

# Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada



## Distance and Distances in our View of the Past

Mark Salber Phillips

Volume 26, numéro 2, 2015

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1037221ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1037221ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Phillips, M. S. (2015). Distance and Distances in our View of the Past. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 26(2), 32–40. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1037221ar>

## Distance and Distances in our View of the Past

MARK SALBER PHILLIPS

It is easier for me to speak to the genesis of my interest in distance and historical representation than to say very much about the inevitable gaps or inconsistencies in my way of working with this concept. Much of my pleasure in writing *On Historical Distance*<sup>57</sup> came from seeing unexpected questions come to light when I began to re-think of distance in new and more flexible terms. What if historians jettisoned their clichés about distance as objectivity and imagined it instead as a problem of mediation? What if historians bracketed distance as a measure of time in order to consider it in more social or affective terms?

The essential test of an idea is its generative appeal. Imagine, then, my pleasure in having been able to discuss my interest in these issues in the company of historians and literary scholars of the caliber of Kenneth Dewar, Marcie Frank, Barbara Leckie, and Allan Greer. Though my remarks are intended to revisit some issues I raised in *OHD*, I want to stress my admiration for the ways their contributions have extended the discussion well beyond my own.

The idea of historical distance is hardly new. On the contrary, historians have staked a great deal on the idea that distance gives us the detachment we need to form a dispassionate view of the past. Indeed, this distinction between supposed objectivity and blind prejudice has often been seen as the divide between cultures that are capable of modern historical perspectives and those that are confined to religious or ideological irrationalism. But we need not press the question this far to recognize the ideological weight carried by the idea of distance — or the potential benefits that may come from liberalizing our conception of this powerful idea.

**I. Distance and Historical Representation.** A generation ago, Hayden White proclaimed that he would begin with what history “most manifestly is: a verbal prose structure in the form of a narrative discourse.” This orientation to prose narra-

tive produced some fruitful discussions, but there were reasons to distrust a strategy that appeared to invite a reductive equation of historiography and fiction. Over time, I have come to think of historical representation in terms of purposes that seem to me more fundamental as well as more comprehensive. Narrative — fundamentally a question of form — is only one dimension of historical practice, nor is prose the exclusive medium of history. In an age when film, television, and other media occupy such prominence in our sense of the past — to say nothing of biography, theatre, or the historical novel — it seems more necessary than ever to think about history in terms of a wider spectrum of representation. What history “most manifestly is” (to echo White’s formula) is not narrative prose as such. More fundamental, I believe, is its *mediatory* purpose, its commitment to connecting present and past in meaningful ways. In simplest terms, as Jacob Burckhardt put it long ago, “history is on all occasions a record of what one age finds worthy of note in another.”

Today, what historiography requires is a set of tools that would help clarify our mediatory practices — and one that does so in a manner that takes account of the broad range of methods and purposes that make up the contemporary field of historical representation. Crucially, too, it will be important to approach this challenge in a spirit of liberal inclusion. Only then can we avoid the temptation to prescriptiveness leads us to embed the desired answer in the opening question.

**II. Variations of Distance as a Heuristic.** The essence of my argument about distance is quickly stated. In common usage, historical distance refers to a position of detached observation made possible by the passage of time. Understood in this sense, distance has long been regarded as essential to modern historical practice, but these assumptions narrow the idea of distance and burden it with a regulatory purpose. I argue that distance needs to be reconceived in terms of the wider set of engagements that mediate our relations to the past, as well as the full spectrum of distance-positions from near to far. Re-imagined in these terms, the idea of distance sheds its prescriptiveness and becomes a valuable heuristic for examining the history of historical representation.

If temporality is conceived in relation to the full range of mediations entailed in historical representation, historical distance is freed from its customary linearity. Rather, our time-sense can be recognized as something molded by a variety of *distances* (in the plural) reflecting our need to engage with the historical past as (simultaneously) a realm of *making, feeling, doing, and understanding*. Thus for every historical work, we need to consider at least four basic dimensions of representation as they relate to the problem of mediating distance: 1. The genres, media, and vocabularies that shape a history's formal structures of representation; 2. The affective claims made by the historical account, including the emotional experiences it promises or withholds; 3. The work's implications for action, whether of a political or moral nature; 4. The modes of understanding on which the history's intelligibility depends. These overlapping, but distinctive distances — *formal, affective, summoning, and intelligibility* — provide an analytic framework for examining changing modes of historical representation.

These categories overlap, but to some degree they orient themselves differently in time. The formal, being the realm of making, is the dimension of mediation most fully rooted in present time and it carries that knowledge to the reader. In modern circumstances, when aesthetic form is often chosen for historical effect, “we understand the meaning of such formal gestures precisely because we accept that the act of representation itself rests fully in its own present. Affect, by contrast, seems the realm in which representation most clearly solicits “a willing suspension of disbelief.” As readers or viewers, we participate in a special class of historical emotions, whether they are founded in an impossible dream of unmediated access, or (to the contrary) in the opacity of a past that resists every attempt at familiarization and can never be our own.

If the formal is most fully entrenched in the present and affect in negotiating the presence of the past, the summons of moral or ideological commitment is the dimension of representation that most explicitly signals an orientation to the future. Only there, where history has not yet happened, can practical

action still be envisaged. Stated more broadly, it is in the arena I have called *summoning* that we are most aware that all historical representation incorporates a *then* of futurity as well as of praeterity. By the same token, of all the engagements involved in historical representation, our need for intelligibility is the one that most clearly traces the circle from past to future and from question to answer. Unsurprisingly, this journey toward understanding has often monopolized the attention of philosophers, while other dimensions of mediation are sublimated or ignored as less respectable modes of encounter with the past."

**III. Summary.** This summary — closely taken from my recent book — is intended to give you a compact account of my central argument, but it may still be helpful to reiterate some key ideas.

1. My point of departure is that all forms of historical representation — visual as well as verbal — can be understood as exercises in mediation. Whether we focus on different historiographical schools (e.g. microhistory vs "big history") or different genres and media (biography, historical novel, film, history painting), mediatory questions are central.

2. In ordinary usage, distance refers to something far off or removed. But if we think of distance in the mediatory context I am proposing, then distance becomes a *relational* term which applies to the full range of positions, near as well as far. Detachment, of course, is a modulation of distance, but so too is proximity. Both are relations of distance and need to be considered in examining forms of representation — as also many contexts of social life. Thus it will be more useful to think of distance in terms of *types* and *degrees* of proximity or removal, rather than in simple oppositions.

3. In relation to the past, we often speak of distance as though its meanings were self-evidently temporal. Common experience, however, tells us that temporality is responsive to other distances. Americans today retain a close bond with the "Founding Fathers" that has no counterpart in the psyche of their Anglo-Canadian neighbors, though Francophone and Aboriginal Canadians come to the eighteenth century with powerful mem-

ories of their own. Temporality, in short, is only one dimension of distance, which is shaped by a variety of other mediations — notably *form, affect, summoning, and intelligibility*.

4. Against this background, I want to suggest that changes in historical representation announce themselves as significant reconfigurations of distance. For my generation, Carlo Ginzburg's rejection of the Braudelian *longue durée* for the political insights and affective pleasures of microhistory stands as a paradigm case. Microhistory was not just a formal change as its name seems to indicate. Rather, Ginzburg's approach also involved an important re-consideration of affect, ideology, and intelligibility as well.

5. Finally, I want to stress that I call this theoretical framework a *heuristic* because it offers itself as no more than a possible map of investigation, rather than a body of prescriptive theory. In itself the heuristic answers no questions. Rather, it draws attention to a set of key historiographical functions, without presupposing specific answers to the specific questions that follow. At this level, historical representation remains as always the domain of the working historian, film maker, or artist whose job it is to probe the actual problems of description and explanation, making use of whatever resources of evidence and imagination the problem requires.

*On Historical Distance* fleshes out this notion of distance, followed by a series of chapters examining distance and historical representation across a broad variety of genres in three deliberately wide-spaced periods of history: the Renaissance in Italy; the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Britain; and the late twentieth century in Europe and America. Thus I describe the book as advancing a theoretical structure, followed by ten and a half experiments. My current work — a study of history painting across several centuries — continues this effort of theory and exemplification with a deep study of one great genre of visual representation. If its scope and approach are somewhat different, its fundamental concern with distance and representation is much the same. As David Hume put it long ago, "There is an easy reason why everything contiguous to us ... should be conceived with a peculiar force and vivacity, and excel every other

object, in its influence on the imagination. Ourselves is intimately present to us, and whatever is related to self must partake of that quality.”<sup>58</sup>

\*\*\*

MARK SALBER PHILLIPS is an intellectual historian interested in issues of historical representation. His publications include *On Historical Distance* (Yale, 2013) [Ferguson Prize of the Canadian Historical Association for the best book of the year on “an other than Canadian topic”] and *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton, 2000), as well as a number of studies on Renaissance Italy. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Chicago and at King’s College, London, and has held a number of fellowships, including the Guggenheim, the Clark Art Institute, CASVA, the Yale Center for British Art, and King’s College, Cambridge.

MARK SALBER PHILLIPS est un historien intellectuel qui s’intéresse aux questions de représentation historique. Ses publications incluent les ouvrages *On Historical Distance* (Yale, 2013) [prix Ferguson de la Société historique du Canada] et *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton, 2000) ainsi que des études sur l’Italie à la Renaissance. Il a été professeur invité à la University of Chicago et au King’s College de Londres et il a occupé de nombreux postes de chercheur, y compris au musée Guggenheim, au Clark Art Institute, au Centre for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, au Yale Center for British Art et au King’s College de Cambridge University.

## Endnotes

- 1 Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 13–14.
- 2 Allan Greer presented a wonderful dialogue between the book and his own historical praxis. Other commitments made it impossible for him to develop his valuable remarks any further. Nonetheless, we are all very grateful for his contribution.

- 3 Mark Phillips, "The Revival of Narrative: Thoughts on a Current Historiographical Debate," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (Winter 1983/4): 161.
- 4 Mark Phillips, "Historiography and Genre: A More Modest Proposal," *Storia della storiografia/Histoire de l'historiographie* 24 (1993): 119.
- 5 Fritz Stern, *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1966 [1956]).
- 6 Ibid., 11.
- 7 Carl G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 39, no. 2 (15 Jan. 1942): 35–48; see later revised version: "Explanation in Science and in History," in *Philosophical Analysis and History*, ed. William H. Dray (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 95–126.
- 8 W.H. Dray, "On the Nature and Role of Narrative in Historiography," *History and Theory* 10, no. 2 (1971): 153–71.
- 9 Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 2; Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); Mark Salber Phillips, "Distance and Historical Representation," *History Workshop Journal* 57 (2004): 127.
- 10 J.H. Hexter, "Historiography: The Rhetoric of History," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 6 (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1972 [1968]), 369–93, reprinted in J.H. Hexter, *Doing History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 15–76.
- 11 Peter Gay, *Style in History* (New York: Basic Books 1974).
- 12 See, e.g., Phillips, "The Revival of Narrative," cited above.
- 13 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).
- 14 Phillips, "Distance and Historical Representation," 126.
- 15 Mark Phillips, *Francesco Guicciardini: The Historian's Craft*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).
- 16 Ralph Cohen, "History and Genre," *New Literary History*, 17 (Autumn 1985): 203–18; Alastair Fowler, "The Life and Death of Literary Forms," in *New Directions in Literary History*, ed. Ralph Cohen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 77–94.
- 17 Cohen, "History and Genre," 204, 2- –05; see also Ralph Cohen, "Genre Theory, Literary History, and Historical Change," in *Theoretical Issues in Literary History*, ed. David Perkins (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 85–113.
- 18 See, e.g., Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
- 19 See Dimitrios Vardoulakis, "The Vicissitude of Completeness: Gadamer's Criticism of Collingwood," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 12, no.1 (2004): 3–19.



- 20 Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 115, quoted.
- 21 J.H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970 [1969]).
- 22 Quoted in Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, 5, quoted.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 116.
- 24 Garrett Mattingly, *The Armada* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959), 57.
- 25 Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, 5.
- 26 Mark Salber Phillips, "The Revival of Narrative: Thoughts on a Current Historiographical Debate," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 53, 2 (Winter 1983/4): 161; "Historiography and Genre: A More Modest Proposal," *Storia della storiografia/Histoire de l'historiographie* 24 (1993): 119, both cited in Kenneth Dewar, "Varieties of Historical Distance" in this issue of *JCHA*.
- 27 Lisa Jardine, "Order out of Chaos," *Financial Times* (14 March 2015), 9.
- 28 The film's cinematographer, Dick Pope, won a well-deserved special jury prize at Cannes in recognition of this achievement.
- 29 Phillips also observes that both modes can be practised in parallel, as they are by Anna Leticia Barbauld. See *On Historical Distance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 144.
- 30 Clara Reeve from the "Progress of Romance" in *Women's Writing 1778-1838: An Anthology*, ed. Fiona Robertson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 44.
- 31 Mark Salber Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013).
- 32 *Ibid.*, xiii, xii.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 155.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 192; Macaulay quoted in Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, 80.
- 39 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253, 64.
- 40 Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, 68–69.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 116.
- 42 *Ibid.*, xii, 115.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 66.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 142.
- 47 Hume quoted in Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, 83.

- 48 Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, 196.  
49 Ibid., 198.  
50 Ibid., 196.  
51 Hans George Gadamer quoted in Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, 7.  
52 Phillips notes Southey's debt to dialogues of the dead (126) but the dialogue form itself, of course, has a long history from Plato's dialogues through to the present.  
53 Phillips, *On Historical Distance*, 16.  
54 Ibid., 194.  
55 Ibid., xii.  
56 Ibid., 195.  
57 *On Historical Distance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).  
58 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. D. F. Norton and M. J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 274.