

**What is History and Why Do I Write It?
Afterthoughts on the Contemporary Past**
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'What is History
and Why Do We Study It?'

1. Out of the eighteen items from post-communist Romania collected and documented by visual anthropologist Alyssa Grossman and brought to stop-motion life by visual artist Selena Kimball in their joint split-screen installation *Memory Objects, Memory Dialogues* (2011) – out of those eighteen items, one in particular caught my attention when I first saw the film version of their work on my tiny laptop monitor: a boxed set of educational slides – *diafilme* in Romanian – dated 1975 and entitled *Istoria patriei* (History of the Fatherland).¹ > p. ...

What was it that struck me? Hardly the portrait of Mihai Viteazul, the Wallachian prince who conquered and held the neighboring principalities of Moldova and Transylvania for a few years around the dawn of the 17th century, which adorned its yellowed lid. On the contrary, considering that his tragic story – just as he seemed to have definitely secured his dominion over the newly acquired territories, Mihai was assassinated on the orders of his closest ally, the Habsburg general Giorgio Basta – would later be glorified by Romanian nationalists in their own struggles against the Ottoman empire, anyone else would have been unexpected. Rather, I immediately felt that this tarnished casing, even more than the other articles in Grossman and Kimball’s “memory archive,” really encapsulated something like *history* – although not quite in the sense intended, in all probability, by the team of university professors gathered under editor Mariana Geamănu.²

Over a total of thirty-six celluloid strips, comprising text as well as images, the narrative covered the entire period from classical antiquity (attending in particular to the relations between Romans and Dacians) and up to “the struggle of the masses under the PCR [Romanian communist party] for justice, freedom and socialism” depicted in the ultimate filmstrip. No small feat, then – but also no big surprise. Indeed, to Grossman’s informant, the act of looking through the slides again – if, that is, she had even seen them to begin with, something that she was unable to recall during the interview – became above all “a reminder of how Romanian history was taught” in the mid-70s, at the time of their production.³ What was originally intended as a historical account, a chronicle of past events, had been transformed – solely, as it were, by the passage of time – to just another trace of that very past. A secondary source demoted to a primary one, history returned to

Not only do these words legitimize my voluptuous feeling, the joyous, and powerful language also nourish it, move The feeling of urgent questions, research future texts and future languages





memory. But the question still remains.

Ce este și de ce învățăm istoria? Even with the text before me, diacritics all in place, I can barely make out the words in the colloquial Romanian of the film's soundtrack. Luckily, there are always the subtitles to fall back on. "What is history and why do we study it?" The question, which also supplies the heading for the first of the thirty-six strips that make up the *Istoria patriei* set, is read out loud by the informant – after which she looks up, straight into Grossman's video camera, and makes a short, hesitant laugh.⁴

Her laughter is what struck me, even though – or, perhaps, just because – I cannot make up my mind about exactly what it was supposed to mean. An attempt to mitigate somewhat the perceived pompousness of the phrase? An expression of historical vertigo, the involuntary effect of the psychological process of recollection? A tacit way of disputing the viability of the "fatherland" as a historiographic category – or even the very possibility of history as a worthwhile intellectual endeavor? Perhaps she did not know herself.

2. More than anything, what the case of *Istoria patriei* signifies – what its discolored carton can be said to encapsulate, but also what the uneasy laughter of Grossman's informant somehow evokes – is the mutual implication, in any historical representation, of past and present. The established terminology is already a giveaway: any *re*-presentation is always already a presentation, a particular way of making something present. In this sense, the metamorphosis of the set of slides from account to trace, from a secondary to a primary source, only brings to light a dynamic that is constitutive of all possible history – but which, no doubt for that very reason, remains hidden from view in most actual histories. A dynamic, furthermore, that works both ways.

The notion of a "contemporary past," as developed over the last handful of decades by Victor Buchli and other scholars in archaeology and related fields, takes us in the same twofold direction: presence coupled with absence, the familiar with the unfamiliar, the articulate with the inarticulate – and, perhaps most significantly in the present context, the discursive with the non-discursive.⁵ Indeed, the same concept served as a point of

departure for that counter-disciplinary encounter (symposium, workshop, whatever you would call it) that, in turn, has provided the main impetus for this anthology.⁶ If it remained in the background of the discussions at the actual event, I hope that it comes out all the more vividly – but still without being overstated – as the diverse contributions have been assembled here, page by page, with Buchli's afterword as a concluding exclamation mark. > p. ...

Now, could we take the same train of thought one more station down the line? In fact, we are halfway there already. If the dynamic brought to light by the notion of a "contemporary past" is actually constitutive, as I have just asserted, of all possible history – then all of the past, in its breathtaking totality, must be considered "contemporary" in the same sense: as more or less comprehensive historical interpretations, as more or less exceptional traces of the past – or even as a *lack* of traces, filled in by our more or less disciplined imagination. Hence, with not one iota of contradiction, we can claim that there is no "recent past" and that all of the past is "recent" – that is, made anew, constantly revived, ever-strange.⁷

And where would this leave us? Allow me to pass the word on to another ghostly presence at the original event, an author whose work animated our discussions – in spirit, if perhaps not in letter – whether we knew it or not. A voice from the past, our past: "History, considered as a spiritual fact, is by no means a mere succession of events that replace and displace each other in time. It is an eternal present, a ὁμοῦ πᾶν, in the midst of this change. Its 'meaning' is in none of the individual moments *alone* – and yet, on the other hand, it is complete and unbroken in each of them." Ὁμοῦ πᾶν, *homou pan*: all together, everything at the same time. The words quoted are from the eighth fragment of Parmenides – while the quotation as a whole originates in Ernst Cassirer's *Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, a study written during the German-Jewish philosopher's exile in Gothenburg.⁸

3. But the question still remains. Regardless of what it suggested to Grossman's informant, what was it about her hesitant laughter that seemed to catch my attention? Perhaps my own inability, all the more astonishing in view of my disciplinary background, to provide a convincing answer to that other question which had first triggered it:

“What is history and why do we study it?” I have spent most of my adult life studying to be a historian, attaining the highest academic degree in the subject – without ever really being confronted in earnest, either by professors or colleagues, with this most straightforward question.

What little I know about the history of my own profession, about history’s own historical conditions of possibility, I have had to pick up by myself. Whatever direction my research has taken, it has dragged me along with it.

For me, then, the question becomes: “What is history *and why do I write it?*” Not that my own personal efforts to this end could be isolated in any meaningful sense from their academic or wider societal context – but since nobody has provided me with a ready answer, I can only turn to myself in search of one.

“Only new countries have a past.” A lapidary statement, but just as profound as you would expect from a one-time collaborator of Jorge Luis Borges: the Argentine photographer Horacio Coppola, as quoted in Ana Betancour’s contribution to this volume. > p. ... Profound – yet immediately visible in the 1930s Buenos Aires that comes into view on the gelatin silver surface of Coppola’s prints. Indeed, it is only when objective change becomes sufficiently *dramatic*, in all senses of that venerable word, to saturate subjective experience – when, on a more philosophical note, the orders of “universal time” and “lived time” begin to intersect – that something like a historical perspective can and will impose itself on the general world-view.⁹ And the more completely the two come to overlap, the more thoroughly its outlook will become dramatic, secular, historical, modern. Specifically, what we have in hindsight come to call “modernity” is that exact moment – impossible to locate exactly – when the scales suddenly tip, when the intersection between the two orders amounts to more than what remains apart. Modernity, that is, should only be considered a historical epoch if we take that term in its etymological sense: a pause or cessation, a position, even a “fixed point in time in reference to which positions are defined.”¹⁰

Yes, only new countries have a past. But under modern conditions, all countries are “new” countries – and no regime, heavenly or worldly, seems sufficiently commanding to be able to conceal that fact. Beyond their immediate appeal, this is perhaps another reason why the

black-and-white of Coppola’s images goes so well with Mikael Olsson’s > p. ... or Hendrik Zeitler’s > p. ... lively palette: they all meet and mingle in the eternal present of our contemporary past.¹¹

No, it is not – as Bruno Latour has so eloquently claimed – that we have never been modern, that there is no such thing as a modern world. It is rather that we have *always* been modern – and that it is only in the era commonly known as “modernity” that we have come to understand this. In fact, such a realization is also what makes something like Latour’s “anthropology of the here and now” conceivable to begin with: that the here and now is also, at least ideally, a there and then.¹²

4. This mutual implication of past and present – hidden from view in most historical writing, revealed by the notion of the contemporary past – has, in its turn, several important implications: for one thing, that every perspective on the past presupposes a point of view in the present. This is not relativism, only relativity.¹³ Hence, as a further corollary, to understand what the notion of the contemporary past actually entails in a given situation, we would also have to understand what “the contemporary” in itself entails.

For all its apparent pitfalls (and, no doubt, some less apparent ones as well), the conception of our time as an “age of information” seems particularly apposite to the question at hand, and another way in which Buchli’s approach could prove valuable. “If prehistory is often characterized by a dearth of material with which to understand past social processes, the experience of the twentieth century and the recent past is confronted with an equally obscuring excess of information.” Writing in 2001, in hindsight of some thirty-odd years of academic identity politics, Buchli and his co-editor Gavin Lucas argued for “a critical empiricism that works on the contradictions of contemporary experience.”¹⁴ Today, more than ten years on, the question is if we can still afford to settle for just the contradictions. The “tragedy of culture” that Georg Simmel already lamented some years before the Great War may be real enough, but is it always as inescapable as he believed it to be?¹⁵ Surely, history also has its comic moments – those rare instants of carnivalesque exuberance when some things (if not





everything) finally seem to be set straight, when wrongs are righted and people get their due.¹⁶ What would a critical *idealism* look like in our age of information?¹⁷

To begin with, it would surely need to temper the critical impulse – which has arguably become so pervasive today as to constitute a new dogmatism, an authoritarianism for the anti-authoritarian personality – with some good old-fashioned hermeneutics. “The task of history,” as Cassirer put it, “does not consist merely in making us *acquainted* with the existence and life of the past, but in teaching us how to *interpret* it. All mere knowledge of the past would remain for us a ‘lifeless picture’ if no other powers were involved in it than those of reproductive memory. What memory preserves of

facts and events becomes historical recollection only to the extent that we integrate it into our interior and are able to transform it.”¹⁸

Integrate – that is, assimilate or, even more to the point, *incorporate* into what the philosopher elsewhere described as “the integral of experience.”¹⁹ Certainly, we must do our utmost to let the contradictions speak for themselves, but we should not leave them unanswered. And transform – for in providing them with a reply, we have already turned them into something else: questions to be answered, problems to be solved, doubts to be dispelled. The contradictions of actual reality transmuted into confirmations of a possible ideal. Lead into gold.

5. This last point, as it happens, almost brings us back to where we began – to historical representation as a particular way of “presenting” the past, as well as to the question of just *how* we go about doing that. To linger for just a while longer in Cassirer’s untimely *Gedankenwelt*, to what symbolic forms does the practice of history appeal? To science, insofar as history is an academic discipline; to art, insofar as it is a literary genre; perhaps even to myth – although only in an oblique fashion – insofar as it speaks to what Siegfried Kracauer, in a posthumously published work, described as “the last things before the last.”²⁰ Or does history, as Cassirer himself seems to imply at times, constitute a symbolic form of its own?²¹

But, by all means, let us not turn this into a philological discussion. In a more experimental vein, what ways to “present” the past does our present age of information present us with? For obvious reasons, our answer to that question can only be provisional, but that only makes it all the more productive. While traditional forms of scholarship – articles published in peer-reviewed scientific journals and eventually compiled into monographs circulated, in print or online, by some more or less prestigious academic press – will no doubt remain the most important forum for historical research, the ongoing revolution in digital technology opens up a vista of possibilities far wider than what is encompassed by the narrow horizon of “open access” distribution. It makes older research as well as established sources readily available, engenders new kinds of source material – texts, of course, but also sounds and images, along with more abstract, statistical patterns hidden away in the underlying data – and, crucially in this connection, invites new means of expression that scholars have yet to embrace fully.

With allusion to a classic article by art theorist Rosalind Krauss, we can think of this new predicament as *history in the expanded field* – an uneven topography that other disciplines have already been exploring for some time now.²² Anthropologists in particular were early to adopt still photography and later film as both research tools and means of dissemination, an approach that has been simultaneously promoted and challenged by the proliferation of digital media.²³ The discipline has also witnessed initiatives that run directly parallel with the work of Victor Buchli and his colleagues in archaeology

and material culture studies, such as the “anthropology for contemporaneous worlds” advocated by Marc Augé.²⁴

Certainly, it is in the same landscape that Alyssa Grossman’s *Memory objects* project situates itself – and her visual dialogue with Selena Kimball no doubt helps her navigate the thick historical undergrowth of the present moment. In their own words:

We maintain that the use of the visual in anthropology can exist beyond the category of a “sub-discipline,” by utilizing creative and experimental fieldwork methodologies consisting of engaged and embodied practices, and by playfully interrogating, as well as documenting and explaining material culture. We also argue that an artist can engage with anthropological theory and debates at multiple stages of his or her art practice, *through making the “field” an extension of the “studio,”* a place where ethnographic awareness can inform and shape the creative process.²⁵

And just as certainly, it is into this expanded field that my own proposition hopes to intercede on history’s behalf. Hence, the prospect of future counter-disciplinary collaborations between the disciplines of history, anthropology and what, for lack of a better term, we might call the “indicial” arts: photography, film, archive-based practices in contemporary art, etc.²⁶ To my mind, and the recent craze for the so-called Web 2.0 (already something of an archaism) notwithstanding, the medium of film still holds the greatest promise in this respect – film conceived, with Jacques Rancière, as “a specific mode of the sensible” and more specifically as “the mode which abolishes the opposition between an interior world and an exterior world, a world of the spirit and a world of bodies, which abolishes the oppositions of subject and object, of nature scientifically known and sentiment endured.”²⁷ Film, in other words, considered as the symbolic form *par excellence* of our contemporary past.²⁸

And so, we return to the photographic reproduction, interlaced and pixelated, of a box of communist-era educational slides... All of that in a single frame. Who would have guessed?

- 1 Alyssa Grossman and Selena Kimball, *Memory Objects, Memory Dialogues* (2013), 26 mins, split screen projection.
- 2 According to the online catalog of Timiș County Library (<http://tinread.bjt.ro/opac>), which houses a copy in their “Deliu Petroiu” collection. Along with the personal website of a *diafilme* enthusiast (<http://cartidecopiisidiafilme.webgarden.ro>), this has served as my main source of information on the *Istoria patriei* slides.
- 3 Grossman & Kimball, *Memory Objects, Memory Dialogues*, ca 16:18.
- 4 Grossman & Kimball, *Memory Objects, Memory Dialogues*, ca 16:35.
- 5 Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas, “The Absent Present: Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past,” in *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past*, ed. Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 9–15. For a historical survey of the subfield, see Rodney Harrison and John Schofield, *After Modernity. Archaeological Approaches to the Contemporary Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), part 1.
- 6 See the introduction > p. ... and Claes Caldenby’s contribution > p. ... to the present volume.
- 7 According to the Online Etymology Dictionary (<http://www.etymonline.com>), an inclusive compilation of published reference works, the word ‘recent’ derives from the Latin prefix *re-* and a (reconstructed) proto-Indo-European root **ken-*, meaning “fresh, new, young” – but cf. the Oxford English Dictionary (<http://www.oed.com>), which has “of uncertain origin”.
- 8 Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences. Five Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 12. Originally published as *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften. Fünf Studien*, Acta universitatis gothoburgensis, vol. 48 (1942). For a recent (!) philological discussion of Parmenides’ expression, see Michael Theunissen, “Metaphysics’ Forgetfulness of Time: on the Controversy over Parmenides, Frag. 8, 5”, in *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, ed. Axel Honneth et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 19–23.
- 9 Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), vol. 3, ch. 4.
- 10 Liddel, Scott & Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s. v. “ἐποχή” (consulted on <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper>).
- 11 Cf. Sigfried Giedion, *The Eternal Present. A Contribution on Constancy and Change*, vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1962). The first out of four epigraphs to Giedion’s tome, taken from Ezra Pound’s *Spirit of Romance* (1910), reads: “All ages are

- contemporaneous.” A recent discussion of Giedion’s work which resonates deeply with my argument is Spyros Papapetros, “Beginnings or Origins – Beginnings and Endings: Sigfried Giedion’s (Pre)historiography”, *Journal of Architectural Education* 65:2 (2012). Regarding Cassirer’s influence on Giedion, see Christopher Hight, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Cybernetics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), ch. 7.
- 12 Quoted from “Irreductions” in Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 207. The preceding passage also alludes to *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 13 Cf. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 228 et passim.
- 14 Buchli & Lucas, “The Absent Present,” 14.
- 15 This is Cassirer’s main objection in his critical discussion of Simmel’s thesis: see *Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, ch. 5.
- 16 An allusion to Mikhail Bakhtin’s famous work on Rabelais. Less well known, even though it has been discussed by leading scholars in the field, is Cassirer’s influence on Bakhtin: see e.g. Craig Brandist, “Bakhtin, Cassirer and Symbolic Forms,” *Radical Philosophy* 85 (1997), where it is described as “pervasive” (p. 20) – and Brian Poole, “Bakhtin and Cassirer: the Philosophical Origins of Bakhtin’s Carnival Messianism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 97:3/4 (1998), who considers it “seminal” (p. 548).
- 17 Of course, Latour has already provided us with an altogether convincing answer to that question, although his love-hate relationship with the Kantian tradition would probably inhibit him from admitting it. More on that in a forthcoming text.
- 18 Cassirer, *Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, 76.
- 19 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 203. One example of such an ‘integral’ would be the *homou pan* of history (see above).
- 20 Siegfried Kracauer, *History. The Last Things Before the Last* (Princeton: Wiener, 1995). Although I have not yet found any research that could substantiate this claim, I believe that Kracauer’s work – first published in 1969, three years after its author’s death, by their mutual colleague Paul Oskar Kristeller – could be read as an inquiry into history as a symbolic form in Cassirer’s sense. The groundwork for such an argument has been laid by Kay Schiller, “Paul Oskar Kristeller, Ernst Cassirer and the ‘Humanistic Turn’ in American Emigration,” in *Exile, Science and Bildung: the Contested Legacies of German Intellectual Figures*, ed. David Kettler and Gerhard Lauer (Basingstoke: Palgrave

Macmillan, 2005).

- 21 If nothing else, the fact that history – along with the usual suspects of language, myth, art, and science – qualifies for its own chapter in Cassirer’s late survey of his own philosophy of culture does lend itself to such an interpretation: see Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man. An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), ch. 10.
- 22 Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (1979). The details of Krauss’s argument, with its quaint semiotic terminology, need not concern us here.
- 23 A classic overview of the field, first published in 1976, recently appeared in a revised edition: Karl Heider, *Ethnographic Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006). More recent developments of relevance to my argument are charted in Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby, eds., *Made to be Seen. Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), esp. ch. 4, 6–8 and 10.
- 24 Marc Augé, *An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). Of course, there is already a pronounced anthropological inspiration in the archaeologists’ project: see Buchli and Lucas, “The Absent Present,” 8.
- 25 Alyssa Grossman and Selena Kimball, “The Memory Archive: Filmic Collaborations in Art and Anthropology,” *Reconstruction* 9:1 (2009), accessed December 3, 2013, <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/091/grossman&kimball.shtml> (my italics).
- 26 Cf. Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). In the original Italian, Ginzburg’s title speaks of a *paradigma indiziario* – and in the present context, I find a literal rendering to be more suggestive.
- 27 Jacques Rancière, “L’historicité du cinéma,” in *De l’histoire au cinéma*, ed. Antoine de Baecque and Christian Delage (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1998), 51 (my translation). I have made previous use of this passage in “The Poetics of History, or: Hatching an Ugly Duckling. Research in Mode √2,” *ArtMonitor* 8 (2010) – an article that prefigures my present discussion in more than one regard.
- 28 Rancière’s preferred term for this “equivalence” of interior and exterior, spiritual and material, that the medium of film embodies is simply *esthétique* (Rancière, “L’historicité du cinéma,” 52) – as expected from a philosopher explicitly inspired by the works of Immanuel Kant. But what specific lineage of thought does his line of reasoning extend? Perhaps that “minor” post-Kantian tradition that connects Leibniz and Kant, via Solomon

Maïmon and Hermann Cohen, with Gilles Deleuze: cf. Daniel Smith, “Deleuze’s Theory of Sensation: Overcoming the Kantian Duality,” in *Deleuze: a Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 39. As a leading Leibniz scholar and Cohen’s foremost disciple, Cassirer arguably belongs in the same genealogy – and may well provide a missing link in an already quite complex reception history. For Cassirer, moreover, aesthetics – on the condition that it is first “detached from all *specific* relation to artistic expression” – was virtually synonymous with his own “philosophy of symbolic forms”: see *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 175.