



Geschichtstheorie am Werk
Theory of History at Work
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Are We All Time-Travelling Detectives? Why Metaphors Matter in Talking About the Work Historians Do (Part 2)

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Cite as: Charlotte Lerg, "Are We All Time-Travelling Detectives? Why Metaphors Matter in Talking About the Work Historians Do (Part 2)," in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 11/10/2022, <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/8390>.

ISSN: 2750-7165

URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/8390>

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Are We All Time-Travelling Detectives? Why Metaphors Matter in Talking About the Work Historians Do (Part 2)

Detective Work: A Metaphor for Historical Research

From R.G. Collingwood's *Who Killed John Doe?* (1946) to the popular PBS children's programme *History Detectives* (2003–2014), the link between historical research and criminal investigation appears pervasive in popular and professional contexts alike.¹ Detective work, upon first examination, has many elements that are indeed helpful to understanding what historians do. They, too, follow traces, corroborate information, sometimes interview witnesses and examine objects or locations. A detective also has to (re-)construct what happened, rely on what remains, and occasionally chase down elements that have been covered up or tampered with. We could even extend the metaphor to think about how the emergence of new approaches – taken from psychology or the social sciences, for example, or developments in forensic science and technology such as DNA analysis or digitization – have changed the work of both the historian and the detective.²

Moreover, as Carlo Ginzburg reminds us, clues and hints alone tell us very little, they need to be contextualized and evaluated, connected and pursued. It remains an intricate balancing act to venture beyond known fact into reasonable conjecture to discover new clues and further hints (and start the interpretative process anew) until eventually a possible and plausible notion of the past can be inferred. Ginzburg, one of the foundational thinkers of the microhistory paradigm, further highlights the power of arriving at a larger understanding by focussing on a multitude of details.³ Thus, there is also a formidable parallelism between the detective and the historian in their deductive method of reasoning and the way they argue, construct and prove their findings.

At the same time, the metaphor does come with some pitfalls: The central motivation of detective work is to identify villains and victims. While in some contexts this is a valuable added task for historians, too, and they certainly need a moral compass, it is not their prime purpose.⁴

There is also an issue with this metaphor on a more theoretical level, because it underscores a notion that studying the past is guided and structured by somewhat objectively given events. Detectives are presented with a crime and circle around it in ever closer rings until they finally get to the heart of the matter, but what is the

heart of a historical event – and what is an event, anyway? William H. Sewell Jr. – speaking, of course, metaphorically – states that “events have always been the bread and butter of narrative history”. Yet he concedes, with Marc Bloch, that the structures that shape life need to be identified and understood.⁵ Still, even the most epic of crime storytelling will not easily compare to a *longue durée* analysis of the Mediterranean (or vice versa).⁶ Or, as Reinhart Koselleck put it, only an event can be narrated, whereas talking about structures will always have to be descriptive.⁷ In his work on historical theory, Sewell is concerned with reconciling the more traditional event-focussed approach with the structural focus popularized since the French *Annals* school.⁸ He does not dismiss the importance of the event completely, but instead (re)introduces it as a “sequence of occurrences” that reshapes or at least affects long-term structures.⁹

Sewell’s theory highlights two shortcomings of the detective-work metaphor. Firstly, he reminds us that, unlike the body-in-the-library set-up that presents the detective with a straightforward task and a central event, the historian has to first choose or, indeed, construct the event from a string of occurrences entangled with other overlapping structures that constitute different events. Secondly, if, with Sewell, we take both events and structures seriously, historians, rather than studying events for their own sake, would explore them to understand the underlying configurations and their development. If a detective approached crime-solving like a historian, the question would not be ‘whodunit?’ but, for example, What does this crime tell us about the underlying economic, cultural and social structures of this particular community, and how are they changed by it? Admittedly, this may not make for a suspenseful page-turning read or prime-time viewing and usually lacks the ultimate satisfaction of complete resolution or the triumph of good versus evil. Thus, while drawing on the idea of detective work may well be a helpful storytelling device to highlight the kind of research work historians do, it can also lead to problematic preconceptions about scope and results.

But why would a mainstream metaphor for historical work need to account for what may seem like the intricacies of historical theory? Thinking of history in terms of individual “cases” that need to be “cracked” for their own sake sustains the enumerative names-dates-facts perception. Reducing the study of history to a one-problem-one-solution logic also neglects the entangled complexities of past realities and consequently threatens to reduce the audience’s willingness to accept multi-causality, intersectional variables and epistemic nuance. Finally, this view makes it easier to dismiss the past once it has been “solved”, instead of asking how it affects and informs the present.

Time Travel: A Metaphor for Historical Method

"The past is a foreign country, they do things different there." The opening line of L.P. Hartley's 1953 novel *The Go-Between* has become a cherished, if somewhat worn, aphorism in historical theory. It was popularized by David Lowenthal when he used it as the title for his scrutinizing analysis of what was becoming professionalized public history.¹⁰ But its appeal also stems from the way it metaphorically thinks of time in terms of space.¹¹ John Lewis Gaddis, also an outspoken champion of "the power of the metaphor", has explored this link further in *The Landscape of History*.¹² He opens with a meditation on Casper David Friedrich's *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*, the painting he selected for the cover of his book. Bypassing much of what art history has to say about it, for him the image illustrates the importance of vantage points. Like the cartographer looking down from a mountain, the historian surveys and maps the past. In contrast, Gaddis contemplates time travellers somewhat dismissively, because their "field of vision only extends to [their] immediate senses".¹³ In his second chapter, however, the author returns to the topic more favourably and considers "historical research itself as a kind of time-machine".¹⁴ In terms of metaphors for historical work two larger issues emerge from Gaddis's work. Firstly, it underscores that the idea of time travel is based on and thus reinforces a metaphorical understanding of time as/in terms of space. And secondly, time travel is more a metaphor for historical method than for historical research. If we leave the science-fiction trappings to the side, what remains is the idea of travelling to acquire knowledge. What if the past really was simply "a foreign country" and fieldwork or exploratory expeditions were part of established research practices in history in the same way they are in other disciplines like anthropology or geography?

Alas, neither participatory observation nor topographical explorations will ever be real options for the historian. After all, apart from some very specific scenarios in theoretical physics, time travel remains a phantasy and the past is no longer directly accessible.¹⁵ Popular culture renditions of time travel often suggest to audiences that jumping back in time enables the protagonists to finally see what "actually happened" and to correct what historians falsely concluded. There might be a productive message here, as it underscores the fact that because historians cannot actually go back to the past, they are left with approximations. At the same time, if taken to extremes, highlighting that we can never really be sure, may also undermine the legitimacy of and trust in the work historians do. This danger echoes

the problem of 'truth' in history and the tension between constructing history versus uncovering the past.

Time Travel and the Ambivalence of Affect

On a different methodological note, unlike crime-solving, that is focussed on rational thinking and specific events, the history-as-time-travel metaphor foregrounds the affective element in historiography and thus points to an ongoing methodological debate on the role of immersion and empathy in understanding the past. Time travel is a favoured metaphor in settings – analogue or digital – keen to recreate a somewhat authentic experience of times gone by.¹⁶ Numerous North American tourist websites have a special category that lists the best places to “step back in time”. History museums like to advertise their immersive experience by evoking time travel. For their latest exhibit *Die Archäologische Zeitmaschine* (=the archaeological time machine) the *Altertumskommission für Westfalen* has even borrowed a real DeLorean from the 1980s classic movie *Back to the Future*.¹⁷ Digitalisation has only upped the ante: virtual time travel experiences complete with 3D goggles have recently been launched in Vienna (“takes you right back in time”), Cologne (“visitors experience the past as if they were really there”), and Berlin (“give the gift of time travel”).¹⁸ At the same time, Klett, an established German publisher of textbooks, titled its 10-volume series for history teaching *Zeitreise* (= time travel) while their rival Westermann had the same idea and went with *Reise in die Vergangenheit* (= journey into the past). Clearly, there is much to be gained from drawing on a fascinating trope from science fiction to teach (and sell!) history.

Making the past appear strange and familiar at the same time can give rise to productive engagement; be it for educational purposes or entertainment, or in rare cases a successful combination of both.¹⁹ However, the idea of better understanding the past through immersion glosses over the fact that the very same period of time felt very different for different people. It neglects the less tangible currents that shape realities, perceptions and experience in the past as well as in the present. Discussions over who can write what kind of (and whose) history come to mind.²⁰ Without going too deep into the philosophical and psychological challenges of grasping someone else's reality and practising empathy among culturally, socially, geographically (and 'chronologically') diverse individuals, there certainly is a limit to how truly we can feel ourselves 'into' others,

let alone into a historical subject, even if we share certain characteristics or identity markers.

“Empathy makes them [historians] uneasy. It is a squishy and capacious concept”, states Thomas A. Kohut in his recent book on *Empathy and the Historical Understanding of the Human Past*.²¹ Apart from the elusive and slippery nature of feelings as such, the rigorous historian is further unsettled by the unclear definition and use of the term ‘empathy’ itself. All too often it is used synonymously with ‘sympathy’, which, needless to say, can be problematic in exploring the past critically.²² Feeling ‘with’ someone suggests a closeness to one’s subject that is diametrically opposed to the professional distance required in the writing of history. Tom Griffiths, a cognitive scientist fascinated by the way historians think, attempts to fuse the logical and the affective element and concludes: “Historians move constantly between reading and thinking their way into the lives and minds of the people of the past”.²³ This observation echoes an earlier link drawn between history and psychoanalysis in the 1970s, for example, in the work of Peter Gay, who called for the “coexistence of engagement and detachment”.²⁴ Thus, time travel as an all-encompassing metaphor for the work historians do remains problematic due to the heavy emphasis on affective experiences. Moreover, for all the metaphorical idealism, let’s not forget that, after all, the past is irreversibly gone and no longer exists as a physical reality. Nevertheless, critically applying emotional knowledge within the rigid framework of the sources could indeed be conceptualised as an imaginary fieldtrip to the past.

Time Travel and the Presence of the Past

Tom Griffiths fully embraces the time travel metaphor and observes: “They [historians] scour their own societies for vestiges of past worlds, for cracks and fissures in the pavement of the present, and for the shimmers and hauntings of history in everyday action. They begin their enquiries in a deeply felt present. But as time travellers they have to forsake their own world for a period – and then, somehow, find their way back.”²⁵ Not all historians will feel comfortable with this description. Some might say it smacks of presentism as it shines a light on the starting point of the journey and forcefully reminds us that all history is of the present. Recently, cultural critics have addressed the hazards of “time-traveling while black” and reminded audiences that it was no coincidence that the majority of time travellers in the western canon of speculative fiction were white and male; even if more recent renditions of the genre have begun to use this trope to make a

point.²⁶ However, as much as it may be eye-opening to be reminded that some progress has been made on the road towards equality, we are immediately faced with the complexities of the notion of progress itself.

By selectively portraying the past as one-dimensional and (in this case morally) backward, we fall into something like a reverse-nostalgia trap. We get to feel good about our present and play down the challenges that remain or have arisen in the meantime. For a fiction writer it might be a useful ploy to juxtapose present-day mainstream morals and values, especially regarding race and gender, with often pithy versions of the past. It makes for clever punch-lines, interesting side plots and sometimes powerful messages. For the historian in the present, however, the moral high ground is not a good place to be. This is not to say that in writing history one ought to remain indifferent to injustices in the past or worse, try to exculpate actors or rationalize their faults away, for example with the infamous men-of-his-time argument.²⁷ Instead, what drives historical research are questions about how these injustices occurred, which ideas and mentalities carried unjust structures, and also how they morphed over time and maybe persist into the present. None of these questions can be answered by simply going back in time – even if we could.

Metaphors have Consequences

If, as I have argued, metaphors come with added meaning and related implications, it matters how we describe the work of historians. It matters methodologically and theoretically, it matters politically and it matters for the public perception of the discipline. These four dimensions cannot always be separated. The detective and the time traveller invite readers, audiences and publics to think of history not in terms of lists of names and dates, but in terms of how the past is linked to the present and yet in need of active exploration (to stay in the figurative language here). At the same time, the complexity of structures, agency and events that drives so much of historiography gets lost. Moreover, these metaphors suggest degrees of truth, reality and authenticity that history work cannot always deliver.

So where does that leave us? Taking metaphors seriously, and criticising them, does not mean we have to stop using them. They fulfil an important function in communicating about historical research and historical method within the profession – but, maybe even more importantly, also beyond. It is worth taking the time once in a while though to look at them more closely and examine their role and their effect. It can make a lot of sense to use the detective metaphor to explain

historical research, and the emotional effect of imagining a journey to the past does have a time and a place. But it is vital to keep the limits of each metaphor in mind. Not everything about doing history is like detective work and not all of it is like time travel, some of it is like a jig-saw puzzle, like an archaeology dig, like weaving a tapestry, like journalism, or like any number of other possibilities. Finding the right image can be just as productive, after all metaphors also do conception work.

[Read part 1 [here](#), published on 04 October 2022.]

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Tags: Consequences-of-Metaphors / history-writing / Metaphors

¹ For an elaborate analysis of the genealogy, theory and impact of this metaphor see: Achim Saupe, *Der Historiker als Detektiv – der Detektiv als Historiker. Historik, Kriminalistik und der Nationalsozialismus als Kriminalroman*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009.

² Interestingly, the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) and the FrameWorks Institute have recently issued a report on how to better engage the public in historical method. Their second (of four) recommendation explicitly suggests comparing historical work to detective work. Cf. Theresa Miller et al. *Making History Matter. From Abstract Truth to Critical Engagement*. Washington DC: A FrameWorks, 2022. For a discussion of the report see: Christy Coleman and Jason Steinhauer, "The Case of the Misunderstood Historical Method," *Reframing History Podcast* Ep. 2, AASLH, 6 April 2022.

³ Carlo Ginzburg and Anna Davin, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes. Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop* 9 (1980), 5–36, here esp. 8–10.

⁴ Cf. Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (eds), *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*. London: Routledge, 2020.

⁵ William H. Sewell Jr., "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures. Inventing Revolution at the Bastille," *Theory and Society* 25 (1996), 841–881, 841.

⁶ Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1949.

⁷ Reinhart Koselleck, „Darstellung, Ereignis und Struktur,“ in *Wie Geschichte geschrieben wird*. Berlin: Wagenbach, 1990, 113–125, here 113.

⁸ Sewell, „Historical Events,“ 842.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 844.

¹⁰ David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; See also: Achim Saupe, „Destination Vergangenheit. David Lowenthals Panorama geschichtskultureller Aneignungen (1985/2015),“ *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 18 (2021), 202–209, here 202–203.

¹¹ While the theory of relativity might seem to provide a scientific justification for this connection, in language the link is much older than modern physics and is deeply engrained in the way we talk about time (and this is true for many languages). Cf. James Glick, *Time Travel. A History*. New York: Vintage Books, 2016, 28–39.

¹² John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History. How Historians Map The Past*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002, 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁵ Peter Watson, „Can We Time Travel? A Theoretical Physicist Provides Some Answers,“ *The Conversation*, URL: <https://theconversation.com/can-we-time-travel-a-theoretical-physicist-provides-some-answers-182634> (15.07.2022).

¹⁶ The multi-layered debate over authenticity that is also central in this context cannot be laid out here in full but there has been some compelling theoretical work in recent years, especially with regard to digital games, and re-enactment. See, e.g., Anne Brædder et al., „Doing Pasts. Authenticity From the Reenactors’ Perspective,“ *Rethinking History* 21, no. 2 (2017), 171–192; Sabine Stach, „Zeit-Reisen?,“ in *Historisches Reenactment. Disziplinäre Perspektiven auf ein dynamisches Forschungsfeld*, ed. Sabine Stach and Juliane Tomann. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021, 209–232; Felix Zimmermann, „Historical Digital Games as Experiences. How Atmospheres of the Past Satisfy Needs of Authenticity,“ in *Game | World | Architectonics – Transdisciplinary Approaches on Structures and Mechanics, Levels and Spaces, Aesthetics and Perception*, ed. Marc Bonner. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2021, 19–34.

¹⁷ Altertumskommission für Westfalen und Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe, *Archäologische Zeitmaschine*, URL: <https://zeitmaschine.lwl.org/de/>.

¹⁸ For a more general discussion of these phenomena see, e.g., „Nah dran, aber keine Zeitreise! Doing Public History und immersive Medien. Christian Bunnenberg im Interview,“ *Doing|Public|History Blog*, URL: <https://doingph.hypotheses.org/890> (May 25, 2022).

¹⁹ Tyson Retz, *Empathy and History. Historical Understanding in Re-enactment, Hermeneutics and Education*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2018, 2.

²⁰ See, e.g., Mahmoud Arghavan et al. (eds), *Who Can Speak and Who Is Heard/Hurt. Facing Problems of Race, Racism, and Ethnic Diversity in the Humanities in Germany*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019; Amos Goldberg, „Empathy, Ethics, and Politics in Holocaust Historiography,“ in *Empathy and its Limits*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 52–78.

²¹ Thomas A. Kohout, *Empathy and the Historical Understanding of the Human Past*. London: Routledge, 2020, 15.

²² Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers, "Introduction," in *Empathy and its Limits*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 1–20, 3.

²³ Griffiths, *Time Travel*.

²⁴ Gay quoted and explained in Retz, "Empathy," 3.

²⁵ Griffiths. *Time Travel*.

²⁶ Maya Phillips, "'See You Yesterday' and the Perils—and Promise—of Time-Travelling While Black," *The New Yorker*, URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/see-you-yesterday-and-the-perilsand-promiseof-time-travelling-while-black> (15.07.2022).

²⁷ For a concise refutation see, e.g., Katie Grimes, "Moral Heroism and the 'Man of His Time' Defense," *Women in Theology*, URL: <https://womenintheology.org/2019/05/01/moral-heroism-and-the-man-of-his-time-defense/> (15.07.2022).