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Hayden White's definition of modernist events constitutes a challenge to historical representation, and in particular to twentieth-century historiography. In this short essay, we will try to follow White's analysis, identify its shortcomings and propose a way forward, a set of directions through which this potentially decisive concept can be deployed by modern historiography.

Keywords: Twentieth century; figuration; historical narrative; modernism.

Os eventos modernistas de Hayden White

A forma como Hayden White define os eventos modernistas representa um desafio para as representações históricas e, em particular, para a historiografia do século XX. Neste curto ensaio, tentaremos seguir a análise feita por White, identificar os seus limites e propor um caminho, um conjunto de direções através das quais este conceito potencialmente decisivo poderá ser utilizado pela historiografia contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Século XX; figuração; narrativa histórica; modernismo.

Hayden White's Modernist Events

Luís Trindade*

Modernist event is an ambiguous expression, offering itself to multiple interpretations and appropriations. The ambiguity lies, of course, in the displacement of a literary concept – that of modernism – to history, the realm of events about which historians write their narratives. This seems to allow at least some degree of speculation about the impact of something like a *modernist event* on these narratives' historical status: if events can be defined according to the literary technique that responded to its context – as in modernism's response to its period –, one may wonder whether it is possible to establish an intrinsic relation between specific pasts and their historical narratives. Such an intrinsic, or necessary, link between historical periods and their forms of narration is a step Hayden White himself does not seem willing to take, but it could be argued that the ambiguity of a formulation like *modernist event* allows us to explore, even if tentatively, that forbidden frontier between history and narrative – at least in the case of a period like the twentieth-century, when events seemed to be, according to White, *modernist*.

The essay "The Modernist Event", initially published in 1996, appears less as a *fin de siècle* evaluation of an era (as in Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* or Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*) than as an attempt to come to terms with *the dissolution of the event* in the historical imaginary. Such dissolution, according to White, was manifest in the disappearance of "character and plot" from

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"modern historical research and writing".¹ This, on the other hand, was already the consequence of the dismissal of the idea of "fact", which undermined "a founding presupposition of Western realism: the opposition between fact and fiction." So, the problem already assumes the form of a crisis at the frontier between history and narrative, as rather than a mere literary question, the break of such a golden rule of representation should be seen as the narrative consequence of "the anomalous nature of modernist events" themselves, and particularly "their resistance to inherited categories and conventions for assigning meanings to events".² In other words, it was not only that those traditional forms based on plot, character and event no longer seemed able to represent modern reality; this critique of representation should be complemented by the recognition that something "anomalous" occurred in the structure of historical events, preventing their translation into narratives. Accordingly, the first image we get of modernist events is one of dramatic excess, "holocaustal events" beyond any recognizable human measure:

two world wars, the Great Depression, nuclear weapons and communication technology, the population explosion, the mutilation of the zoosphere, famine, genocide as a policy consciously undertaken by "modernized" regimes, etc.

The problem with these events, what stops them from lending 'themselves to understanding by the commonsensical techniques utilized in conventional historical inquiry', thus seems to be a question of number and extension: 'the number of details identifiable in any singular event is potentially infinite; (...) the context of any singular event is infinitely extensive or at least not objectively determinable.'³ But although White's essay does not focus directly on the tragic legacy of the twentieth century as expressed in contemporary titles such as *Age of Extremes* or *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, such incommensurability produces a similar sense of pessimism. More specifically, the overwhel-

1 Hayden White, *Figural Realism. Studies in the mimesis effect* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 66.

2 White, *Figural Realism*, 70.

3 White, *Figural Realism*, 71.

ming nature of events appears, in White, under such a dramatic presentation that their challenge to representation becomes qualitative, that is, moral and political, and not merely a question of number and extension. This is where the twentieth-century of world wars and nuclear weapons meets modernism, as modernist writers had already conceived the latter as an aesthetic coming to terms with the political and moral problems posed by such events.

Most of the effort of “The Modernist Event” thus focuses on the identification of different modernist literary responses to the challenges posed by the century to representation. In Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*, White follows Fredric Jameson in his analysis of the discrepancy between the eventless nature of modern life and the ‘adventurous’ structure of narratives. As the meaning of events, according to Jameson, ‘is a function of their narrativization’, modernism has to operate a ‘derealization of the event’ (that ‘amounts to a rejection of the historicity of all events’⁴) in order to represent the eventless form of ordinary life. In Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, on the other hand, we can identify an even more daring attempt to represent ‘nonaction’ through a story occurring at intervals, in which the distinction between events and its representation is ‘fused’ or ‘collapsed’. At the limit, as in the heated debates around the representation of the holocaust, the disappearance of the opposition between fact and fiction would just become unbearable, and before the risk of turning such an event ‘into the subject matter of a narrative’, many thought (although not White) preferable not to represent the event at all. ‘This is why’, adds White,

the kinds of antinarrative nonstories produced by literary modernism offer the only prospect for *adequate representations* of the kind of “unnatural” events – including the Holocaust – that mark our era and distinguish it absolutely from all of the history that has come before it.⁵

Before trying to verify how reasonable this dramatization of modernist events really is, let us explore our initial ambiguity – on the

⁴ White, *Figural Realism*, 76.

⁵ White, *Figural Realism*, 81 (my emphasis).

relation between modernism's formal devices and twentieth-century's modernist events – further. What exactly does Hayden White mean when he assigns an 'adequate representation' to specific kinds of event? In different occasions, White seems to come close to the idea that the form of representation, rather than just a narrativization of history, was already somehow contained in it. In "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth in Historical Representation", for example, the cultural circumstances in which modernism emerged are shown as a direct consequence of that 'change that permitted the crystallization of the totalitarian form that Western society would assume in the twentieth-century': 'as thus envisaged, cultural modernism has to be seen as both *a reflection of* and a response to this new actuality.'⁶ In "Auerbach's Literary History", White nuances this relation by deploying Eric Auerbach's 'figure-fulfillment model' of literary history as a mediation between events and historical representation: 'historical events can be related to one another in the way that a figure is related to its fulfillment in a narrative or a poem.'⁷ In this sense, Auerbach's 'figuralist model' not only establishes a narrative thread between the classics of the Western canon, it also seems to allow us to expand the model to the 'relation between literature and its historical contexts.'⁸ More than an analogy between historical experience and the history of literature, this enables White to consider experience as a prefiguration of the form such experience will be given by literary representation:

In other words, it is not a matter of an author having an experience of a historical milieu and then representing it, in a figurative way, in his text. On the contrary, the experience is already a figure and, insofar as it will serve as a content or referent of a further representation, it is a prefiguration that is fulfilled only in a literary text.

Prefiguration seems more appropriate than 'reflection', as it keeps the discussion at the level of representation, thus avoiding a fall into

⁶ White, *Figural Realism*, 40 (my emphasis).

⁷ White, *Figural Realism*, 89.

⁸ White, *Figural Realism*, 93.

determinism. Modernist events did not determine modernist forms. The reason they are modernist, however, is in the way they gave themselves to modernist representation. For that same reason, the only thing that is determined is ‘the figurative nature of all descriptions of historical objects and their contexts’, and the way this *figurative nature* ‘stems from the particularity with which they have to be invested in order to qualify as historical.’⁹ It could in this sense be said that the challenge posed by “holocaustal events” stemmed from the incommensurability of their historical experience. What made events modernist was their coincidence with the historical reality fictional modernism tried to deal with – the reason why Auerbach would speak of modernist novels as ‘the realistic novel of the era between the two great wars’¹⁰ – as both part of the same experience that, ‘in order to qualify as historical’, would have to be somehow represented.

As a concept, the modernist event thus seems to be in a good position to benefit from the immense creativity of literary modernism. And yet, Hayden White’s treatment of modernist narratives seems rather to point towards a critique of the illusions of realistic representation and to initiate a ‘process of mourning which alone can relieve the burden of history’.¹¹ The last example of a modernist model offered by White’s essay, Gertrude Stein’s lectures in *Narration*, is there precisely to create an impasse: the ‘collapse [of] the distinction between’ Stein’s ‘form and its semantic content’ precludes any effort of representation. Its role is that of those ‘antinarrative nonstories’ that, rather than enhancing the narrative ability to come to terms with events, seem to declare ‘the unreality of the event’ as such, and thus the impossibility of its representation. Modern events, according to Stein, would be an ‘outside without an inside’ in contrast with the ‘things which have really existed.’¹² The extent to which the impasse affects historical nar-

9 White, *Figural Realism*, 51.

10 Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 546.

11 White, *Figural Realism*, 82.

12 In White, *Figural Realism*, 82.

rative is clear: when events are opposed to the *things which have really existed*, there is nothing left to represent.

The problem is thus twofold. Events proliferate in pure exteriority, occupying all visible space with unreality while simultaneously making 'things, which have really existed', invisible. In the 1930s, Gertrud Stein blamed newspapers for this historical impasse: 'the reality being the inside and the newspapers being the outside and never is the outside inside and never is the inside outside'.¹³ The excessive form of modernist events becomes concrete, but newspapers are here only an example of modern media (whose power would be exponentially intensified by television, for example), which constitute either the reason why it is impossible to represent modernist events or the form of modernist events themselves in their unrepresentability. The world of modernism would thus be not only overwhelming, but indeed chaotic: 'it is a more difficult thing to write history to make it anything than to make anything that is anything be anything because in history you have everything, you have the newspapers and the conversations and letter writing...'. Conversely, modern media as modernist events would become an ultimately *meaningless excess of meaning*.

"The Modernist Event" starts with a reference to Fredric Jameson's "Metacommentary", where White identifies an initial example of the 'commonplace of contemporary criticism that modernist literature (...) dissolves the trinity of event, character, and plot'.¹⁴ It may therefore be worth remembering that the proliferation of the "outside" White associates, via Gertrude Stein, with 'the unreality of the event', looks remarkably close to the way Jameson describes the 'lived experience' that works as history's 'raw material':

The essential characteristic of such raw material or latent content is that it is never initially formless, never (...) initially contingent, but rather is itself already meaningful from the outset, being nothing more

13 In White, *Figural Realism*, 83.

14 White, *Figural Realism*, 66.

nor less than the very components of our concrete social life: words, thoughts, objects, desires, people, places, activities.¹⁵

The world of this history is still quite overwhelming, full as it is with words, thoughts and desires. And yet, it looks much less chaotic than one would be led to believe by the extension, number and violence of White's "holocaustal events". If, to this quantitative definition of modernist events, we add the qualitative contribution suggested by Jameson – that, overwhelming as it may be, the raw material of modernism 'is itself already meaningful from the outset' –, modernist narratives may still be facing a daunting task, but surely not one outside historical representation. In this sense, rather than a burden of which one should be relieved, Jameson's raw history may be seen as a way out of the impasse Gertrude Stein forced Hayden White into.

Like White, Jameson too (following Auerbach) believes the historicity of narrative forms depends on form, rather than content. From realism to modernism, this history of formal procedures in art and literature reveals, according to Jameson, each period's *political unconscious*. Whereas an analysis based on content would situate historical action on individuals producing meaning – in a narrow humanist sense – the political unconscious is both historical and collective, expressing through form the shared metanarratives of broader human groups – in an enhanced, collective form of humanism. The ways an idea like the *political unconscious* may serve as a model to rethink the historical narratives of *modernist events* are thus multiple, but what was just said points in at least two initial, but decisive, directions: in the way modern media can be seen as collective forms of meaning-making; and, consequently, in the way progress, as the ideology of modernity, can be seen not as a law of historical determinism but as a metanarrative, the ultimate form of modernist events, through which modern people made sense of the world collectively.

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Ideologies of Theory* (London: Verso, 2009), 16.

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