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## Post-modern storytelling and fragmented narrations in the history of medicine

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In this article, I try to combine Hayden White's work on historical narration with sociological and artistic perspectives in order to propose possible avenues for a new kind of storytelling in the history of medicine. Drawing on White's focus on emplotment and the Actor-Network Theory, I try to think about new actors and plot-types for the history of epidemics. I also share White's belief that fictional and historical narration share a lot, which leads me to study some artistic storytelling. This makes me speak in favour of fragmented and contradicting narrations aimed at spotting lies instead of conjuring an objective and unique "Truth".

Keywords: Storytelling; narration; emplotment; history of medicine.

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### **A narratividade pós-moderna e as relações fragmentadas na história da medicina**

Neste artigo procuro combinar o trabalho de Hayden White em torno da narrativa histórica com perspectivas sociológicas e artísticas, com o objetivo de propor novas possibilidades de narrar a história da medicina. Baseando-me nas propostas de White sobre o conceito de "*emplotment*" e na "Actor-Network Theory", procuro pensar sobre novos atores e enredos para a história das epidemias. Partilhando da noção de White de que as narrativas ficcionais e históricas se assemelham, procuro ainda estudar algumas formas de narratividade artística, argumentando em favor de uma narração fragmentada e contraditória que pretende identificar mentiras e não estabelecer uma "Verdade" objetiva e única.

Palavras-chave: Narratividade; narração; *emplotment*; história da medicina.

# Post-modern storytelling and fragmented narrations in the history of medicine

Paul-Arthur Tortosa\*

*À la longue,  
Angelo fut étonné de n'apercevoir  
d'autre vie que celle de la lumière<sup>1</sup>*

In an article originally published in 1996, Hayden White addresses the following issue: is a historical narration possible?<sup>2</sup> Or is every narrative necessarily an ideological one? This debate derives from the call for a “return to narrative” made by some historians arguing that storytelling could be given only a rhetorical function and might be used “as means of reviving an interest in history” among people that were bored with structuralism and dry scientific historiography. The implicit idea behind such a view is that narration is a neutral discursive form. However, this thesis by no means enjoys a consensus among intellectuals: several researchers have claimed that storytelling is “in some ways ideological in its very nature”.<sup>3</sup> First, Fernand Braudel argues that “in its own covert way, narrative history consists of an interpretation, an authentic philosophy of history”, emphasizing dramatic accidents and exceptional

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1 Jean Giono, *Le hussard sur le toit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 14.

2 Hayden White, “Storytelling. Historical and Ideological,” in *The Fiction of Narrative. Essays on History, Literature and Theory, 1957-2007* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2010), 273-93.

3 *Ibid.*, 273.

beings.<sup>4</sup> None less than Roland Barthes shares this indictment of narration as an ideological elaboration aimed at transforming history into a spectacle.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Lukàcs claims that “the choice of narrative mode for representation of reality indicated [...] the impulse to engage reality in ideological rather than in non-ideological terms”.<sup>6</sup> After reviewing these work , Hayden White shifts the debate into another sphere: he explains that “there is no such thing as narration-in-general” but only different story-types, such as epic, tragedy or face, which leads him to study the “techniques of *emplotment*”.<sup>7</sup> Unlike David Carr, who, while acknowledging that historians do “emplot”, argues that historiographical narratives “should not be considered as «allegorizations» of the events of which they speak but rather [...] as literal accounts thereof”, White considers that historical narratives are abstractions, just like fictional storytelling.<sup>8</sup> Drawing on Hjelmself’s concepts, he distinguishes between the “Expression” level and the “Content” level of a discourse. He then further distinguishes between the “Form” and the “Substance” of both, concluding that “the «story» told [...] unfolds at the level of the «Form of Content» of the discourse whereas [...] emplotment can be seen to operate at the level of its «substance of expression»”.<sup>9</sup> Finally, White writes that the degree of historicity arises from the Substance of Content: a historical concept can be “endowed with different specific contents at different times and places in history”.<sup>10</sup>

Drawing on my own research, I would like to extend Hayden White’s reflection on historical narration. I think that combining White’s work on emplotment developed in this piece, as well as in other articles, with ideas coming from sociology and art could enable us

4 Fernand Braudel, “Position de l’histoire en 1950,” in *Écrits sur l’histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1969), 22-23.

5 Roland Barthes, “Le discours de l’histoire“, in *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 174.

6 Hayden White, “Storytelling ...”, 277.

7 *Ibid.*, 280. White underlines.

8 David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

9 Hayden White, “Storytelling ...”, 288.

10 *Ibid.*, 291.

to think about genuinely post-modern narrations. In my field – history of science – an example of narration as ornamental device is Carlo Cipolla’s tale of Italian cities fighting against an “invisible enemy”.<sup>11</sup> Cipolla used narration as a way to present his scientific results in a more entertaining manner. Despite its flamboyant style, Cipolla’s book is very classical from a methodological point of view. For instance, it is deeply flawed by its focus on individuals mastering their own fate and its epic emplotment. Nevertheless, I think that historical narration of epidemics could be renewed in a threefold manner.

Firstly, drawing on Science Studies and on Actor-Network Theory, we need to grant non-human actors a greater role in history. On the one hand, humans are not the only living form to make history: technical objects, microbes, germs and other living forms do it as well.<sup>12</sup> One could argue that most historians have understood the crucial part played by objects, animals and germs and have taken a “material turn”. Although this is true to some extent, non-humans are mostly depicted as bystanders whereas humans are the actors of the narration. Microbes and objects must be given a non-human agency. They are neither objects nor subjects but “actants”, to use Latourian terminology. The Black Plague pandemic killed between a third and half of the European population. A yellow fever outbreak helped people from Haiti repel the French troops in the 1800’s. In most wars in history, “disease killed far more men than the enemy”.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, historians of medicine need to reintroduce bacteria, viruses and their animal carriers, such as rats or mosquitoes, into the historical narrative. Likewise, the environment has to be taken into greater consideration. Environmental history is a relatively new field, but the environment has long played a key role in literature: one could remember the role played by the light in *The Outsider*, where the blinding light leads the narrator to commit a murder

11 Carlo Maria Cipolla, *Contro un nemico invisibile: Epidemie e strutture sanitarie nell’Italia del Rinascimento* (Milano: Il Mulino, 1979).

12 Bruno Latour, *The pasteurization of France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

13 Erica Charters, *Disease, War, and the Imperial State. The Welfare of the British Armed Forces during the Seven Year’s War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 11.

he will be sentenced to death for.<sup>14</sup> In this book, the sun is not a remote part of the scenery, it is a crucial actor. Closer to my field is the first chapter of *The Horseman on the Roof*, which depicts the beginning of a fictional cholera outbreak. Again, the author underlines the role played by the light in history and makes it a living agent equal to humans, as shown by Giono's quotation as an epigraph to this text.

Secondly, we can renew historical narration not only by introducing new protagonists, but also by diversifying our sample of plot-types, since Hayden White considers emplotment to be the key of every narration. One could think, for instance, of writing the account of a technical failure in the form of a love story: the doomed romance of an inventor and his invention. This is what Bruno Latour does in *Aramis*, and we can apply to this book Hayden White's analysis of Karl Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.<sup>15</sup> Hayden White explains that choosing a plot-type over another was a matter of interpretation, not of description. This means that events are not ontologically dramatic, comic or epic: they are given a meaning by the researcher.<sup>16</sup> Marx's book depicts the events of 1848-1851 in France as a farce, not because they were inherently ridiculous, but because Marx's idea is that things went the way they did because no one understood what was going on. Therefore, Marx's choice of the farce as emplotment refers to a twofold irony: pathetic characters and ignorant actors. As far as *Aramis* is concerned, the emplotment of the story as a romance is also both figuratively and literally true: the romance can be seen as a metaphor for the inventor/invention relationship, but Latour's main argument is that the invention failed because its inventor did not love it enough to convince other people of its quality.

Thirdly, historical narration could benefit from being fragmented into various small contradictory stories. Historically, narration has been linked to truth: one tells a story in order to reveal the hidden order of

14 Albert Camus, *The Outsider* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1946 [1942]).

15 Bruno Latour, *Aramis, or the love of technology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

16 Hayden White, "Historical Pluralism," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 3 (1986): 480-93.

things, or, in the case of historical narration, to unveil “the historical significance” of events.<sup>17</sup> In most cases, White talks about “narration” as the singular form, but he considers that there is no such thing as “objective facts” that could be a consensual ground for analysis.<sup>18</sup> However, he does not directly state that “truth” does not exist; he thinks that some stories are more “plausible” than others.<sup>19</sup> I would argue that telling several conflicting stories is better than looking to establish the more “plausible” one. Indeed, taking Hayden White’s post-modern perspective to its logical conclusion leads to “truth” funerals. Therefore, historical narration could be thought as a device aimed at uncovering lies instead of discovering truth. Art has already explored territories that are unmapped by historians in this area. In this regard, Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashômon* is particularly interesting.<sup>20</sup> At the core of this movie is a trial: a samurai traveling with his wife has been murdered by a brigand, who is being judged for his crime. The brigand is the first to speak, confessing the murder with great detail. Then, the victim’s spouse testifies, telling a totally different story. After that, the dead samurai’s spirit is summoned by a witch and gives a third account of the events – different from the two others. After the trial, a witness that did not testify in court tells his friend that he saw the murder and gives a fourth unique narration of the mysterious assassination. The movie ends without any narrative being explicitly ruled out, but it is obvious for the spectator that every character lied to some extent. More importantly, one can understand why people have lied the way they did, which reveals their values and interests: the brigand wants to hide his cowardice, the wife her guilt, the samurai his defeat in a fight, the witness his greed. How could this be applied to historical research? I am studying a yellow fever epidemic that stroke the Tuscan port of

17 Hayden White, “The Problem of Style in Realism Representation: Marx and Flaubert,” in *The Concept of Style*, dir. Berel Lang (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 279-99.

18 See, for instance Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

19 Hayden White, “Storytelling ...”, 288-89.

20 The movie is inspired by Ryunosuke Akutagawa’s short story entitled “In a Grove”, which was first published in the January 1922 edition of the Japanese journal *Shinchô*.

Livorno in 1804. This story can be written with various plot-types: the epic struggle of sanitary institutions against a deadly disease, the tragic fate of a city originated from an individual professional misconduct, the scientific analysis of the spread of a virus in a population, the “small” and “regional” narrative of a city facing a collective threat. None of these narratives is “wrong”, for they are all based on empirical evidence and account for what happened. Moreover, in my opinion, there is no such thing as a more “plausible” narrative since they all elude some aspects of reality: the scientific narrative omits the political origins of the epidemic, the epic story downplays the messiness of the situation, etc.

Hayden White’s remarks on narration are still relevant today, particularly his focus on emplotment techniques. Combined with ideas coming from other fields, such as sociology and art, I think that White’s insights on narration could lead to new historical narrative practices. The thesis developed in this article is that post-modern storytelling could be built around fragmented and contradictory partial narrations, whose confrontation aims at spotting lies instead of conjuring an unique and objective “Truth”.

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