

## UNCONVENTIONAL HISTORY

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The purpose of this Theme Issue is to explore various ways history might be or has been portrayed unconventionally. “Unconventional” is, of course, an inherently relative term, like “tall”: one can be tall only in relation to a comparison set, and one can be unconventional only in relation to something that is conventional. Nothing is inherently tall, nor is anything intrinsically unconventional. So what’s the comparison set against which history, here judged unconventional, is being set? For lack of a more precise term, call it “academic history,” by which I mean the typical sort of discursive history produced by professional academic historians. This class may be hard to define further, but like pornography in the famous Supreme Court decision, it’s probably something you know when you see it.

Why devote a Theme Issue to exploring unconventional history? In part the answer to this question derives from the relational character of the concept: learning about unconventional history is, at the very same time, learning about conventional history, its strengths and limitations. Another reason is that unconventional history opens doors onto ways we can understand the past (and can understand our understanding of the past). Exploring the unconventional ways that history is currently being presented can reveal new conceptual resources and novel forms of representation that might be useful in deepening the possibilities of history as a discipline, and for shedding light on what understanding the past involves.

That these aspirations have been met in this Theme Issue is clear in its very first essay. In it Thomas Cohen both presents a (somewhat unconventional) history of a real event—a gruesome murder in which an Italian Renaissance nobleman kills his wife and her lover (his half-brother) caught *in flagrante delicto* in a bedchamber in the nobleman’s castle—together with an extended meditation on the research involved in constructing this history, on teaching the art of the historian to his students through this story, and on the role form plays in historical writing (“musing on the patent irony of artful artifice” [7]). Cohen deftly shows the way history (his particular history, and all history in general) involves artifice that attempts to balance the tension between being, on the one hand, involved in the heat and feel of an event, and, on the other, being distant, because historians are in fact temporally distant and because they need a proper distance to assess the significance of what they write about. He considers various representational strategies, favoring for himself one that “make(s) the art so manifest-

ly artifice that by its very form it proclaims its irony, alertness, and distance from its subject” (14) One lesson from his essay is this: that the demands of history itself push historians toward unconventional means of expression.

Cohen writes about written history, but there are other ways of presenting the past. Academic historians sometimes use paintings to illustrate their discursive representations of the past, but they usually do not paint what they think occurred in the past. But if one thinks about it, why should this be so? Painting can surely be a window onto the past, a depiction of what happened and its significance. In his essay, Steven Conn looks at history paintings generated by the Civil War. Interestingly, he claims that painters at that time “failed to create any iconic, lasting images of the Civil War” (17)—which is to say, that they failed not just as art but as history. By exploring the reasons for this failure, Conn is able to unearth some of the bases for what might make a history painting successful and what might lead to its failure. The issue here is a matter of form. Conn argues that history paintings, just like their discursive counterparts, are governed by conventions of representation, but that these conventions can be an impediment as well as a source of success. In the case of the Civil War, the forms of what he calls “grand manner history painting” were simply inadequate to capture the meaning and essence of the Civil War. He also explores a painting by Winslow Homer which does capture something telling and insightful about that War by employing a new form of representation. Conn’s lively, engaging essay reveals the heart of an unconventional—but nevertheless vital—way of depicting the past.

What probably most immediately comes to mind when hearing the term “unconventional history” is what Madhumalalti Adhikari calls “literary history,” a “cross between conventional (scientific) history and pure fiction” (43). Of course, several hundred years ago history was itself understood as a form of literature, an understanding that was replaced by the scientific aspirations of nineteenth-century, especially German, historiography. That history has often been linked with literature is not surprising: they make natural companions. This companionship derives in part from the fact that the historical record is always incomplete such that historians must try to conjecture what a historical event or period was like, filling in details by means of their own (controlled) imagination—not unlike novelists; in part from the fact that historians often try to get “inside the minds” of their subjects to understand their motivations and their experiences—in much the same way as do fiction writers; and in part from the fact that history often uses narrative as the form by means of which it portrays the past.

What distinguishes works of literary history is that, though they are clearly works of literature, they attempt at the same time to be works of history. They weave historical facts into their narratives, and they aim to reveal the core of historical events. Adhikari examines two excellent instances of this type: *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, and *Tales of the South Pacific* by James Michener, both novels about World War II. Adhikari shows that these hybrids provide access to history that the more conventional sort does not (in particular,

a sense of the experiences of the historical actors, and the human meaning of historical events).

Marjorie Becker goes one step further by not only discussing the need for unconventional history in her opening “meta-reflection,” but by presenting an unconventional history herself. Her history joins techniques drawn from fiction and journalism as well as history. In so doing, “Talking Back to Frida: Houses of Emotional *Mestizaje*” attempts to vividly render specific assaults on women’s voices by drawing readers into the historical worlds of Frida Kahlo, Maria Enríquez (a Mexican woman who was sexually assaulted in 1924), and Marjorie Becker herself. Actually, “drawing readers in” isn’t quite right. Becker wants to “give voice” to these three women, “allow[ing] [the essay’s] characters to speak by creating a historical environment enabling people who never met to speak with one another” (57). Becker labels this history “empathic rather than the more purely critical” (58); by this she means it to be a history that renders the experiences of its subjects (and of the historian writing about these subjects) palpable: “the intention is to allow its readers and listeners to experience what the writer, and perhaps its subjects, experienced” (58). This emphasis on the desire to recreate in the historian’s audience the experiences of others from earlier times by having historians give voice to what those in the past felt and perceived is a *leitmotiv* that runs throughout the essays in this issue: conventional history, by focusing on external evidence, by adopting an impersonal third-person perspective in search of a kind of objectivity, and by employing narrative techniques such as the third-person omniscient narrator, often leaves out the felt, the experienced, the lived-through—not only sources of historical curiosity, but of what makes those in the past human and enriching for our own lives. As Becker puts it, “the histories that concern me go down very deep, are at times composed of longing and tenderness” (59).

Painting and literature are not the only sources for unconventional history. Another—and somewhat surprising—source is the more hard-edged world of social-scientific prognostication (what David Staley calls a “history of the future”). Of course, a history of the future sounds like a contradiction in terms, but Staley argues that it is not. Indeed, he thinks that, properly conceived, a history of the future can be methodologically rigorous and informative. He distinguishes between *predictions* and *scenarios*. Despite their pretensions to be otherwise, predictions about the future in human affairs are little more than extrapolations from present trends or imaginative projections of hopes or fears, and in either case are consequently doomed to fail. Scenarios are quite different: they are “heuristic narratives” that depict a number of plausible alternative situations that might develop, and in so doing they incorporate a role for innovation, contingency, and unexpected outcomes. Staley argues that the method of history is particularly well suited for producing well-researched, empirically-grounded scenarios: historians, after all, are particularly adept at asking questions, marshaling evidence to answer these questions, and discerning patterns in this evidence, and this is just what writing scenarios requires. Historians perforce are

also required to imagine counterfactual situations in trying to ascertain the causes and significance of events. Staley argues that history understood as historical method can therefore have the future as its object as well as the past; such a history *is* unconventional, but readers may be surprised to learn just how developed and widespread it is—and how reasonable Staley makes it.

No exploration of unconventional history would be complete without an examination of so-called “alternate history”—of “how the past might have been,” to use Gavriel Rosenfeld’s words (93). The genre of counterfactual history has exploded in the last few decades, and has made a significant impact in popular culture. But despite its current popularity, alternate history might appear to have no place in the serious world of academic history. But appearances here are deceiving (indeed, Rosenfeld cites a number of significant alternate histories that have entered the world of academic history). In the first place, historians employ counterfactual scenarios all the time in attempting to ascertain the causes of events. (Causal claims involve claims about necessary and sufficient conditions, and therefore must support counterfactual conditionals; alternate histories are the way such conditionals are tested.) But Rosenfeld is interested in a second way alternate histories are relevant. (Rosenfeld focuses on what he calls “allohistories”: full-scale historical narratives of an alternative past, such as a history in which the South wins the Civil War.) As he shows, allohistories “shed light upon the evolving place of various historical events in the collective memory of a given society” (90). That is, allohistories themselves can be studied as a way of grasping the concerns of the present day; they are “documents of memory” (93).

How so? Because allohistories, despite being about the past, have a presentist soul: allohistories “explore the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment on the present” (93). In particular, they express whether “we are either grateful that things worked out as they did, or we regret that they did not occur differently” (93). So, for instance, American allohistories about World War II that depict the Nazis winning the War (to choose a case that Rosenfeld explores at length) for the most part depict a Nazi victory producing a dystopian hell. But at certain periods this same scenario has been portrayed as producing a more tolerable, “normalized” outcome. Rosenfeld shows that these two depictions reflect the basic attitude in the U.S. about its current state: an allohistory of a Nazi hell reflects an attitude of American self-confidence (the present is good, and since defeat of the Nazis was in part responsible for this present good, a history in which the Nazis were not defeated would have been a catastrophe); an allohistory of a normalized Nazi victory expresses an attitude of self-doubt (the present isn’t so good, such that what produced it, including the defeat of the Nazis, wasn’t altogether good, implying that the Nazis winning the war might not have been such a bad thing).

It could be argued that in all of this Rosenfeld is saying something about all of academic history as well as allohistory. Academic histories, too, reflect historians’ sense of the present as they attempt to depict what they think is significant

about the past. In this way, allohistory and academic history may not be as different as one might think.

One reason why one might think them utterly different is that academic history often yearns to be scientific in a broad sense. It counsels looking at the past with a cold, clear eye bent on discerning what actually happened, not with what might have happened or should have happened. In this it must necessarily eschew moral assessment and moral categories like “evil,” “atrocious,” and the like. But in this way history is surely impoverished as a discipline, for the simple reason that history is filled with atrocities and injustice, and it will do no good to write these out of bounds on methodological grounds. Moreover, confronted by these horrors, humans are inevitably driven to ask such questions as “why did the heavens not darken?” (to use Arno J. Mayer’s question prompted by the Holocaust), or how can evil be confronted? Historians can dismiss questions such as these as outside their professional competence to answer, but there is an evasiveness here that is unsettling. Indeed, as Allan Megill puts it in his review essay of two books of what he calls “para-history,” “the almost unanswerable questions do not disappear, even for historians. This is because historians have the task not only of describing and explaining the past but also of trying to show how the past makes sense for ‘us’ now—and ‘making sense’ surely involves some attempt to confront the ethical breach that atrocity makes in our world” (106). Indeed, this is exactly what Jonathan Glover attempts to do in *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, and Erna Paris does in *Long Shadows: Truth, Lies, and History*. Megill artfully and insightfully examines these works, showing what they are about, their strengths and their problems. In this he shows that “these two books help us to see why the peculiar limitations and detachments of historiography ought to be neither absolutized nor abandoned” (107).

The Theme Issue concludes with two essays about history and film. It’s obvious that film is one of the most important ways history is portrayed in our time, and yet film is not a medium in which academic historians conventionally work. (When one of them does—as, for instance, Natalie Davis on *The Return of Martin Guerre*—it’s news.) Given the significance of historical film, it is appropriate that the Theme Issue concludes with essays about it.

Stephan Bann reviews Philip Rosen’s *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory*. Bann focuses on the documentary film (though he also discusses the historical film in general), and, following Rosen, claims that “the claim of documentary to have historical significance is not just analogous to, but in an important sense inseparable from, the claim of mainstream historiography to represent the past” (126). Documentaries—*contra* the claims of Baudrillard and Barthes—are inherently referential: they point to something outside themselves, and promise to unearth what this something is. Indeed, historical films make a similar claim to represent. Of course, neither conventional histories nor films represent the past directly in some unmediated way: they both involve conventions of representation, and second-order conventions about how to acknowledge and assess the first-order conventions. These conventions are in part peculiar to the

medium employed, and so cannot simply be applied across all historical media. Bann discusses the conventions operative in historical film, and relates them to wider questions about the nature of indexicality, representation, historical meaning, and the relation between filmmaker and audience. Historical film may be unconventional, but it is not without conventions, nor is it disconnected from the more general historiographic enterprise of conventional history.

Robert Rosenstone's essay, discussing Natalie Davis's *Slaves on Screen* in particular and the historical feature film (and recent reflections about it) in general, appropriately ends the collection by focusing on the *sui generis* character of historical films. He concludes with a consequent plea that "rather than assuming that the world on film should somehow adhere to the rules of written history, why not let it create its own standards, appropriate to the possibilities and practices of the medium?" (143). In other words, there are many ways to skin a cat, and it impoverishes our ability to access and make sense of the past if we insist that there is only one way to do so. Historical feature films speak the dense, particularistic, dynamic language of image and sound, rather than the more colorless, abstract, and slower world of verbal language; moreover, the form of historical feature films is usually dramaturgical rather than explicatory. Representing the past and exploring its meaning in different languages and in different forms than those of traditional historiography, historical film presents to us possibilities for understanding and appreciation heretofore closed off. To fail to appreciate this fact, and to insist that all "legitimate" history be presented in a single way in the same language—the language and form of the modern professional historian—is a recipe for impoverishment.

Indeed, Rosenstone goes further than this. As he puts it: "Doesn't film, for all its inventions, provide us a kind of experience of or interaction with history impossible for the written word to convey? Mightn't its practices point up limitations in our own?" (143). This last question could serve as the focal point for this entire Theme Issue: don't unconventional practices of historical representation, analysis, and assessment—unconventional relative to those prevalent in academe—provide an opportunity to see the weaknesses (as well as the strengths!) of conventional historiography? Rosenstone himself shows this to be the case with historical film; I very much hope that the other essays in this issue do the same by exploring the variety of ways history can be, and is, unconventionally practiced.

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