

Dramatizing Historical Distance

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Article abstract

This essay explores the efficacies of the distance rubric Mark Salber Phillips developed in *On Historical Distance* by applying it to a couple of recent examples that post-date the book's appearance: Ruth Scurr's *John Aubrey: My Own Life* and Mike Leigh's *Mr. Turner*. These examples lead to some speculations about Phillips' attention to media and his account of the history of literary history.

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Abstract

*This essay explores the efficacies of the distance rubric Mark Salber Phillips developed in *On Historical Distance* by applying it to a couple of recent examples that post-date the book's appearance: Ruth Scurr's *John Aubrey: My Own Life* and Mike Leigh's *Mr. Turner*. These examples lead to some speculations about Phillips' attention to media and his account of the history of literary history.*

Résumé

*Le présent article explore l'efficacité de la rubrique de distance développée par Mark Salber Phillips dans *On Historical Distance* en l'appliquant à deux exemples récents publiés après la sortie du livre, soit *John Aubrey : My Own Life* de Ruth Scurr et *Mr. Turner* de Mike Leigh. Ces exemples mènent à quelques spéculations au sujet de l'attention portée aux médias par Phillips et de son récit de l'histoire de l'histoire littéraire.*

In *On Historical Distance*, Mark Salber Phillips makes a significant contribution to the history and theory of history by developing a rubric for capturing the formal, cognitive, affective, and ideological ways distance can be modulated, illustrated in a three-part narrative treating various histories from the Renaissance to the present. In order to characterize the adaptability of his far-reaching achievement, I apply his rubric to a couple of recent examples that postdate the book's appearance. My examples highlight the interpretive efficacies of the rubric, especially as it allows Phillips to produce a revaluation of the sentimental between the eighteenth century and our own time. My questions about the possibility of achieving a complete revaluation lead me to wonder about the ways the category of media might help to sharpen the relations between Phillips' formal and affective axes.

In another essay in this cluster, Kenneth Dewar portrays *On Historical Distance* as the culmination of Phillips' earlier commit-

ments to producing “a practical criticism of historiography,” and “a literary history of history writing,” thus highlighting a rich interdisciplinary practice that uses some of the modes of reading most closely associated with literary studies for the purposes of historiography.²⁶ The disciplinary boundaries between the studies of literature and history are most evident, however, in the history Phillips gives of literary history, to which I turn in conclusion, to explore an edge of the territory where the studies of history and eighteenth-century literature meet up.

Phillips’ key insight is that the combination of ways distance is manipulated in historical narrative, fiction, and painting encodes their ideas of history. The analytical force of his theorization of distance, as both combinatory rubric and historiographical key, can most easily be seen in his capsule treatment of the transformation of history painting between the later eighteenth century and the Victorian period. This treatment, I would suggest, proves to be the lynchpin linking together the last two sections of the book, and this for two reasons. First, the variable subject matter of history painting makes it plain that a painting will belong to the category of “history painting” as much because of its relationship to what it represents as its subject matter. Phillips’ treatment of neo-classical history painting, whose subjects are often fictional or mythic, for example, thus becomes a proving ground for his rubric’s capacity to analyze treatments of history in other media, including novels and even museum installations. Second, the shift from the monumentalizing depictions of real, or imagined, figures’ heroic behaviour that dominated neo-classical history painting to the domesticating depictions of ordinary people’s experience of historical change that preoccupied history paintings of the Victorian age involved developing a lower and wider perspective. The logic of this development culminates in microhistory, as Phillips powerfully demonstrates in the book’s last part.

Eighteenth-century history paintings proposed to close the gap between the past and the present and thus to hold both at the same distance by various means. For example, as Phillips shows, James Northcote’s illustration of *Richard III* for Boydell’s

Shakespeare Gallery counted as a history painting because it harmonized painting and poetry according to the neoclassical codes of decorum. The display of the two heirs to the throne about to be murdered recalled the theatrical provenance of the scene to foreground the translation across the media of stage, page, and canvas that the painting accomplished. Holding not only past and present but also the different media at equal distance, such translation updated the spatial relations of the rhetorical “common-places” of an earlier age. Benjamin West’s *The Death of General Wolfe*, to take another example, used embodiment to traverse the geographical distance between the Old World and the New by including the Mohawk warrior. Nineteenth-century paintings, by contrast, emphasized the differences between then and now, finding ways to render the experience of temporality in visual terms.

David Wilkie’s *Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Waterloo Dispatch* (1822), for example, presented the lag between events and their report in the newspaper, not only written after the battle occurred but also only read after whatever additional time it took for delivery into its readers’ hands. In Ford Madox Brown’s *The Last of England* (1852–55), the backward gaze of the emigrant at the receding shore associates the Old World with the past and the New World with the future, as the ship moves towards a destination located across the ocean. The domesticity of these paintings’ subjects conveys that history is experienced not just by heroes but also by regular people from across the social spectrum. Greater accessibility to viewers across horizontal and lateral, rather than vertical and aspirational, lines brings them close in another way.

Phillips’ overview of the history of history painting proposes that Victorian history paintings’ distillation of the historicity of history cannot ultimately be separated from their ordinary subjects’ affective experience of temporality which viewers are invited — or obliged — to share. He then proposes to see in comparable terms the ideological shift to history “from below” after 1968, which, he observes, is accompanied by an intensification of affective proximity to the subjects of history that can now be

narrated from the perspective of local individual experience, be it of humans, animals, or objects. Revealing microhistory to be a sentimental genre, Phillips would complete the revaluation of the sentimental that he began in *Society and Sentiment* (2000), in which sentiment gauged the genres of eighteenth-century history writing. Indeed, the distance rubric of *On Historical Distance* might be seen to elaborate and codify the earlier category of genre.

In *On Historical Distance*, Phillips uses an expansive understanding of sentiment grounded in eighteenth-century treatments of the category to perform an end-run around the downgrading of sentiment that occurred in the Modernist backlash against the Victorians. Phillips would thereby neutralize the term “sentimental,” which has been used to dismiss from any serious analysis popular and often middlebrow culture thus accused of exhibiting hokey, clichéd and naïve manipulations of feeling. Instead of a reason to ignore it, he would use “sentimental” as an indicator that psychological or affective involvement is demanded and thus requires analysis, even when it is not overtly acknowledged. In his analysis of the post-1968 turn to cultural history that included microhistory, “thick description,” and “historical anthropology,” Phillips uses this revalued sentimental to explore the shared formal investment of close-up views with metonymic significance.

But can the resuscitated term, no matter how thoroughly grounded in the historical contexts that gave it its most nuanced elaboration, fully shed the associations it accrued — also historically? The meaning of “sentimental” may not always be as neutral as Phillips would have it. He makes a persuasive case for seeing the Victorian history paintings with fresh eyes when he shows that, in their representation of the differences between then and now, they braided together affective involvement and cognitive and ideological commitments by maintaining a uniform degree of distance across the axes. In the post-1968 histories, as Phillips’ rubric clarifies, divergent distances along the cognitive and affective axes have ideological significance with the meaning of “sentimental” vacillating accordingly. Phillips’ post-1968 examples are not paintings but historical narratives, for the most part.

Perhaps the fuller neutralization of sentiment in the case of the Victorian paintings can be achieved because of their presentation of distance as uniform, a formal feature of the static medium of painting.

In post-1968 histories, the formal granting of the part with the capacity to speak for the whole is supported cognitively by the accrual of a wealth of new and new kinds of detail, and ideologically by the adoption of the new perspective "from below." In some kinds of post-1968 history, the affective axis is amplified by similar degrees of distance across the other axes, another version of which we have seen in Victorian history painting; in others, its power derives from the heightening of feelings isolated by means of contrasting degrees of distance. In the first type, the lower perspective that embraces more subjects of history than had previously been allowed brings readers psychologically closer to hitherto marginalized or minority subjects, with the historian also being more closely connected to these subjects by means of an identification made newly explicit. As Phillips shows, both access and identification flow from the position of the historian, who often shares gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, or nationality with her subject, and who, where no such grounds are available, is often required to justify the differences. Similarity amplifies affect which in turn amplifies ideology. Despite Phillips' cool uptake of sentiment, he wields it here as a weapon to expose the alignment of the cognitive, affective, and ideological that underwrites the celebration of authenticity, a late-twentieth-century replacement for an objectivity understood to be tenable no longer. To a certain extent, "sentimental" here retains its negative overtones.

In the second type of post-1968 history, often where the animation of objects is involved, principles of what the Russian formalists called defamiliarization, or estrangement, are enlisted to provide points of affective and cognitive distance in strong contrast to the closeness of perspective that occurs on the formal and ideological axes. Two contemporary examples invite the application of Phillips' rubric to new forms and media, even as they illustrate this contrast. Indeed, Phillips helps us to under-

stand the latest development in the logic of the zoom, or the close-up, that extends the first type into territory that might otherwise be almost unrecognizable as history.

In a contemporary mash-up of autobiography, biography, and fiction, Ruth Scurr's recent biography of John Aubrey invents a first-person voice in which Aubrey narrates his "own" experience. In a review of *John Aubrey: My Own Life*, Lisa Jardine praised Scurr, whose act of scholarly imagination "opened up the emotional space to appreciate the bonds of affection" between Aubrey and Robert Hooke that had eluded Jardine in her own biography of Hooke, thus "modifying significantly [Jardine's] own historical understanding."²⁷ The "I" voice that expresses Scurr's maximal closeness to Aubrey also brings readers closer to him, insofar as they are alternately directly addressed by this "I" and interpolated into an identification with it. Phillips' concept of distance prompts us to see Scurr's fictional memoir, like that of its kissing cousin, the counterfactual novel, as new forms of engagement with history as a category of knowledge.

Powered by the imaginary, both transcend some of the earlier requirements of history, the former pushing past the actual alignment of historian and subject on the grounds of identity, the latter past the archive of actual events. Now that all past texts are equidistant at "one click away," some would forge connections to the past whose intensity is more effectively rendered in the genres usually associated with fiction than with scholarship. And fiction, instead of being opposed to fact, now puts its arsenal of devices at the disposal of the historical imagination, which harnesses its narrative capacities for manipulating distance as well as for rendering what may never have happened to represent the past.

Mike Leigh's resplendent film, *Mr. Turner* (2014), illustrates the second type of post-1968 sentimental history, and is thus amenable to Phillips' distance rubric not simply because Turner's contributions to British history painting make an appearance in *On Historical Distance*. Leigh's film coordinates different distances across the affective, cognitive, and ideological axes; at times, he even seeks strategically to maximize viewers' alienation.

The scenes of Turner exploring scientific advances in optics and the new technologies of photography portray his anxieties that the art of painting belongs to the past and is about to be surpassed, but the film also goes over Turner's head in scene after gorgeous scene delivering the visual evidence that film can live up to painting's aesthetic achievements.²⁸ Cinematography, costume, and set design transport us back to Turner's time, but Leigh will not allow this lovingly detailed historical reconstruction, however accurate it may be, to lay the grounds for an explanation of Turner's achievement. Refusing the usual terms of psychobiography, and demystifying the Romantic myth of the artist, Leigh proposes that Turner, both the man and his work, cannot be explained, only described and displayed. The film thus shares with Scurr's "auto"-biography of Aubrey a belief in the display afforded by dramatization, even if Scurr's occurs in the performance of self-narration.

Phillips' distance rubric makes it clear that the film's ideological eschewal of psychological explanation is undergirded by, or realized through, the contrasts it generates between formal and cognitive closeness and moments of affective alienation. Leigh visually immerses the viewer in nineteenth-century England, but at the same time, he violently pushes us out of the moment in the brutal scenes of Turner's sexual exploitation of his housekeeper, Hannah Danby, the niece of his common-law wife from whom he was estranged. These scenes are calculated: faced with a relationship we might be more comfortable to call abusive, we are obliged to recognize Hannah's pleasure, though it is only fleetingly conveyed, her sustained devotion to Turner, and her sexual jealousy when Turner takes another lover. Leigh thus makes us confront the discrepancy between the forms taken by sexual morality in the Victorian period, from which Turner himself seems to have diverged, and those of our own time. He makes us bring a historical understanding to our own expectations of sexual intimacy, even if a narrative of the processes by which nineteenth-century mores are transformed is not provided. Phillips' distance rubric exposes the means by which Leigh leverages the proximity his historical reconstruction has elicited into

the recognition that our values were absent in Turner's times. We confront their historicity, a lesson that abides even if Turner's sexual behaviour is a figment of Leigh's and his actor-collaborators' collective imaginations.

Another way Leigh attacks the Romantic myth of the artist can be seen in the film's mannered portrait of John Ruskin, in a scene where he hosts Turner and a number of others for tea. Leigh invites the viewer to laugh at Ruskin, who proposes silly topics of conversation, and has an elaborate hairdo and a foppish, nearly incomprehensible, lisp. Leigh would thus minimize, if not dismiss, the crucial financial support and aesthetic legitimacy Ruskin offered Turner to portray the painter as more self-sufficient and independent. Although both men were evidently equally eccentric, Leigh cruelly pokes fun at the privileged Ruskin and celebrates the salt-of-the-earth Turner, who is given the voice of reason in this scene of artistic sociability. The divergent distances in this scene display Leigh's ideological investment in celebrating Turner as a self-made artist from the working class. Phillips' rubric exposes that the modulations of distance in the scenes of both sex and sociability encode Leigh's relation to history: though Leigh may stake a claim to historical objectivity in rejecting psychological explanations in the sex scenes, such anti-sentimentality may be the flip side of a sentimental overinvestment in Turner as a working class subject.

Phillips is attentive throughout his treatments of paintings, novels, and museum installations to the status of media. It is worth raising the possibility, however, that media might merit its own axis in what might then become a five-part rubric. More of an emphasis on media differences might help to specify the relations between the formal and affective axes, especially insofar as certain formal features are features of media, while others are more rhetorical or generic in nature. It would be important, however, not to let the category of media obscure the real continuities present in the project of history, no matter what form or medium it takes.

The capacity of Phillips' rubric to handle the interface of fiction and history on canvas, page, and screen, however, is so

impressive as to suggest it might be worth retrenching the privilege normally granted to literature in the study of fiction. Yet in the history he gives of literary history, we can see where literature might play a bigger role than Phillips allots to it. He seeks in late eighteenth-century literary history a similar reorientation to history to that which occurred in history painting. He portrays a shift from reading the literature of the past “under the lamp of morals,” as he puts it, to reading it as it illuminates the development of a literary tradition linked to the history of the nation.²⁹ Whereas Phillips is surely correct that literature only comes to be recognized as having a history at the turn of the nineteenth century, his explanation that this is due to the new availability of national development to historical narrative is, in my view, only part of the story.

In order for literature to have a history, it had to become available as a category for organizing literary texts. The modern term, “literature,” came to displace the older term, “poetry,” under the joint pressures of new genres, such as the novel and melodrama, and the inundation of the literary marketplace by cheap print. Literature thus became available to historical narrative at the turn of the nineteenth century because of the reorganization of the field of letters designated by the term “literature.” From this point of view, Phillips’ history of literary history might need to take account of earlier discussions of a native English poetic tradition that did not narrate its development in terms of the history of the nation.

John Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1665), for example, treated the drama of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Beaumont, and Fletcher as comprising an inheritance to be valued and transmitted even if it did not conform to the neoclassical rules that were seen as coming from France. Later critical essays by Joseph Addison and Samuel Johnson distinguished native from classical strains in poetry, a program Horace Walpole put into service in his 1764 articulation of the Gothic novel as a blend of old romance and new. Clara Reeve’s *Progress of Romance* (1785), appeared, like *Essay of Dramatick Poesy*, in dramatic dialogue. Her speakers give a history of prose fiction in which they “consider the beauties and

defects of these writings, the uses and abuses, and their effects upon the manners of the times in which they are written;" they "trac[e] Romance to its Origin" to "show how the modern Novel sprung up out of its ruins," thus applying a chronological frame to debates about the relevance of the neoclassical rules to native novelistic composition.³⁰

In other words, English literary criticism from the mid-seventeenth until the late eighteenth century was self-consciously invested in a native literary tradition; it could be said to have made this tradition available to the conceptualization of the nation, even if it did not always take narrative form or narrate development. Although the generic diversity of literary history might mean that its history would no longer dovetail quite so nicely with the history of history painting or national history, Phillips' distance rubric remains capable of disclosing earlier criticism's assumptions about history. A more fulsome account of English literary history that used Phillips' distance rubric would make a valuable contribution to our understanding of various neoclassical practices of history before they came to be displaced by sentimental narratives of national history.

Phillips' book has significant implications for the ways historical knowledge is produced, archived, and displayed in the present. Not only will his distance rubric help to deepen our understanding of the historiography of the past; its applicability to contemporary examples suggests that it will continue to be equally useful in the future.

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