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Figuratively Speaking. Why Metaphors Matter in Talking About the Work Historians Do (Part 1)

To raise the question of the rhetoric of historical discourse is to raise the problem of the nature of description and analysis¹

I like a good metaphor. That said, some of my colleagues who have written texts with me, might be inclined to say, I like metaphors a little too much. But we all speak figuratively on a regular basis, often without thinking twice about it. While we may consider metaphors stylistic devices that primarily fulfil an aesthetic function in literary prose or poetry, they are, in fact, an inevitable element of scientific and academic language, also in history. Hans Blumenberg famously considered the nature of metaphors in the context of hermeneutics and the philosophy of language, arguing that it was through metaphors that we could truly grasp the world. Unlike simple terms or concepts, figurative language enables us to communicate a fuller and more profound understanding of the world, including elements and inherent connections simple language cannot account for.²

Outside the philosophy of language, awareness of the epistemic potential of metaphors emerged only gradually. Despite Blumenberg's 1960 argument that metaphors went beyond "ornamentation", "rhetoric" and "effect," Mary Hesse, writing in 1966, still felt frustrated by the constant need to stress why metaphors were more than "decorative literary devices."³ She must have felt vindicated by the linguistic turn. "The conflation of the concepts of poetry and prose within a general theory of language as discourse is one of the principal achievements of modern linguistic theory" Hayden White wrote, and "these figurative elements play a correspondingly more important role as components of the message of the historical discourse precisely in the degree to which the discourse itself is cast in ordinary, rather than technical, language."⁴ In other words, metaphors are particularly important for historians, because the latter tend to use less jargon than their colleagues in other disciplines. Himself no stranger to metaphors, White concluded: "Figures of speech are the very marrow of the historian's individual style."⁵ Arguably, it is about more than style. Figures of speech also do conceptual work as they endow everyday language with added meaning.⁶ Following this view, this blog post will explore the way metaphors influence our thinking about history itself and about the work of historians. In a second part next week we will explore two specific metaphors more closely.

Why Metaphors?

Knowledge psychologist Andrew Ortony was one of the first to study the phenomenon of metaphorical language as a conceptual tool in academic language in his 1979 essay *Why Metaphors are Necessary and Not Just Nice*. He pointed out that the compactness and vividness of figurative speech allows us to express the inexpressible. An observation that harks back to Blumenberg's "non-conceptuality" (*Unbegrifflichkeit*).⁷ A well-chosen image enables us to grasp otherwise complex ideas. Metaphors thus clearly have a heuristic as well as a depictive function.⁸ Trying to understand one context by invoking another, however, brings along its own framework, implicit meaning and related imaginary, which White terms the "determinative power of figurative language."⁹

With a slightly less postmodern agenda than White, cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson elaborate in *Metaphors We Live By* on how "metaphorical structuring" creates conceptual systems.¹⁰ They argue that what they call "conceptual metaphors" are not only decorative, but go beyond their heuristic function as they constitute their own frameworks through the "used" and "unused" elements of meaning associated with a certain imaginary. For example, when we speak of international relations in terms of personal relationships, we tend to use connected verbs and idioms. There is "wooing" and "estrangement", even the occasional "cold shoulder" or risky "flirt"; since necessity makes "strange bedfellows" it can occasionally lead to "rude awakenings". Unused parts of this metaphor are carried along tacitly but affect the meaning nonetheless. Transferring international relations into the realm of amorous or even sexual associations may implicitly assign gendered identities to nations, reflecting power relations and national identities that go beyond any particular context.¹¹ This shows that language can matter in the way White, Lakoff and Johnson described, as one metaphor creates an extended relational framework. Based on this premise, taking a closer look at metaphors used for history and historiography inside and outside the profession sheds light on the different challenges in (and to) the study of the past.

Thinking about the Past in Metaphors

The conceptual work of metaphors in thinking about the past can take different forms and occur in different contexts. Within the historical profession it can be a mode of methodological self-reflection. In fact, consciously engaging with the

metaphors we use as historians also raises our own awareness for implicit interpretations and assumptions that may inform our reading of the past. At the same time, because figurative speech is memorable and evocative, it is also a highly effective way to communicate beyond the academic context. Some of the more powerful metaphors transcend scholarly discourse and become part of public knowledge or even established tropes in everyday language.

Lucian Staiano-Daniels and Anne Schult have, in separate essays, examined the pervasiveness of aquatic metaphors in historiographical language and highlighted the workings and consequences of the activated elements and passive meanings in this imaginary.¹² Staiano-Daniels delves (!) into the philosophical implications of the “sea of history” by contemplating the immersive experience of archival research. He also probes the difference between rapid surface currents and slow-moving deep-water sediments to think about the relationship between structure and event.¹³ Schult, by contrast, sounds out the political implications of wave metaphors, especially in the history of migration. She shows how this epistemic figure of speech that initially aimed to convey a notion of natural laws such as the ebb and flow of the tide, assumes a politically problematic meaning through its connection to images of flooding, drowning, and uncontrollable natural disaster.¹⁴ These two examples illustrate two different applications of metaphorical language in history: Staiano-Daniels’s reflections are part of a methodological discourse on the nature and idea of history, other examples include history as a river or a multi-branched tree.¹⁵ Schult, by contrast, examines a figure of speech that has become so established that it illustrates historical phenomena within different periods and national contexts. Her example also highlights the transition of the metaphor into public – in this case extremely politicized – discourse.¹⁶

In addition to these methodological uses (in historical theory and to describe structural phenomena), particular events, or specific interpretations thereof, have become established through memorable metaphors. A continent might have “sleepwalked” into a world war for example. The way an image can grow and spread, particularly by using the corresponding verbs, is illustrated by the “iron curtain” that was “lifted”, “peered behind”, “peeked through”, and, occasionally, even “twitched”. Sometimes one metaphor begets another: The “spring of nations” of the 1848 revolutions was echoed over a century later in Prague and most recently in the Arab world. This example reminds us how powerful these imaginaries can be even in a diachronic perspective, where they create their own lines of tradition. In a variation on this phenomenon, historical events enter everyday language and can themselves become metaphors, as anyone who has

faced a personal “Waterloo” will know. In short, speaking about the past in metaphors comes almost naturally to both historians and those outside the profession. Linked to this practice are the metaphors used to talk about history in a more abstract sense, particularly in a non-academic context, and about the work historians do. What implicit added meaning do these figures of speech carry and why does it matter?

Caught Up in Political Discourse

Arguably, few other disciplines in the humanities are as ubiquitously present in the public realm as history – for better or worse. To a certain degree this omnipresence of historical content and the seemingly straightforward nature of the narratives trick audiences into believing that anyone can write history if only they know their facts.¹⁷ However, as much as referring to the past is a natural part of political debates, entertainment, identity formation¹⁸ or even matters of style and design, there seems to be little or no awareness of how the past becomes history in a professional sense.

In 2020, the American Historical Association (AHA) conducted a survey and found that 66% of Americans define history as “names, dates and other facts about what happened in the past” and only 9% saw it as something “historians have concluded about the past”.¹⁹ While there seems to be some allowance made for changing the narrative if “new facts” are “discovered”, the practices involved in how these “facts” are “discovered” and more importantly how they are interpreted (with a possibility to re-interpret them) fades from public view completely. In fact, ‘history’ has become a one-catch-all term that can variably mean, for example, ‘the past’ or ‘public memory’ (both official and popular). This faulty equation of the subject matter (the past) and the study of it (history) becomes particularly problematic in view of the central role assigned to ‘history’ in some political debates.²⁰ Granted, when history is invoked in these contexts (i.e., when history is supposedly erased or rewritten) neither the speakers nor their audiences are particularly concerned with what history actually is. Instead, they are referring to a diffuse higher authority or sacred truth, the underlying implication suggesting that there can be no objection. In a sense, the notion of ‘history’ is itself used metaphorically here, and the way it is endowed with absolute authority is more than a little troubling. There seems to be just one definitive history, one true, right and real telling of what “actually happened” with little or no room for amendments, additions, disagreement or changing interpretations.

In the face of a fair share of deliberate falsification of history, a yearning for the truth is understandable. Yet, academic historians, notably since the mid-twentieth century and particularly after being confronted with the so-called post-modern challenge, have generally accepted that absolute truth, like absolute objectivity, will remain but “a noble dream” as Peter Novick put it in his book on historiography.²¹ Most have learned to inhabit the liminal space between fact and interpretation where productive historical debate takes place. But public discourse struggles with such grey areas and resorts to metaphors that can be counterproductive: Grace McNutt has recently examined a related phenomenon with regard to statues as metaphors, which arguably highlights the problem even more clearly. In her article *Set in Stone. Using Statue-related Metaphors to Describe History Misses the Mark* she explains: “metaphors, like ‘carving’ and ‘setting in stone,’ present history as solid, unchanging and definitive. But history is actually none of these things,” and she warns: “The danger in these metaphors is they can subconsciously discourage reinterpretation, which can further contribute to sexist, racist and colonial influence in historical writing.”²² The way monuments and statues can carry multitudes of meaning has again become clear in the past few years.²³ The debates and protests that unfolded in this context reminded us of how complex the connections are between representation, memory, history, the past, and the present. They also highlighted that especially in public discourse it matters that there is an understanding not only of what happened in the past but also of what history itself actually is.

In my next post, I will explore two of the most popular metaphors for the work historians do: detective work and time-travel. At first sight these might seem mundane and, thanks to their rich counterparts in fiction, simply an attempt to provide (especially young) audiences with a little extra motivation to get excited about the past. But both of these metaphorical imaginaries also carry added conceptual elements that are both productive and problematic. So, what are the consequences of the detective and time-travel metaphors for how the public views history?

[The [second part](#) of this post will be published on 11 October 2022].

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Tags: history-writing / Metaphors / Rhetoric

¹ Hayden V. White, "Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination," *History and Theory* 14, no. 4, suppl. 14 (1975), 48-67, 49.

² Hans Blumenberg, „Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 6 (1960), 7-142.

³ Mary B. Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966, 158.

⁴ White, "Historicism," 52.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶ Purists (and grammar teachers) would insist that, strictly speaking, metaphors are to be distinguished from similes, comparisons, and analogies, but scholars studying the effect of their use tend to group them together as a linguistic tool that enables us to convey one idea by means of another. George Cf. Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, 10.

⁷ Hans Blumenberg, *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit. Aus dem Nachlaß herausgegeben und mit einem Nachwort von Anselm Haverkamp*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2007.

⁸ Phillip Stambovsky, "Metaphor and Historical Understanding," *History and Theory* 27, no. 2 (1988), 125-134, 125.

⁹ White, "Historicism," 53.

¹⁰ In subtle self-awareness the two authors use the example of how we tend to speak of theories in terms of building, to explain the "structural" function of metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 52.

¹¹ This example also highlights how visual language often corresponds to actual imagery in, for example, art or political cartoons. There is a long tradition of representing nations figuratively, from Marianne and Germania to Uncle Sam and John Bull, but depending on the context there is some fluidity (which would deserve separate exploration). Many countries have both a female allegory and a male representation (e.g., Britannia/John Bull; Columbia/Uncle Sam; Germania/Michel). Moreover, this gendering of nations is deliberate.

¹² Lucian Staiano-Daniels, "That Sea Is History. Water Metaphors in Modern European Historiography," *Journal of the History of Ideas Blog*, URL: <https://jhiblog.org/2021/10/06/that->

[sea-is-history-water-metaphors-in-modern-european-historiography/](#) (15.07.2022); Anne Schult, „Wellen, Ströme, Fluten. Zur politischen Geschichte aquatischer Metaphern,“ *Geschichten der Gegenwart*, URL: <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/wellen-stroeme-fluten-zur-politischen-geschichte-aquatischer-metaphern/> (11.04.2021).

¹³ Staiano–Daniels, “That Sea”.

¹⁴ Schult, „Wellen“.

¹⁵ Cf., e.g., Daniel Little, “Metaphors for History,“ *Understanding Society*, URL: <https://understandingsociety.blogspot.com/2009/03/metaphors-for-history.html> (10.03.2009). In a related vein, drawing maybe on Clio, the relevant muse here, history is regularly given agency; able to teach, and to judge, to prove wrong or right, and even to forget.

¹⁶ Regarding the extreme politicization of metaphors notably in the debate on migration, see also: Anne Friederike Delouis, “When History Becomes a Metaphor for the Present and the Future. Recent Far-Right Discourse About Immigration in the UK,“ *Lexis* 8, URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/219> (19.04.2019).

¹⁷ Tom Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel. Historians and Their Craft*. Melbourne: Black Inc., 2016. The digitization of the public sphere has given new urgency to this issue. See, for example, Leslie Madsen–Brooks, “‘I Nevertheless Am a Historian’. Digital Historical Practice and Malpractice around Black Confederate Soldiers,“ in *Writing History in the Digital Age*, ed. Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki. Ann Arbor: University Michigan Press/Digital Culture Books, 2013, 49–63.

¹⁸ See also the Issues “[Das umstrittene Wir.](#)“

¹⁹ Peter Burkholder and Dana Schaffer, *History, the Past, and Public Culture. Results from a National Survey*. Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2021, 9, 101.

²⁰ Charlotte Lydia Riley, “Why History Should Always Be Rewritten,“ in *What Is History Now*, ed. Helen Carr and Suzannah Lipscomb. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2021, 280–295.

²¹ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream. The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

²² Grace McNutt, “Set in Stone. Using Statue-Related Metaphors to Describe History Misses the Mark,“ *The Conversation*, URL: <https://theconversation.com/set-in-stone-using-statue-related-metaphors-to-describe-history-misses-the-mark-180372> (15.07.2022).

²³ See also Lisa Regazzoni’s blog post “[Den Vergangenheiten auf der Spur: Abriss einer Theorie der Intentionalität – Den Dingen entlang](#)“.