemporary fields of historical discourse from academic historiography through historical films and novels to reenactments, conspiracy theories, and so on. One needs to deal not only with "serious," "scientific" approaches to the past and not just with "great works" but also with instances of popular culture, to interpret the deeper connections among them and the possible approaches to the practical past versions. As I shortly analysed earlier, for example, the extreme positions as the conspiracy theories and the Holocaust denial also need to be studied since without understanding their explanatory methods and visions of the past we could not fight effectively against them. Not only historical works of the academic field have some special narrative strategies, ways of explanation, and ideological implications, but popular histories also possess their own approaches to the past. They can discuss with present problems or challenge our habitual ideas, as the works of Morrison, Sebald, and other significant writers, film directors, etc. do, can reinforce our present identity with examples of the past, as most versions of public history do, or can serve extremist political tasks as well.

Actually, it is not a new project but just continues the inquiry of *Metahistory* in which, with parallel analyses of historians (Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, Burckhardt) and philosophers of history (Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche, Croce), White outlined the main narrative, rhetorical and ideological tendencies and directions that determined the historical discourse of the century. Or Stephen Bann's earlier mentioned book set the task of studying the historical mindedness in nineteenth-century England and France with simultaneous analyses of historical works, novels, memoirs, or museums and house interiors. Thus, the theory of history can also be a historiography, and maybe today one has to analyse not only historical works and philosophies but also conspiracy theories, popular series, novels, films, or even videogames to sketch some characteristics of contemporary historical imagination and some attitudes to the practical past.

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