LUCIAN HÖLSCHER

VIRTUAL HISTORY

PERSPECTIVES ON AN EXPANDED CONCEPT OF HISTORY

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Perspectives on an Expanded Concept of History

The micro monograph in the series *Bielefeld Theory Talks* is an innovative publication format, developed in close collaboration between the Center for Theories in Historical Research at the Department of History of Bielefeld University and Bielefeld University Press (BiUP). The aim is to encourage theoretical debates in historical research by publishing ways of thinking that are both original and interdisciplinary. The core of each micro monograph is a detailed paper on key questions of historical theory originally given as a lecture – notably a Koselleck Lecture – at the Center for Theories. Each contribution is accompanied by commentaries from a member of the Department of History at Bielefeld University and two international experts, who analyze the historical-theoretical position under review from their own scholarly perspective. Through these conversations, the series not only showcases a range of different theoretical positions, it also gives us an insight into the processes and practices of theorizing itself – a true theory in the making.

The micro monograph by Lucian Hölscher published here is a revised version of the Koselleck Lecture "Virtuelle Geschichtsschreibung. Ideen zur Entfaltung eines erweiterten Geschichtsbegriffs" he gave on 10 May 2023 at the Bielefeld Center for Theories in Historical Research.

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At first glance, the term 'virtual history' may evoke images of computer-animated fictions of the past – an artificial rendition of a reality that never existed. However, the matter is more complicated: In the present context the term 'virtual' is used to describe as much the non-existent in reality as that which could exist or could have existed. In this sense, the following essay explores historical scenarios that could have occurred but never did; scenarios that are embedded in the past and will never completely disappear. Such a concept expands the concept of history beyond what has actually happened to what was, is, and always will be possible.

The Ephemeral Nature of Historical Knowledge

One of the gravest weaknesses of history as a science is undoubtedly the temporal limitation of the validity of its publications, provided we accept the timeless validity of findings as a measure of their scientific character. This is not only due to the fact that, as in all other sciences, existing knowledge is constantly being overtaken by new findings and discoveries, so that an increasingly accurate picture of "how it actually has been" ("wie es eigentlich gewesen," Leopold von Ranke)[1] will emerge only with the passage of time, but also to a specific characteristic of historical narratives: Since most historians have lost faith in the possible timelessness of their representations of the past, historical narratives contain a temporal index that binds them to the time and situation in which they were created.[2] As a result, even if they are factually correct, the validity of their representations is bound to be short-lived.

This loss of validity can occur in different ways - for example, by the fact that the story told runs toward the present and can therefore only be read

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1   Cf. Rudolf Vierhaus, "Rankes Begriff der historischen Objektivität," in Reinhart Koselleck, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Jörn Rüsen (eds.), *Objektivität und Parteilichkeit in der Geschichtswissenschaft,* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977), 63–76.

2   Ludger Jansen, *Die Wahrheit der Geschichte und die Tugenden des Historikers,* 9. (https://www.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/phth/jansen/Texte/geschichte&wahrheit11.pdf).

as its pre-history: As soon as the present has shifted, the pre-history of the present will also be different. For example, a history of the German Weimar Republic, written in retrospect in 1933, will certainly differ from a history written in retrospect in 1950 or later: Seen from 1933, it will primarily have to address the collapse of the Republic under the onslaught of Nazism, and its causes; seen from 1950 or later, it will also have to address which elements of the Weimar Republic survived the Nazi regime. Many historical narratives, even if they do not deal explicitly with the present, contain such an implicit reference to the present: One only needs to think, for example, of Theodor Mommsen's "History of Rome": First published between 1854 and 1856 (translated into English in 1862–1866), it covered only the period from the foundation of Rome to Gaius Julius Caesar. At the same time, however, it indirectly addressed, and thus tried to rekindle and remedy, the lack of republican spirit in Germany in Mommsen's own age.[3]

Another reason for the loss of historical validity of historiographical works is the historians' changing methodological approaches or theoretical assumptions, not least in terminology. Friedrich Meinecke's "Idee der Staatsräson," published in 1924, was convincing only at a time after World War I when the History of Ideas as a theoretical concept was booming in Germany. Only half a century later, however, it was criticized by social historians claiming that its author had not sufficiently identified the actors that had promoted the idea, and that his description therefore lacked a social basis.[4] It was not with the facts that Meinecke had collected that his critics found fault, but with the theoretical concept with which Meinecke sought to describe and explain a historical change.

Various times produce different images of the past, even if they report the same events. That does not mean that some are necessarily more correct than others, but each of them belongs to the time, place, and social group that identifies with it. And as soon as they have lost this validity over the course of time, either by the death of their protagonists or changes in the basis of experience or research methods, they also belong to the time in which they were considered to be an accurate representation of the past. Although there are often different, sometimes even contradictory, scholarly accounts of a fact or a past situation, there is just as often a consensus

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3   Cf. the Wikipedia article: "History of Rome (Mommsen)," Wikipedia, accessed 7 March, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_History_of_Rome_(Mommsen).

4   Cf. Jürgen Kocka, Sozialgeschichte. Begriff – Entwicklung – Probleme (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986). Idem, "History and the Social Sciences Today," in Hans Joas and Barbro Klein (eds.), *The Benefit of Broad Horizons. Intellectual and Institutional Preconditions for a Global Social Science. Festschrift for Bjorn Wittrock on the occasion of his 65th birthday*, International Comparative Social Studies 24 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 53–67.

among experts and ordinary people on what was real, at least for a time, making it possible for later historians to speak of a general agreement at a past time.

In this sense, modern historiography is necessarily always bound to the point of view of its pictures of the past. In German historiography this perspective view on history is called "Standortgebundenheit": Only the standpoint from which a story is told provides the perspective that gives a historical judgment its persuasive power.[5] But this attachment to the historical place and moment in which the historical narrative was created seems ambivalent: On the one hand, it guarantees the topicality of historiographical works. On the other hand, however, it also necessitates ever new attempts to portray the past as it appears in the present day and time. Thus, the mountain of possible narratives and interpretations of past times continues to grow over time. Historical works are usually accepted by the public for only a brief timespan, subjecting scholarly resources to an enormous amount of wear and tear.

The Identity of Past Facts

Historians have gone to considerable lengths to make their accounts of the past more durable. One of their hypotheses is an assumed identity of the facts of the past: Historians are aware that there may be many different accounts and interpretations of past events, yet they assume that all these accounts are about one and the same past reality. While this fundamental principle of modern historiography has been challenged in recent decades by some radical constructivist historians,[6] most historians continue to maintain that even different views of historical reality cannot call into question its identity as such. Otherwise, there could be no dispute about how and whether something happened as reported by certain historians. The possibility, at least theoretical, of conducting and deciding such a dispute still seems to be an indispensable prerequisite for historical research today, if it is to continue to fulfil its task of truthfully depicting the reality of the past.

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5   Cf. Reinhart Koselleck, "Perspective and Temporality. A Contribution to the Historiographical Exposure of the Historical World," in idem, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time,* trans. Keith Tribe, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 128–154.

6   Cf. Christian Reus-Smit, "Reading History through Constructivist Eyes," *Millennium. Journal of International Studies* 37, no. 2 (2008): 395–414, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0305829808097647?journalCode=mila.

This is precisely what distinguishes historiography from the literary treatment of mythical material, where the question of how it really happened seems meaningless. The intention of Benjamin Hederich, the leading lexicographer of Greek mythology in eighteenth-century Germany, to work out not only the fabulous traditions of the Greek myths, but also how they "really happened," therefore seems a pointless undertaking to us today.[7] Myths, such as the story of the Greek king Oedipus, who unknowingly fathered children with his mother, bringing upon himself the gods' revenge, can certainly be told in different versions without forcing the reader to decide which one is the correct, authentic account. If, on the other hand, the myth may be based on a historical event, like Odysseus' return to his home on the isle of Ithaka in Homer's epic Odyssey, then it would make perfect sense to search for it, as it actually happened.

The assumption of the existence of an objective identity of the past is the foundation underlying the techniques of source criticism, which form the core of the scientific methodology of historiography. They aim to reconstruct past events authentically by systematically comparing different sources. Such a comparison would not be possible at all if it were not based on the assumption that different, independently created accounts address the same events. Similar to hearing different witnesses in a court case, such a comparison of different sources guarantees the general validity of its findings and thus gives them a lasting "scientific" character. According to the "veto of the sources" (Reinhart Koselleck), historians are not allowed to ignore such verified facts in their accounts of the past without refuting them.[8]

However, the scope of source-critical procedures is limited: They cannot prevent new experiences and new questions, different choices of sources, and different theoretical presuppositions from giving the historical narrative, in which such scientifically elucidated events are assembled into a coherent narrative, an appearance of its own, making the picture of the past vary from one work to the next. As a result, while historians may agree on the elements that make up a historical narrative, they may not agree on the way in which they are selected and put together. The nature of historical

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7   Cf. Benjamin Hederich, *Gründliches Lexicon mythologicum, worinne sowohl die fabelhafte, als wahrscheinliche und eigentliche Historie der alten und bekannten römischen, griechischen und ägyptischen Götter und Göttinnen, wie auch Helden und Heldinnen, seltsamen Wunder-Tiere, merkwürdigen Flüsse, Brunnen Berge und der gleichen zur Mythologie oder sogenannten Historia poetica gehörigen Dinge ... zusammengebracht ist*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1741).

8   Cf. Stefan Jordan, "Vetorecht der Quellen," Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte, last modified February 11, 2010, https://docupedia.de/zg/Vetorecht_der_Quellen; Koselleck, Perspective and Temporality.

narratives, depending on the point of view from which they are told, is not touched by them, but only the factuality of their elements is ensured by secured historical sources.

The following considerations therefore are not meant to question the perspective character of all historical narratives as such but rather aim to do better justice to the time-bound nature of such perspectives than has previously been possible. The problem for historiography is precisely the great number of possible histories that have been produced over the last two centuries. If they cannot be reconciled, their multiplicity contradicts the theorem of identity and unity of historical reality.[9]

Originally, in the eighteenth century, the theory of perspectivity (Theorie der Standortgebundenheit) was developed only for multiple concurrent perspectives on an event: Seen from different simultaneous perspectives ("Sehepunkte"), events appear differently, as the author of this theory, Erlangen historian Johann Martin Chladenius, argued in 1752. It is therefore necessary to synthesize the different perspectives of an event to obtain an overall picture of it.[10] Far more difficult than synthesizing simultaneous perspectives, however, is the diachronic multi-perspective view on past events, arising from the fact that historians look back on the same historical sequence of events at different times. These diachronically different perspectives cannot be brought together to form a vivid overall picture as easily as synchronous perspectives of different observers in the older doctrine.

Unless they expand our knowledge of historical objects by adding new aspects, they tend to replace an older image with a newer one: but only in the sense of an immediate claim to reality of today's descriptions of the past, superseding earlier ones: Just as a modern map replaces older, say, medieval cartographic representations of the same region in our mind. On another, fictional level, the older representations of past events often keep their significance, whether in the form of a "classical," "mythological," "nostalgic," or otherwise qualified representation of the past. As a kind of artwork, they can then unfold a timeless truth that lifts them out of historical reality and thus makes them meaningful for the present and the future in a different, non-historical sense.[11]

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9 Cf. Lucian Hölscher, "Die Einheit der Geschichte und die Konstruktivität historischer Wirklichkeit. Die Geschichtswissenschaft zwischen Realität und Fiktion," in Wolfgang Sonne and Evelyn Schulz (eds.), *Kontinuität und Wandel. Geschichtsbilder in verschiedenen Fächern und Kulturen,* (Zurich: vdf Hochschulverlag, 1999), 19–40.

10 Cf. Johann Martin Chladenius, *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* (Leipzig, 1752); idem, *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft,* 2nd ed. (Vienna et al.; Böhlau, 1985), 91–114. Cf. Koselleck, *Perspective and Temporality,* 5.

11 As an example for such a kind of historiography, which he calls „Erinnerungsgeschichte", cf. Jan Assmann: Die Zauberflöte. Oper und Mysterium (München: Hanser, 2005).

What follows, then, is not an attempt to unite the various historical views of different epochs into an overarching entity, but rather to work out the relationships between the perspectives of different times of one and the same event: In this way, the historical picture of the present is complemented by the pictures of the past and even of the future, making a multi-layered image of past realities emerge. The main purpose of this operation is to liberate historiography from its static attachment to the present moment and thus, to a certain extent, to make historical narrations "dynamic." As I want to demonstrate, history consists not only of the ephemeral and contingent images of the past created by the present age, but also of the images that were created in the past, and that will be created in the future.

However, this requires an important extension of what we call 'history': Since today, we cannot predict future images of the past with any certainty, such a diachronic series of historiographical images turns to the world of possibilities – those historical images of the past and present that could one day be shaped by future generations. Thus, we expand the scope of history from the historically actual to that of the historically possible. I call this 'virtual history' or 'virtual historiography,' using the attribute 'virtual,' as I pointed out in the beginning of this essay, in the double sense of a history that can be thought and imagined as well as a history that has not actually occurred. In doing so, the concept of the 'virtual' is distinct from the concepts of the 'fictional' and the 'unreal' in that it reveals the unreal as only seemingly unreal; and that it elevates the fictional to a new kind of reality.[12] It is precisely the hybrid character of the virtual that gives the term its relevance today.

In the future, a virtual historiography must be concerned with exploring the space of what was once possible, for several reasons: Firstly, because not only what actually happened, but also what could have happened, is in some sense a historical fact, namely as an intellectual idea; secondly, because what really was and is in the past or present ultimately turns out to be just one possibility among many others; and last but not least, because what once seemed possible may one day become a reality again in the future.

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12 According to the German dictionary of Oxford Languages, the word "virtuell" has two major meanings: (a) existing as a possibility according to its nature (a virtual opposition of interests), (b) not real, not existing in reality, but appearing real (virtual, i.e. apparent, only logically existing memory).

Not Only is the Real Possible, but also the Possible is Real

Ever since the concept of history came to embrace the whole of historical reality,[13] modern historiography has sought to exclude from the realm of history the unrealized possibilities once imagined by contemporaries: According to a widespread prejudice that goes back at least to Leibniz and Hegel, what has not happened could never have happened.[14] According to this prejudice, one only has to consider the facts closely enough to understand that what really occurred was the only thing in the past that was possible.[15]

In the age of historicism, it seemed to be the historians' task to prove this hypothesis. And historians believed they could do this all the better because common sense was always on their side: As we know from everyday life, what has not happened sooner or later loses the character of reality. The same is true in politics: In 1990, when the GDR collapsed, civil rights activists could still hope that the successor state to the GDR would pursue a reformist socialist course, whereas a short time later, this appeared to be a mere illusion. Options for the future, no matter how likely, desirable, or threatening they may once have been, are in most cases dismissed as illusions only a short time later when they have failed to materialize. The further back in time a landmark decision was taken, the more historically inevitable it appears in hindsight. This can be seen, for example, in the transition from the Roman Republic to the Caesarism of Augustus and his successors in the first century BC: For Cicero, who had experienced and tried to shape Caesar's autocracy, the alternative of republican rule as an option for the future was still very much alive. But within a short space of time after him, this possibility had disappeared. According to the new reading, by describing the transition as a 'crisis,' the Roman Republic had been carrying the

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13 Cf. Reinhart Koselleck, "Geschichte," in Otto Brunner, Werner Conce and Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Klett, 1975), 593–718.

14 For Leibniz cf. his theory of the existing world as the best of all possible worlds; for Hegel cf. his dictum: "that what is reasonable is real; that which is real is reasonable": cf. Xiangyun Xie, "Comment on 'What Is Reasonable Is Real; That Which Is Real Is Reasonable'," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (January 2021): 314–320, https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=106734. Michael Pawlik, "Hegel und die Vernünftigkeit des Wirklichen," *Der Staat* 41 (2002): 183–212.

15 Cf. Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers," in Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel (eds.), *Wilhelm von Humboldt. Werke in fünf Bänden. 1. Schriften zur Anthropologie und Geschichte*, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960), 585–606. Idem, „On the Historian's Task," *History and Theory* 6 (1967): 57–71.

seeds of its imminent demise no later than since the attacks of Marius and Sulla half a century earlier.[16]

At the moment of change, political constellations usually present multiple possibilities that would drive the course of events in different directions.[17] In the case of the GDR, it was the moment of indecision when people took to the streets of Leipzig, demanding the opening of the Berlin Wall; in the case of the fall of the Roman Republic, it was the assassination of Caesar in 44 BC. It is only when new events occur that some of these possibilities are eliminated, and then they quickly take on the character of illusions. In retrospect, their hopelessness sometimes even seems to have been predestined. In this way, past constellations lose their openness over time, and realistic options and possibilities become illusionary assumptions and castles in the air. The fact that they were not illusionary assumptions from the beginning, but only became so ex post, is then quickly lost on both historians and contemporaries. They often write about what happened in the past as if there had been no alternative. To avoid this short-circuit, historians must keep in mind what they know from their own experience: As contemporaries, they are well aware of the fact that there are alternatives in almost any situation.

Past Designs for the Future Do not Die with Their Momentary Failure but Live on Latently

This leads to the further conclusion that history is obviously more than what actually happened in the past: There are also the events and processes that were once possible but did not happen; and with them, different contemporary perspectives into the past and future. It is worth taking a closer look at the futures of the past, in particular, because they sometimes behave strangely: Contemporaries expect some events to have a long future, while denying others any future at all. For example, with the end of the Second World War, the National Socialists' "millennial" horizon collapsed, while in 1871, Socialists and Communists reinterpreted the crushing of the Paris Commune as a herald of even more certain success in the future.

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16 Cf. Christian Meier, Caesar. *A biography* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Robin Seager (ed.), *The Crisis of the Roman Republic. Studies in Political and Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

17 Cf. Lucian Hölscher, "The New Annalistic. A Sketch of a Theory of History," *History and Theory* 36, no. 3 (1997): 317–35.

It is remarkable that collective perspectives for the future sometimes do not disappear even when they seem refuted by their "defeat" in historical constellations, such as the collapse of the Nazi regime in 1945 or of the Communist regime in Eastern Europe in 1989. Sometimes this happens because small minorities perpetuate the old narratives that have been ostracized by mainstream society; sometimes they are rediscovered by newly emerged groups that use them to make their concerns heard. As we can learn from many cases, they can be revived in new, more favorable constellations. The hopes and fears they arouse seem to live on beneath the surface, just waiting to be revived. The history of Europe in the twentieth century is full of such latent perspectives, ranging from the belief in a communist 'future society' to the belief in a fascist 'Volksgemeinschaft'; from the vision of a liberal constitutional state to that of an ecological recycling economy.[18] Such historical visions are surprisingly durable and resistant to contrary experience. And so, they continue to exist today, their supporters expecting that they will be confirmed and strengthened by new constellations and developments.

Considering such repetitive structures opens up new ways of representing the past, for example, writing parallel histories of twentieth-century European history. Each would present historical events from the perspective of a different political camp. This is what Sami Adwan, Dan Bar-On and Eyal Naveh did in their histories of Israel and Palestine in 2015.[19] Such a historiography even offers the chance to outlive changing political constellations more than any standard-bound historiography that is conceived only from the current historical perspective, for it does not depend solely on the temporary evidence and value system of its own present. Instead, it recognises that historical events and narratives mean different things to different people at different times.

The Mechanisms of Historical Recognition

In observing enduring historical expectations over long periods of time, it is important for both historians and politically engaged contemporaries to recognize the basic patterns of pre-existing narratives in the new events and experiences they are living through. The Christian belief in the coming

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18 Cf. Lucian Hölscher, *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2020).

19 Sami Adwan et al. (eds.), *Die Geschichte des anderen kennen lernen. Israel und Palästina im 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus-Verlag, 2015). Cf. Falk Pingel (ed.): *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in History and Civics Textbooks of Both Nations. Curricula and Teaching in Israeli and Palestinian Schools.* Studien zur internationalen Schulbuchforschung 110 (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2004).

of the kingdom of God on earth is the most astonishing model for such processes of recognition: Since the ancients were repeatedly disappointed in their expectations, the eschatological expectation of Christians underwent ever new interpretations and mutations in the course of the centuries, adapting it to each historical constellation.[20] At the same time, it immunized itself against premature temporal determinations early on by the statement, attributed to Jesus himself, that it was not for humans, but only for the "Father" himself to know when the kingdom of God would dawn (Matthew 24:36). For the Christian community, the perspective of redemption was more important than the date on which divine prophecy was actually to be fulfilled.

This applies to all long-term expectations of the future. A good recent example to study this is the ecological or environmental movement. When it emerged in the 1960s, it was able to build on a previous conservation movement that dated back to the dawn of the twentieth century. From its perspective, just as in 1900, the main dangers of future social development resided in the destruction of natural resources and the dominance of individual economic interests over the life interests of the broad majority of the population. The differences between the older conservation movement and the newer environmental movement, for example the greater international ambitions of the new ecological movement compared to the older, more narrowly nationalist nature protection movement, receded in the perception of the environmentalists.[21]

It is these mechanisms of recognizing the old in the new that can breathe new life into the possibilities of the past. Thus, even if they seem to have been "disproved" by new historical experiences, such as the fascist 'Volksgemeinschaft' (people's community) in 1945 or the socialist 'Zukunftsstaat' (future society) in 1989, once prominent historical perspectives rarely lose their historical significance in the long run. Faced with such experiences, who today would deny the possibility of a future revival of fascist or socialist movements? The mechanisms of translation and deconstellation are always central to the possibility of regenerating historical perspectives on the future. They are the means by which desirable connotations are captured and undesirable ones repelled.

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20 Cf. Lucian Hölscher, "Eschatological presentism in Protestant German Theology of the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries," in Julian Wright and Allegra Fryxell (eds.), *Time on a Human Scale. Experiencing the Present in Europe,* 1860–1930, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 299–312.

21 Cf. "The Movement," Rachel Carson and the Environmental Movement, accessed 28 February, 2024, https://rachelcarsonenviromovement.weebly.com/the-movement.html.

On the Facticity of Past and Future Possibilities

In historiographical practice, the present is often perceived as the solid ground on which historical images of the past and forecasts of the future are based.[22] However, this assumption is deceptive: What we call our present is an overly complex conglomerate of very different and incoherent experiences and impressions that only seem to come together into a coherent period of time when viewed from an external perspective, that is, from other periods in time. It is from this that the theory of history has drawn its most important justification in the last two hundred years: Only if we know where we come from and where we are going, historians taught us, would we also know who we are.[23] Therefore, given the uncertainty of where we have come from and where we are going, it is also highly uncertain who we are today. The present is not a solid ground on which we can build our images of the past and of the future.

In order to determine what our own present might actually be, constructs of future pasts as well as reconstructions of past futures can make a valuable contribution: Future pasts are fictional designs of the past, created from the perspective of a (fictional) future point in time.[24] Such constructs, which always play an important role in political debates, are usually aimed at providing a more detailed description and assessment of the present situation. For example, they create scenarios of a looming war between Russia and the European Union in order to show the European Union's current inability to defend itself adequately. I call this a 'retrospective present.'

Reconstructions of past futures, on the other hand, are designs for the future that were once unfolded and widespread, but then usually did not

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22 Cf. Fotios Petropoulos et al., "Review. Forecasting: Theory and Practice," *International journal of forecasting* 38, no. 3 (2022), 705–871, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0169207021001758).

23 This is what Michel Foucault argued against in his essay "Nietzsche, Geneology, History," in Donald Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-memory, Practice. Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 139–64.

24 Cf. Lucian Hölscher, "Future Pasts. About a Form of Thought in Modern Society," *Sustainability Science* 14 (2019): 899–904, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00678-9. Idem, "Virtual Historiography. Opening History Towards the Future," History and Theory 61, no. 1 (March 2022), 27–42.

materialize.[25] While future pasts thus create a picture of the current state of things, past futures focus on the contingency of the historical course of events, i.e. the reasons and circumstances why things turned out differently than once expected. I call this a 'prospective present.' To give just two examples for both, future pasts and past futures: On the one hand, it is possible to explore how German history would have unfolded if a consistent nature conservation policy had been pursued since the beginning of the twentieth century (past future); on the other hand, it is also possible to conceive how the current situation would look in retrospect if a climate catastrophe were to actually occur in the future (future past).

Both types of construction, the construction of future pasts and the construction of past futures, are fundamental to virtual historiography because they extend the scope of history beyond factual events to include past and future possibilities that are embedded in it but not fully realized. Such considerations are also of practical relevance for politics: Global warming is likely to lead to a significant deterioration in living conditions for many people in large parts of the world in the coming decades. Such a prospect can trigger very different reactions in the present: We can try to take countermeasures to contain global warming as much as possible. However, we can also accept global warming as unavoidable and count on the adaptability of the global population. We can therefore already anticipate today how we might look back on today's decision-making situation in the future: Will it be seen as an abdication of responsibility on the part of humanity as a whole, or will the demise of parts of the earth's population be attributed to a succession of disasters, no different from other catastrophes that humanity has faced? Whatever we do, however, the expected future becomes a fact in our own present, which would be of great importance for the course of history even if it did not come to pass. Of course, this also applies to past decision-making situations and the future plans on which they are based. In the historicist historiography of the nineteenth century, they were not sufficiently considered, even though they are clearly important for judging the past.

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25 Cf. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures past. On the semantics of historical time*, trans. Keith Tribe, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Lucian Hölscher, "Future Thinking – A Historical Perspective," in Gabriele Oettingen, A. Simur Sevincer and Peter M. Gollwitzer (eds.), *The Psychology of Thinking about the Future*, (New York: Guilford Press, 2018), 15–30.

Virtual History is not
a Counterfactual History

In his 1930 novel "The Man Without Qualities," Robert Musil argued that if one assumes that man possesses a "sense of reality," then one must also grant him a "sense of possibility." He further specified that this sense of possibility should not be understood as the "sense for real possibilities," known to anyone who ever had the choice of spending a certain sum of money in different ways; but as the "sense for possible realities" as only the visionary of future states possesses, i.e. a sense for alternatives to the existing state of things: "Thus the sense of possibility could be defined virtually as the ability to think everything that could just as well be, and not to take what is more important than what is not."[26] A very similar expansion of the concept of history was implied in Reinhart Koselleck's distinction between the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation" of historical societies.[27] For what else could a concept like "space of experience" refer to but the sense of reality among contemporaries, and what else could the concept of "horizon of expectation" refer to but their sense of possibility?

However, by studying historical horizons of expectation, history enters a field it had shunned in the age of historicism. It seemed too close to the mostly unfounded speculations of "counterfactual" historiography, which explores questions such as what would have happened if Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand had not travelled to Sarajevo in late June 1914; or if England had not entered the war in early August, as the German government had apparently hoped for a while. Such speculations usually get out of hand very quickly and tell us more about the wishful thinking of those who make them after the event than about the possibilities that actually existed at the time of such events and constellations.[28]

Such speculations are different from the contemporaries' own visions of the future, their justified fears and aspirations, sometimes expressed in

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26 Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften,* Leipzig 1930, ch. 1.

27 Reinhart Koselleck, "Space of Experience and Horizon of Expectation. Two Historical Categories," in idem, Futures past. *On the semantics of historical time,* trans. Keith Tribe, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 255–276.

28 For definitions and examples cf. the Wikipedia-article: "Counterfactual History," Wikipedia, accessed March 7, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counterfactual_history. Niall Ferguson (ed.), *Virtual History. Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Picador, 1997). Aviezer Tucker, "Historiographical Counterfactuals and Historical Contingency," *History and Theory* 38, no. 2 (May 1999), 264–76. Lucian Hölscher, "Virtual Historiography. Opening History Towards the Future," History and Theory 61, no. 1 (March 2022), 27–42.

dreams, images, and literary fiction. Often, they had already made provisions for their realization, drawn up plans and scenarios, or taken other precautions.[29] We sometimes have considerable source material on them, showing how intensively contemporaries had already prepared for such possibilities.[30] The fact that they did not materialize says little about the likelihood of their realization. There are always reasons why things did not happen, including the possibility that they did not happen precisely because contemporaries were so prepared for them to happen. In any case, they point to the unlimited contingency and randomness of the events and constellations in which history takes its course. Therefore, such alternative possibilities also belong to an extended concept of virtual history, as presented here.

A focus on alternative historical courses that contemporaries themselves envisioned considerably narrows the field of possible and conceivable historical courses. Although things may still turn out quite differently from what was foreseen, there is a natural tendency to recognize in the new the old, an already conceived possibility. This increases the likelihood that the expectations of the past will be revived in the new experiences.

Reality as a Historical Possibility

Up to this point, we have been discussing the possible alternative courses of history. It is necessary to include them in writing history, not only because they help us understand the motives of the contemporaries, but also because they continue to accompany history subconsciously as future possibilities. I will now show that the historical facts themselves are contingent according to their inner constitution.

It is helpful to look at historical 'facts' and the timelines in which they are embedded not retrospectively or prospectively, as is common in the historical and social sciences, but as they are in the moment they unfold, in order to show how contingent they really are:[31] As they unfold, it is usually

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29 Cf. Lucian Hölscher, "Vorsorge als Zukunftshandeln. Versuch einer theoretischen Bilanzierung im Hinblick auf die Geschichte der Zukunft," in Nicolai Hannig and Malte Thießen (eds.), *Vorsorgen in der Moderne. Akteure, Räume und Praktiken,* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), 233–42.

30 As a case study on the socialist belief in a coming "future state" (Zukunftsstaat) cf. Lucian Hölscher, "Alternative Moderne. Die Zukunftsvorstellungen der Generation vor 1914 in Deutschland," in Isabel Kranz (ed.), *Was wäre wenn? Alternative Gegenwarten und Projektionen in die Zukunft um 1914*, (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2017), 41–62.

31 Cf. Hölscher, "New Annalistic"; idem, *Zeitgärten. Zeitfiguren in der Geschichte der Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2020).

yet unclear into which temporal context the present events will one day be inserted. To take a current example: Anyone who has been following the war in Ukraine in recent months knows only too well that its time frame is currently (February 2024) wide open: Not only is it conceivable that either side may win or lose, but also that there might be a stalemate. In addition to political, cultural, and economic stakes, one country or the other will also lose significance or impoverish in the long-term.[32]

We generally have only a vague idea of what will actually happen next, and usually only in the sense of what is likely, what can be expected, and what can be assumed. It is therefore difficult to predict how events will unfold. But we usually need – and do have – ideas about how things could evolve. And these alternatives remain part of the story even if they do not come to pass later, because on the one hand, they obviously could have happened, and on the other, they might still happen later. A historian is therefore well advised to keep them in mind.

Transferred to the past, such a shift to the contemporaries' perspective of the future also opens up new interpretations of past events. For example, in Germany, even economic experts welcomed the massive economic stimulus provided by the constant supply of new money during the great inflation of the early 1920s. They saw the current high inflation as a prerequisite for the desired economic recovery. It was only when inflation got out of control in 1923, leading to a huge destruction of material assets, that inflation turned into the catastrophic crisis we still remember today. If we did not know what hopes contemporary experts initially placed in inflation, we would, in retrospect, have to consider their economic policy decisions as irresponsible.

To regard a specific time figure like progress or decline as an essential structure of empirical processes, as social scientists and historians usually do, can have grave consequences. It suggests that the course of time is its substance, its nature.[33] Time, however, is not a substance, but a mere form, acquired retrospectively or prospectively and coagulated in time figures.[34] It is also a fluid form that can change in an instant if things turn out differently

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32 As an example for the present uncertainty regarding the outcome of the war, take for example the article "How – and when – Ukraine's war with Russia could end," CNBC, accessed 8 August, 2023, https://www.cnbc.com/2023/08/07/when-and-how-will-ukraines-war-with-russia-end.html.

33 Cf. Lucian Hölscher, "Time Gardens: Historical Concepts in Modern Historiography," *History and Theory* 53, no. 4 (December 2014): 577–91; Reinhart Koselleck, "Wozu noch Historie? Vortrag auf dem Deutschen Historikertag in Köln am 4. April 1970", in Carsten Dutt (ed.), *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte. Aufsätze und Vorträge aus vier Jahrzehnten,* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010) 32–51.

34 Hölscher: *Zeitgärten.*

than expected. We must therefore consider time itself as a space of possibilities that places not only existing but also possible things in temporal proximity to one another; as a space in which things/events can, but do not have to, communicate with each other. It is this quality of time that matters when we speak of a "space of possibilities."

As an example, I would like to come back to the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig in September and early October of 1989. These demonstrations would have taken a completely different course if the Communist Party leadership had decided to suppress them, as the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party did in Tiananmen Square in Beijing a few months earlier. From the contemporary point of view, the ultimately peaceful course of the protest in the GDR was one possibility among others, and not even the most probable.[35]

Transcendental Relations

Those events and event relations that we refer to as 'real' are also to be described as 'possible' because they are based on the construction of contingent categories of perception. As we know from our encounters with other languages and cultures, we could name things differently. That we name them as we do is contingent in this sense. There are many examples of descriptive categories influencing the historical character of events. They range, to give just a few examples, from the contemporary designation of the "Great War" of 1914/18 as a "World War" (which it was not at all in the beginning), to the annihilation of European Jewry as the "Final Solution" or as the "Shoa" and "Holocaust," to Putin's designation of the Ukrainian war as a "Special Military Operation." A well-known anecdote of a Chinese scholar illustrates how semantic labels change the character of things: While filling in his entry form for the USA on the plane, he found that his spiritual roots in the tradition of Confucianism were regarded here as a "religion," which he had to then check as his religious affiliation as opposed to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and others. This classification had been completely unknown to him until then. It made Confucianism something different from what he was used to.

There is a transcendental relationship between historical events and their conceptual designations. Reinhart Koselleck's historiographical program of reconstructing the linguistic and anthropological "conditions of

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35 Cf. Fritz Backhaus et al. (eds.), *Roads not Taken, oder: Es hätte auch anders kommen können. Deutsche Zäsuren 1989–1848* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2023).

possible histories"[36] ultimately served to identify such linguistic specifica-tions, which he regarded as contingent factors of historical events, given to contemporary actors. Historical experience, he was convinced, is based on linguistic categories, and contemporaries cannot avoid using them if they want to give voice to what is. But such a dependence also goes the other way: Koselleck alluded to this when, for example, he described concepts as "satu-rated with experience" (erfahrungsgesättigt).[37] By this, he pointed to the fact that they not only made experience possible but also reacted to experience. Thus, not only do the possibilities, in this case the possible histories, depend on the linguistic instruments as their conditions, but, conversely, the lin-guistic conditions depend on the historical possibilities, too.

To illustrate this, let us first consider the case Koselleck himself had in mind: Political conflicts, such as those that have recurred in the "age of extremes" (Hobsbawm), can certainly be broken down using the categories of 'master/servant' and 'friend/enemy' introduced by Carl Schmitt in the 1920s.[38] But conversely, the conflicts of this period also gave rise to these categories of thought: for it was only because the conflict situations proved the concepts right that they could establish themselves as general cate-gories of thought saturated with experience.

Another example of the reciprocal transcendental relationship between language and historical experience is provided by the concept of 'utopia':[39] In the context of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, the term has come to denote a state of affairs that, as the word itself says, is never and nowhere possible. But the historical critique of utopias in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from Louis Blanc to Ernst Bloch, already provided several examples (for example, the abolition of the death penalty) to show that what once seemed impossible soon became possible and was even realized shortly thereafter. Conceptualization reacted to this:

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36 Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time. On Possible Histories*, trans. Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2018). *Idem, Begriffs-geschichten. Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2006).

37 Cf. Douglas Attila Marcelino, "Primary experiences and discontinuities of remem-brance: notes from a text by Reinhart Koselleck," Revista Tempo e Argumento 8, no. 19 (2016): 462–496, (https://www.redalyc.org/journal/3381/338149856020/html/).

38 For an early example of Koselleck's affirmative reference to Carl Schmitt's basic onto-logical concepts of friend and enemy, master and servant, see his letter to Carl Schmitt of 21 January 1953 in: Jan Eike Dunkhase (ed.), *Reinhart Koselleck – Carl Schmitt: Der Briefwechsel 1953–1983 und weitere Materialien* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019), 12. Cf. also Manfred Hettling and Wolfgang Schieder (eds.), *Reinhard Koselleck als Historiker* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), Introduction.

39 Cf. Lucian Hölscher, art. "Utopia" in: Utopian Studies 7, no. 2 (1996): 1–65.

Influenced by the realization of earlier 'utopias,' the concept of 'utopia' mutated in the twentieth century into designating a mere relative limit of the possible, even a pragmatic goal of political action. The condition of a possibility had been transformed into the possibility of a condition.

The Existential Interdependence of Past, Present, and Future

The manifold interdependencies between historical realities and historical possibilities have profound and far-reaching consequences for historiography:[40] From the fact that, firstly, what once was can only be determined in retrospect, and, secondly, that our own present stands in a relationship of contingency, of mere possibility, to the past, it follows, thirdly, that what we experience and register as historical reality is inconceivable without taking into account past and future possibilities. For it is only in the light of possible pasts and futures that the present becomes comprehensible to us at all as a distinct period of time.[41] With regard to the future, we are sufficiently familiar with this perspectivism from our preoccupation with current problems of global survival, such as a possible nuclear war or a global climate catastrophe; with regard to the past, from our preoccupation with National Socialism and other dictatorships. They all form the backdrop against which our own present stands out as an epoch with a specific character. However, such references to future and past provide only one reading of the present, alongside which there are others.

The existential status of possibility thus not only denotes the contingent character of historical facts, i.e. that which could also be different, but also serves to profile that which actually constitutes our image of the present world: For in a world in which much could be described as reality, the present is only profiled as reality from the perspective of a possible future or past – as much as past and future are profiled from the perspective of a possible present. That means that we have to take historical times not as something "given" but as actions through which possibilities become realities.

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40   Cf. Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernages (eds.): *Breaking up Time. Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future* (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 2013).
41   Cf. Hölscher, "Future Pasts".

Prospects for a Future "Virtual Historiography"

Such an understanding of what I call a 'virtual history' opens up a view on the multitude of possible past, present, and future histories that surround all real histories like a wreath: to people's hopes, to their fears of real and imagined dangers, to their dreams, to their precautions and planning games, to their risk assessments and miscalculations, to their inept or appropriate images and conceptualizations, in short, on everything that could, can, and will guide and paralyze the actions of human beings. In doing so, virtual historiography will expand into new materials that it has so far failed to cover, or has done so only rarely and marginally.

In order to produce such a virtual history, entire sub-disciplines will have to be redesigned, such as the conceptual history of statistical categories, a broad historical interpretation of dreams, and a historical contextualization of literary utopias. They could serve to reveal the virtuality of historical facts and the historical references of seemingly unreal phenomena, such as dreams and fictional texts, to reality. In this way, the methodological boundaries between historical reality and fiction could become clearer in their significance for historiography.

The question then arises how to construct such a story discursively: The first conclusion from this essay is that the stories we present as historians no longer emanate from a fixed point of origin, nor do they lead to a fixed point of destination. Rather, they will be formed in the tension between the past present and changing futures and pasts, reconstructing different temporalities in past events. In this process, different possible futures are repeatedly juxtaposed and set in relation to one another, and different pasts are presented in their relation to the changing present.

Concerning the temporal structure of history, such a virtual history will no longer be chronologically linear. Rather, in such a history book, many temporalities will often intertwine and sometimes only communicate with each other at punctual touchpoints: simultaneities and repetitions that form a network of coincidences that touch each other at certain points. The intention of such historiography is to identify the past as the past present, the present as the past future and the future past. It will be done less in the tone of an indirect prophecy and more in the tone of a discussion that raises a variety of issues. For the aim is not to fix the past, present, and future permanently, which is never possible, but to reveal the possibilities they hold, so that we can better find our bearings in the time of history and thus better shape the time that lies ahead of us.

Taken together, all this should help expand the short shelf-life of historical works and remedy their fixation on the ephemeral present in which they

are written. It is true, by extending its scope to the world of historical possibilities, virtual history opens itself up to events that never really happened. But the associated danger of a boundless expansion of history is not as great as opponents of counterfactual history might believe: for in virtual history, this expansion is narrowly limited to those perspectives that contemporaries already considered quite realistic. Virtual historiography includes only those perspectives that have already shaped history and could do so again in the future. Without them, even what has actually happened would ultimately remain incomprehensible.

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Comments

Some Perspectives on Pictures Showing Possible Past Futures

Britta Hochkirchen

When we look back on a particular point in the past, can we make out possibilities, feasible or imaginable scenarios, that did not come about or came about in a manner that differed from the way they were originally envisioned? Which options for futures were open at that point in time alongside the one that eventually found realization? In assigning the core significance of these and similar questions to the historian's remit, Lucian Hölscher offers his inspiring vision of "virtual history" in opposition to a historiography that excludes or deems irrelevant those histories that did not come to fruition. Hölscher's view that "history is obviously more than what actually happened in the past" (p. 16) invokes a "virtual history" that encompasses all those ideas, desires, dreams, and alternatives that found expression in the past, but did not materialize in the history that in fact took place. Hölscher subtitles his vision an "expanded concept of history"; such a concept, in this spirit, would mean extending the territory covered by history's subject, enabling these unrealized ideas, desires, and alternatives to take their place as central components of historical knowledge, to which historians must necessarily pay attention. Should this come to pass, artefacts from previously discounted textual genres, such as literary utopias and written accounts of dreams, would gain relevance to the act of historical interpretation. Hölscher regards these types of sources, now often overlooked or subjects of controversy, as serving a significant purpose in "virtual historiography," as they enable historians to perceive links between what we know as reality and phenomena assumed not to hold this status of real and, through these perceptions, to experience the "contingent character" (p. 26) of all historical fact. "Virtual history," then, "expand[s]" not just the concept of history itself, but also the range of genres in which historians seek its sources, incorporating those which tell of the possibilities of the past to which the course of history-as-it-happened denied emergence.

If, in this endeavor, historians turn their attention to the imaginary visions of the future that never found form in reality, pictures and works of art may be among the artefacts that compel their interest, due to their potential to give an eloquent account of ideas of the future, brought forth in a specific historical context. To use Hölscher's terms, they may represent constructed manifestations of both "future pasts" and "past futures," showing us potentialities of the past and the future even though they remained just that, potentialities. We might even consider pictures particularly vivid embodiments

of the "virtual" as Hölscher defines it, given their "hybrid character" (p. 14) that provides the "fictional" with a new form of reality, or, more precisely, realizes it within the materiality of the picture. A possible or once-possible future, when it becomes manifest in a picture, has a place in the world, notwithstanding its non-emergence, or incomplete emergence, into reality. Imaginations of the future take visible or viewable form within pictures and, in so doing, gain the capacity to influence our actions and decisions.

Reading Hölscher's vision of "virtual history" as nothing more than a simple expansion of the historian's subject, or of the range of sources with which historians are to concern themselves, would do it an injustice. Instead, in a sense that remains implicit in Hölscher's account of "virtual history," the "expanded concept of history" it envisions would entail changes in how historians handle and interact with their sources. Reinhart Koselleck's maxim that an artefact only becomes a source through the questions asked of it still holds here;[1] yet the content the source communicates is contingent, not only upon the questions asked of it, but also upon their type. One example in this context might be the analysis of pictures as sources. Much of academic history continues to adhere to a concept of "pictures" as effectively being reproductions or reflections of events from the past, that, as such, bear evidential witness to these happenings.[2] To a considerable extent, this idea of a "picture" is traceable to iconology, a method articulated and developed by art historian Erwin Panofsky in the first half of the twentieth century, that has remained, to this day, centrally influential in the analysis of pictures by academic historians.[3] Historians using this method seek to ascertain the degree of consistency and alignment between pictures and history as it took place; its purpose seems to consist in quantifying the degree of "reality" these pictures contain. Pictures thus find themselves conceptualized as

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1 Reinhart Koselleck, "Archivalien – Quellen – Geschichten," in idem, *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte. Aufsätze und Vorträge aus vier Jahrzehnten,* ed. Carsten Dutt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2014), 68–79, esp. 74.

2 Jens Jäger, "Zwischen Bildkunde und Historischer Bildforschung – Historiker und visuelle Quellen 1880–1930," in Jens Jäger and Martin Knauer (eds.), *Bilder als historische Quellen* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2009), 45–70, 63. Peter Burke, *Augenzeugenschaft. Bilder als historische Quelle* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2nd ed., 2019), 15.

3 Cf. Klaus Krüger, "Geschichtlichkeit und Autonomie. Die Ästhetik des Bildes als Gegenstand historischer Erfahrung," in Otto Gerhard Oexle (ed.), *Der Blick auf die Bilder. Kunstgeschichte und Geschichte im Gespräch* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1997), 55–86, esp. 61 and 70.

reproductions of history as it happened.[4] Photography, in this context, may appear as an extreme instance of images' endowment with the "property of a certificate of truth."[5] Pictures that give visual form to alternative notions of the future, to possibilities or potentialities, still find themselves discounted by academic history. And yet, in pictures, what is "real" *always* shows itself in changed form, is transformed and depicted in a different manner. It is in this that the "hybrid character" of every picture's virtuality is founded. And it is this difference whose trail we might follow when analyzing pictures, and which could potentially open up the whole wealth of possible past futures. Yet currently, the discipline of history generally does not examine pictures for their traces of such futures, with the result that it possesses scant awareness of their potential to render these visible to us. An "expanded concept of history," then, requires us to likewise expand the repertoire of questions we ask in encounter with sources of various genres. Rather than proceeding invariably from the act of comparison and alignment with history as it was and as it came to be, we could seek to ask questions around the manner in which a picture depicts its subjects, thus dislodging these subjects, which are too often credited as reproductions of the realized past, from the center of our interest, and making room for the depiction that occurs in the picture, a depiction whose manner frequently uncovers alternative visions of what was then the future.

In the final analysis, the "virtual history" that Hölscher proposes remains, in some respects, abstract, and its specificity remains doubtful. He concludes his vision by defining limits to his concept, restricting it to only "those perspectives that contemporaries already considered quite realistic" (p. 28), and thus defining "[v]irtual historiography [as] includ[ing] only those perspectives that have already shaped history and could do so again in the future" (p. 28). Hölscher does not expand upon the criteria that could serve to determine the existence or degree of the effect, or lack thereof, exercised by specific past futures, given they did not, in fact, take effect. Should we measure such influence quantitatively, by the number of people who shared the future vision? Or do we set store by quality, by the "degree of reality" attached to an unrealized potentiality, by how close it came to becoming factual reality, its appearance as an arguable, a probable proposition, in relation to the history that did in fact happen? The restriction Hölscher places on his concept's applicability may save us from the fallacy of equating a "virtual

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4   Cf. Britta Hochkirchen, "Bilder können nicht reden, sie zeigen. Das zu verstehen will gelernt sein," in Thomas Must, Jörg van Norden and Nina Martini (eds.), *Geschichtsdidaktik in der Debatte. Beiträge zu einem interdisziplinären Diskurs* (Frankfurt am Main: Wochenschau Verlag, 2022), 29–44.

5   Jäger, "Zwischen Bildkunde und Historischer Bildforschung", 63. Citation translated by Katherine Ebisch-Burton.

history" with a counterfactual narrative; yet it also runs the risk of turning realized history – the history that in fact happened – into the sole yardstick or the inclusion in, or exclusion from, any "virtual history," thus causing the former to once again predominate over the latter.

Put somewhat provocatively, the fundamental epistemological pitfall of "virtual history" that becomes evident here appears to center on the matter of whether, and to what extent, it is even possible to put aside the history-that-happened so we can gain an unimpeded view of those past possibilities that never came to fruition; do we not in fact always run the risk, in this endeavor, of needing the vantage point of realized history as a viewing platform for perceiving past futures and indeed recognizing them in the first place? Opening his vision of a "virtual history," Hölscher himself raises the issue of historians' "*Standortgebundenheit*" (Reinhart Koselleck) – that is, the inescapability of their position in space and time – by noting the encompassing influence of their present time on all historiography, or, put differently, the fact that history only gains validity as such once it is deemed relevant to a specific present (cf. p. 11). The "ephemeral nature of historical knowledge" (p. 9), as an epistemological conundrum, then appears, equally inescapable for "virtual history," which, for all its focus on non-realized possibilities, alternate timelines, and visions from or of the past, may only recognize these for what they are against the encompassing backdrop of the "real present," the "realized present". An exhibition currently on show at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin may serve to exemplify this dilemma. Entitled *Roads Not Taken. Or: Things could have turned out differently,* the exhibition, which opened in 2022 and is scheduled to run until 2026, traces unrealized past possibilities around "14 distinctive caesurae in the German history."[6] Its intends to demonstrate ways in which history could have, as the subtitle says, "turned out differently" and detail the circumstances that averted these alternate paths.[7] Its remit, then, seems to concur with the "virtual history" Hölscher proposes. Yet its exploration and examination of desires, visions, and possibilities proceeds from history-that-happened, specifically "14 distinctive caesurae" from 1989 extending back to 1848/49, and it is this history that governs the exhibition's

6 https://www.dhm.de/en/exhibitions/roads-not-taken-oder-es-haette-auch-anders-kommen-koennen/ (last accessed 25 February, 2024). The exhibition opened on 9 December 2022 at Berlin's Deutsches Historisches Museum and will run until 22 March 2026.

7 "Roads not Taken Oder: Es hätte auch anders kommen können. Ein Gespräch mit Dan Diner über das Konzept der Ausstellung," in Fritz Backhaus, Dan Diner, Julia Franke, Raphael Gross, Stefan Paul-Jacobs and Lili Reyels (eds.), *Roads not Taken Oder: Es hätte auch anders kommen können. Deutsche Zäsuren 1989–1848* (Munich: Beck, 2023), 11–23, esp. 11f.

search for the histories that did not come to pass, and the benchmark by which the exhibition measures the alternatives it narrates. Unrealized histories, then, depend once again on realized history for their emergence into visibility; it is the "road taken" that leads us to the "roads not taken." While this procedure certainly protects us from falling into speculation and counterfactual historiography, it is a constrictive safety net, reinforcing the authority of the present to define history's reality and its non-realized alternatives. Yet I wonder: What past possibilities, what visions of futures might we access if we were to escape the matrix of history as a series of realized events – if, indeed, we even can? When Hölscher suggests that his concept of "virtual history" permits us to "expand the scope of history from the historically actual to that of the historically possible" (p. 14), I would add that this act of extension, this expansion of historical periods, of genres of sources, and the questions we ask of them, must necessarily prompt us to call into question the established systems of coordinates from which we are accustomed to generate history.

Translated by Katherine Ebisch-Burton

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Slaves of Time?
Reflections on Lucian Hölscher's Concept of 'Virtual History'[1]

Chris Lorenz

What is the major problem of writing history and what could be its solution? These are the two questions that Lucian Hölscher has raised in his intriguing plea for 'Virtual History. Perspectives on an Expanded Concept of History' and that I address in my following commentary.

1. First, I need to clarify which historiographical problem Hölscher intends to solve. It is the "ephemeral character" of historical knowledge, interpreted as its "temporal index" that binds it to the time and the constellation in which it originated (p. 9). In Hölscher's view, this 'temporal index' or *'Standortgebundenheit'* makes it impossible for historical knowledge to claim a "timeless validity" – which he equates with its scientific character. Consequently, the validity of historical representations "is bound to be short-lived" (p. 9), only to be replaced by successor representations that have a similar 'temporal index' and thus the same limitation. So, the opposition between the genesis ('Ursprung') and the validity ('Geltung') of historical knowledge is fundamental for Hölscher's general line of argument, because it produces the problems that he intends to solve through virtual history. His basic aim is to increase the validity of historical knowledge by decreasing its dependency on the historically specific and thus temporally limited context of its origin. His proposal is to expand the historical context to include the future dimensions of the past.

Simultaneously, Hölscher cautions historians in a Nietzschean spirit against an unreflected continuation of their 'business as usual' because "the mountain of possible narratives and interpretations of the past continues to grow" (p. 11).

At this point, there appears to be a *basic ambiguity* in Hölscher's characterization of historiography. On the one hand, he argues, in accordance with the tradition of *Historismus*, that the flow of time produces the ongoing change of history and the ongoing need to rewrite history: "Various times produce different images of the past, even if they report the same events." (p. 10) Time thus constitutes the *condition of possibility* of historiography. On the other hand, however, Hölscher presents the flow of time as a fundamental *problem* for historiography because it supposedly limits the 'shelf-life' of historical works by undermining their epistemological validity.

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1   For my original extended comment see: https://rub.academia.edu/ChrisLorenz

To analyze Hölscher's problem diagnosis, it is useful to compare it to some ideas that Arthur Danto formulated in his famous *Analytical Philosophy of History*. Danto was the first to provide a solid philosophical argument for historians' widespread intuition that history can only be written after the event, that is: *ex post facto.* This means that historians can only describe change over time *retrospectively* because the 'beginning' of a history can only be identified after its 'end.' The writing of histories therefore differs fundamentally from the writing of chronicles: Histories must continuously be rewritten because the 'end' is in motion as time goes by. Historical accounts typically contain narrative sentences like "The Second World War started on 1 September, 1939" or "Galilei was a precursor of Newton" – sentences that could not have been written in a chronicle because they describe events by connecting them to a *future* state of affairs that had not yet been attained at the time of description. In short, the historians' – later – position in time à vis the events on which they report is the precondition of writing history because it allows the historian to connect past events to past future events. Hölscher's proposal to expand historiography by including virtual futures therefore is an expansion of what historians are already doing, that is: connecting past events to their futures.

Now, although the irresoluble tension between the genesis and the validity of historical knowledge is fundamental for Hölscher's line of argument, he introduces this idea without clarifying it, hereby generating a major issue of interpretation. This is the case because in Martin Jay's words "there is no more contentious and perennial issue in the history of Western thought (–) than the vexed relationship between the genesis of an idea or value in a specific context, and its claim to validity beyond it."[2] Although historians tend to be contextualists by character and by education, "the relationship between genesis and validity is not necessarily adversarial," as many historians – including Hölscher – assume.[3]

The simplest way to refute the presupposition that the relationship between validity and genesis of historical knowledge is necessarily antagonistic is to point at the so-called classics of historiography because classics exemplify representations whose validity can not be reduced to the context of their genesis by definition. In this sense, excellent historical representations – like Braudel's 'The Mediterranean' and Thompson's 'The Making of the English Working Class' – are like excellent works of art – like Da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa' and Rembrandt's 'The Night Watch'. This does not imply the claim that these two genres are timeless, but only that both possess an autonomy (aura) that transcends the context of their origin. Because

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2   Martin Jay, *Genesis and Validity. The Theory and Practice of Intellectual History,* Philadelphia 2022, 1.

3   Jay, *Genesis and Validity,* 8.

of this quality, they enjoy a long afterlife and remain valid to *posterity.*[4] Therefore, in Rainer Forst's words, "the question of whether the principle of reason (embodied by historical method in history, CL) has a transcendent (or transcendental), an abstract, or, on the contrary, a historical, context-specific character is wrongly posed. The question of justification always arises in concrete contexts and equally points beyond them."[5] Hölscher, however, argues from a pure contextualist standpoint when he states that "modern historiography is necessarily always bound to the point of view of its pictures of the past", meaning that the location of the historian in space and time conditions "the standpoint from which a story is told" and "provides the perspective that gives a historical judgment its persuasive power" (p. 11) – in other words: its epistemological validity.

This kind of contextualism is known from 19th and early 20th century *Historismus* and has been seriously criticized – and for good reason. One line of criticism was aptly formulated by Leo Strauss: "Historicism asserts that all human thoughts or beliefs are historical, and hence deservedly destined to perish; but historicism itself is a human thought; hence historicism can be of only temporary validity, or it cannot be simply true." (–) "Historicism thrives on the fact that it inconsistently exempts itself from its own verdict about all human thought."[6] In other words: Reductionist contextualism must be rejected because it results "from a logical fallacy of collapsing validity into genesis."[7]

Another line of criticism argues that reductionist contextualism blinds us to the effects that specific events and important texts may exert beyond their origins, that is: in their *futures*. Nevertheless, Hölscher's plea for virtual history is based on a wholesale acceptance of the notion of the 'Standortgebundenheit' of historical knowledge – the idea that there is a *fixed* connection between historical knowledge and the historical context in which it is produced. This fixed connection is also presupposed in Hölscher's idea that the validity of historical knowledge automatically decreases after a brief period because this is the problem he set out to resolve. Virtual history thus is based on the contextual reductionism known from *Historismus*. At the same time, the notion of 'Standortgebundenheit' in virtual history remains as indeterminate as the notion of context in *Historismus*. As intellectual historians have pointed out, the context is never given, but must first be established by historians with the help of sources and present-day conceptual tools (like speech act theory in the case of the 'Cambridge School,' and

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4   Jay, *Genesis and Validity,* 10–11,174–192.

5   Forster cited in Jay, *Genesis and Validity,* 9.

6   Leo Strauss, *History and Natural Right,* Chicago 1953, 25–26.

7   Peter Gordon cited in Jay, *Genesis and Validity,* 3.

stratigraphical theory in the case of Reinhart Koselleck).[8] This means that placing an event or text in its context is fundamentally a historiographical operation with *two* unknowns because if an event and a text depend on their context, the first two concepts "raise as many questions as 'context'".[9] Therefore it is always the historian who defines this 'Standortgebundenheit' or context of events and texts – including their temporal extensions in the future and the past. And therefore, changes of the context over time cannot be considered the reason why historical knowledge loses validity, nor can extending the timeframe be viewed as the solution to increase its validity and attain scientificity, that is, enduring validity.

According to Hölscher, scientificity of historical knowledge could be reached if historians, over time, agreed on the accuracy of historical representations but this argument also remains ambiguous. On the one hand, he acknowledges that historians often fail to agree – since there are different and even contradictory accounts – but on the other hand, he posits "making it possible for later historians to speak of a general agreement at a past time." (p. 11)

This ambiguity can be avoided if one does not identify the notions of scientificity, timeless validity, and general agreement – and acknowledges both the productive role of time and of disagreement in science. As to the productive role of time and the correlative changes of interpretations, Hans-Georg Gadamer convincingly argued that the proponents of *Historismus* historicized everything – except for *Historismus* itself. Consequently, they became stuck on the hidden positivistic image of objectivity as timeless validity. Instead, Gadamer famously proposed to conceive of objectivity in terms of horizons of meaning ('Sinnhorizonte') that change over time. Now, although Hölscher implicitly endorses Gadamer's idea of the changing horizons of meaning over time, he rejects the implication that Gadamer spelled out: the simultaneous rejection of the idea of objectivity as timeless validity. If Hölscher followed Gadamer's lead, he would, in any case, avoid the problem of his ambiguous connection between historiography and time. Now let's take a closer look at his proposed solutions.

2. Hölscher's basic proposal "to expand the short shelf-life of historical works and remedy their fixation on the ephemeral present in which they are written" (p. 27 f.) is to 'unlock' this fixation by expanding the notion of history from 'what really happened' to 'what possibly could have happened' – that is:

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8   For Koselleck's use of stratigraphical theory, see: Chris Lorenz, 'Probing the limits of metaphor. On the stratigraphic model in history and geology', in: Zoltan Simon and Lars Deile (eds.), *Historical Understanding. Past, Present, Future,* London 2022, 203–217.

9   Jay, *Genesis and Validity,* 46.

by including virtual history.[10] This expansion can be realized when historians start showing that every present is wedged between different pasts and futures, which were viewed as possible at the time but were never realized – except for the one possibility that transformed into 'historical reality.' Now Hölscher's aim is "to liberate historiography from its static attachment to the present moment" and thus, to make historical narrations "dynamic." "As I want to demonstrate, history consists not only of the ephemeral and contingent images of the past created by the present age, but also of the images that were created in the past, and that will be created in the future." (p. 14) So, while historians, until now, have tried to increase the validity of historical representations in a *synchronical* manner, that is: by expanding the number of perspectives from which past events are studied (by including an increasing number of formerly marginalized and repressed voices, for instance), Hölscher proposes to do so in a *diachronical* manner, that is: by expanding historical representation with the ideas, hopes, and fears etc. which actors had in mind but that did not become reality. By including the imagined but not (fully) realized possibilities in historical representation, the historical past will include 'past futures' and 'future pasts.'

I will leave aside the question whether the reconstruction of the ideas, hopes, and fears etc. of past actors concerning the past and the future isn't part and parcel of what 'normal' historians strive for. I will also leave aside the question on what grounds the proposed diachronical extension of history is supposed to 'unlock' the fixation of historical representation to a moment in time. In this paragraph, I will only go into two other questions: a) how Hölscher distinguishes virtual history from fictional history and counterfactual history; b) on which grounds Hölscher expects that virtual history would extend the 'shelf-life' of historical works.

a) Like most historians, Hölscher has serious doubts about the validity of counter-factual history because 'what if?' questions could easily lead historians into the swamps of 'unfounded speculation.'[11] "Virtual history is not a counterfactual history," Hölscher posits (p. 21), although it includes that which was possible in the past and not actual. Hölscher's simultaneous recognition that what has happened in the past was only one of various possibilities, however, creates the problem how to distinguish real possibilities from unreal possibilities, that is, from 'unfounded speculations.' To keep 'speculations' out, he restricts the range of actual possibilities to the

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10   Using terms that Koselleck 'borrowed' from Karl Mannheim, Hölscher is pleading to integrate the 'Erfahrungsorizonte' and the 'Erwartungshorizonte' of the past actors into historiography.

11   By contrast, Max Weber and other historians have argued that all causal explanations are based on counter-factual arguments. See: Chris Lorenz, *Konstruktion der Vergangenheit,* Cologne/Weimar/Vienna 1997, 189–221.

possibilities as they were imagined by the historical actors, including "their justified fears and aspirations, sometimes expressed in dreams, images, and literary fiction." (p. 21 f.)

So, although virtual history may include dreams and literary fiction, it unsurprisingly does not blend with fictional genres.[12] More surprisingly, Hölscher holds that including the contemporaries' unrealized visions of the future may enhance history's practical usefulness because "they continue to accompany history subconsciously as future possibilities." (p. 22) This leads me to my last question: Is it reasonable to expect that virtual history will extend the validity and thus the 'shelf-life' of historical works?

b) I think the answer to this question must be yes and no. Yes, because the *systematic* inclusion of ideas about past futures and future pasts will put the actual, historical past in a broader perspective on the grounds that the horizons of expectation and the actors' horizons of experience condition one another. This insight has been formulated before but is nevertheless valid.

At the same time, the answer must be no because virtual history is hampered by another blind spot that it inherited from *Historismus*. Now I am referring to the circumstance that history is exclusively conceptualized from the viewpoints of the historical actors. Hölscher basically conceives of virtual history as the *intentional contents of their minds and identifies* this content with the domain of the actual possibilities. Virtual history therefore remains blind to what the actors did not imagine: for what happened 'behind their backs,' independently of what they thought and intended. This is a fundamental problem because a big part of what was and is going on in the past, present, and future – like traffic jams, global warming, population ageing, inflation, and financial crises – is *un*intended and cannot be explained only through the lens of ideas and intentional actions.[13] This observation implies that virtual history may inform us better about what contemporaries *imagined* as their pasts and futures (planned, hoped for, feared, and everything in-between) but not necessarily better about what *actually* happened – which, as Danto clarified, can only be established *retrospectively* by the historian who *knows* the future of the past and who thus has a viewpoint that is, by definition, unavailable to the contemporaries. Only by exploiting this feature – the *non*-openness of the future, so to say – historians can try to increase the epistemological qualities of historical representations over time and so increase their 'shelf-life'. Hölscher's plea for virtual history in its present form does not address the fundamental problem of the unintended consequences of social action, but maybe he will do so in the future. Only time will tell.

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12 See: Chris Lorenz, 'Fiktion und Fiktionalität in der Geschichte,' in: Jörn Rüsen a.o. (eds.), *Handbuch der Historik*, Wiesbaden 2025, 249–257.

13 See: Chris Lorenz, 'If you could read my mind: on the history of mind and other matters,' *History and Theory* 63, no. 3 (May 2024), 1–12.

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Virtual History and Temporal Imagination

Rūta Kazlauskaitė

Lucian Hölscher's virtual historiography aims to extend the concept of history by complementing the historically actual with the historically possible. In this reading, the historically possible, long neglected by historians, consists of two temporal domains: future pasts and past futures. Future pasts require historians to look backward at the present from an imaginary point in the future. This kind of construction implies prediction and forecasting about what is to come. Past futures, on the other hand, ask historians to inquire how the anticipated future takes shape in the thoughts, plans, and aspirations of individuals, steering their actions and behaviors. The underlying assumption is that comprehending how people in the past envisioned the future is essential to understanding their actions. In both cases, prediction plays a significant role. Future pasts highlight the predictions of historians, whereas past futures focus on the predictions of individuals in the past.

Predictions shape how people perceive reality, affecting what and how they see, hear, and feel. This concept is central to the predictive processing theory in cognitive science, a theory designed to elucidate the mechanisms of human perception.[1] According to this theory, our brains are in a constant state of anticipation, actively forecasting and preparing for potential future scenarios presented by our environment. It proposes that the brain is fundamentally a prediction-making machine that constantly tries to minimize the difference between its predictions and the actual sensory input it receives. This framework suggests that cognition is largely driven by the brain's efforts to predict and anticipate future sensory inputs, leading to the notion that perception, action, and cognition are deeply intertwined in a cycle of prediction and correction. Consequently, our expectations about the future impact every aspect of what we do and experience. However, the construction of brains' predictive models is rooted in the accumulation of our past experiences, which are continuously refined and updated: "What we perceive today is deeply rooted in what we experienced yesterday, and all the days before that. Every aspect of our daily experience comes to us filtered by hidden webs of prediction – the brain's best expectations rooted in our own past histories."[2] When an experience deviates from what our models predict, it generates a prediction error.

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1   Andy Clark, *The Experience Machine: How Our Minds Predict and Shape Reality* (Dublin: Penguin Random House, 2023).

2   Clark, *The Experience Machine,* xv.

These discrepancies are not merely flaws in our perception but play a pivotal role in the learning process, signaling the need for our cognitive models to adapt and evolve.

Taking the theoretical insights of predictive processing into account leads to several implications for Hölscher's notion of virtual history. Firstly, the concept of "past futures" aligns with the principles of the predictive processing framework by emphasizing the significance of visions, dreams, and images of the future held by people in the past. These visions, as noted by Hölscher, exert influence on people's behavior, even when they fail to materialize. Secondly, the theory of predictive processing implies that historians' constructions of future pasts are inherently rooted in their accumulated experiences and knowledge; historians are constrained by the present and the accrued understanding of their time. Therefore, even though future pasts involve looking back at the present from an imaginary future point, this "future" is still anchored in the present. There is no way to escape the ephemeral present. This realization prompts a fundamental question: Why is the temporal limitation of historical narratives and representations considered to be a problem that needs solving? Instead of viewing the present's ephemeral nature as a constraint on the validity of historical narratives and interpretations that must be overcome, we might, rather, embrace this ephemeral present as an inherent aspect of human experience and historical sense-making.

If we take predictive processing theory seriously, it means that historians, as knowers, despite writing from a point in the present, never encounter their environment a-historically. The present moment, from which historians make sense of the past or envision the future, embodies the past process of living and interacting with their environment; it embodies time, not as a sequence of static snapshots, but as a process and duration. Any perspective on the past or the future is therefore temporally extended because it expresses a process of interaction with the environment. This idea stems from a research area in cognitive science, embodied (enactive) cognition, which suggests that cognitive processes are deeply rooted in the body's interactions with the world and proposes to view cognition as embodied action. The pioneers of enactivism in embodied cognition, Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, posit cognition as "an enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs."[3] In this view, cognition depends on the accumulation of past experiences that stem from possessing a body equipped with diverse sensorimotor abilities. These experiences are situated within a larger

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3   Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind:* Cognitive Science and Human Experience (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 9.

context that includes biological, psychological, and cultural dimensions.[4] The brain's predictions are therefore grounded in embodied experiences, suggesting that our bodily interactions with the world shape our cognitive predictions, perceptions, and actions. Both predictions of the future and representations of the past are malleable: Rather than being a limitation to overcome, this plasticity is a necessary attribute of human cognitive processes, aiding in learning and adapting to changing environments.

My final point addresses the question posed by Hölscher: How could such a virtual history be discursively constructed and conveyed? I suggest that virtual and mixed reality (VR/MR) technologies are particularly well-suited to convey the multilayered temporality of virtual history, its simultaneities, repetitions, and tensions. This is because users can live out representations of real and possible pasts in VR, as well as different possible futures, and reflect on their interconnections. In fact, temporal complexity is frequently incorporated in history-focused VR storyworlds. VR excels at illustrating the intertwining of different time layers, showcasing repetitions and simultaneities – as exemplified by works such as "Here," "The Changing Same Ep. 1 The Dilemma," or "The Book of Distance".[5] "Here" is an immersive adaptation of the unique graphic novel of the same name by Richard McGuire. It focuses on a specific location rather than individuals as the main character of the story, narrating events that transpired in this place over hundreds of thousands of years. Different temporal frames are blended and juxtaposed in the same immersive space (or the same page in the novel), covering events that happened in this space, from hundreds of millions of years ago, to several centuries, or a decade ago, and what might happen in the future. The storytelling approach leaps back and forth in time, encouraging viewers to look backward from a hypothetical future point. Similarly, "The Changing Same Ep. 1 The Dilemma" combines various temporal frames to narrate a story, allowing viewers to witness the interconnected historical experiences of racial injustice in the United States. It encourages viewers to think how aspects of the past persist in the present, particularly racial oppression. By intertwining the past, present, and future, the VR experience encourages viewers to look back from a future standpoint. It also challenges viewers to consider how history might be reimagined, retold, and remembered, as well as how they could reimagine the future. Finally, "The Book of Distance" stands out for its unique blend of temporal as well as emotional distance

4   Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind,* 173.

5   Lysander Ashton (dir.), *Here,* https://59productions.co.uk/project/here/. Joe Brewster, Yasmin Elayat, and Michèle Stephenson (dir.), *The Changing Same Ep. 1 The Dilemma*, https://www.oculus.com/experiences/media/1398540963523459/511759760062624/. Randall Okita (dir.), *The Book of Distance,* https://www.nfb.ca/interactive/the_book_of_distance/.

and proximity. It seamlessly merges several different temporal dimensions within a single immersive space.

More than just presenting the possibility of different pasts or multiple futures, VR delivers these storyworlds as experiences in which users can actively participate, not just read about. In VR, storytelling becomes story-living.[6] VR transforms the concept of intertwinement of different temporal dimensions into a tangible and memorable experience that can be story-lived "in the flesh." Even if it is a virtual experience, it is still an experience that affects a users' body, memory, and emotions, and can, as a result, shape how users make sense of the past, the future, and themselves in different temporal landscapes.[7] VR employs the bodily imagination: Just as users can learn to practice public speaking or pilot a plane in VR, they can learn to notice and practice making sense of the past in a way that is not linear or confined to a single temporal dimension. Importantly for virtual history, by supplying direct, personal experiences, it can prepare users to better conceive of the very possibility of multiple past futures and future pasts. In other words, it can provide new experiences that feed into users' predictive models and shape their perceptions and actions. If history serves to make sense of the past to better understand the present and to inform future actions, then it is fundamental to this endeavor to understand that multiple alternative possibilities existed in the past, exist in the present, and will continue to do so into the future.

6   Thomas Maschio, *Storyliving: An Ethnographic Study of How Audiences Experience VR and What That Means for Journalists.* Google News Lab, 2017. https://newslab. withgoogle.com/assets/docs/storyliving-a-study-of-vr-in-journalism.pdf

7   Benjamin Schöne, Marlene Wessels, and Thomas Gruber, "Experiences in virtual reality: A window to autobiographical memory," *Current Psychology* 38 (2019): 715–719, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-017-9648-y. Benjamin Schöne, Joanna Kisker, Leon Lange, Thomas Gruber, Sophia Sylvester, and Roman Osinsky, "The reality of virtual reality," *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023): 1093014, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1093014. Rūta Kazlauskaitė, "Virtual reality as a technology of memory: Immersive presence in Polish politics of memory," *Memory, Mind & Media* 2 (2023): e7, https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2023.9. Rūta Kazlauskaitė, "Pictures in Our Heads: Politics of Space, Time, and Memory in Polish Virtual Reality Storyworlds," *Memory Studies,* 18, no. 4 (2024): 1004–1018.

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Response to the Comments

Lucian Hölscher

My proposal to expand the concept of history, traditionally limited to authenticated facts, to the idea of virtual history has met with a variety of reactions in the contributions collected here. I would like to thank my colleagues Rūta Kazlauskaitė, Chris Lorenz, and Britta Hochkirchen for their efforts to examine the conceptual foundations of such an extension for their coherence on the one hand, and to discuss the possibility of its practical implementation in historiography on the other. However skeptical they may be about such an expanded concept of history, their comments certainly help explore possible directions in which the work of historians might develop in the future.

At the heart of my proposal is the category of the historically possible, which has received increasing attention in twentieth-century historical theory, for example in the work of Ernst Bloch and Reinhart Koselleck, for assessing past and future human action.[1] Its further development will be of strategic importance for the future work of historians. I start from the observation that future-oriented possibilities of human action and expectations usually undergo a process of separation into illusions on the one hand and real phenomena on the other. In both cases, this led to a gradual neglect of such expectations and visions of the future in nineteenth-century historiography, which confined itself to representing the past and only indirectly considered the future: either by continuing to pursue such prospects only in terms of their successful realization, or by ignoring them altogether as failed projects. With this neglect, however, a large part of historical reality has been lost to historiography, namely that which is possible, imaginary, still open. All that continues to inspire and stimulate the future, even if it has not (yet) been realized. The main purpose of my reflections is to preserve all this for historiography and for the future.

Several of the critical considerations and suggestions expressed in the commentaries focus on the question of the *temporal nature of such possibilities:* The world of past events is historically ordered primarily in terms of time. Therefore, when considering a historical event, one of the retrospective historian's first tasks is to determine when it took place. It is the historian's reality check, so to speak. Intellectual ideas, however, are

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1   Ernst Bloch, Das Prinzip Hoffnung (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1959), chapter 18: "Die Schichten der Kategorie Möglichkeit." Manfred Hettling and Wolfgang Schieder (eds.), Cf. Reinhard Koselleck als Historiker. Zu den Bedingungen möglicher Geschichten (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021).

fundamentally beyond the scope of this task. How, then, can we recognize them as historical objects? As Chris Lorenz has pointed out, they can be dated according to their historical origin, but not according to their validity, which can extend far beyond the time of their origin. This raises the question of their external and internal temporality, i.e. their temporal position in history on the one hand, and the time they create or manifest themselves on the other.

Dating: To date intellectual concepts and ideas, historians try to relate them to the historical contexts and points of view in which they acquired their validity. But this is not easy. For even if they can thus identify the reasons for their later loss of validity, we must also consider that the contexts and places to which historians assign an idea can vary greatly, depending on the particular temporal, spatial, and social contexts in which this assignment took place: An idea born in classical Greece, for example, such as that of democratic rule or of human beauty, could regain its persuasive power in very different times and contexts. This shows that the validity of such an idea is not limited to the time and context in which it was first formulated.

Chris Lorenz refers to Gadamer's concept of "horizons of meaning" (*Bedeutungshorizonte*) to come to terms with the fact that historical objectivity is not timeless, but changes over time. But this concept does not take into account the fact that ideas unfold differently at very different times. Like Foucault's discourse analysis, Gadamer's hermeneutic approach is unable to resolve the contradiction between the universalist, trans-temporal claim and the epistemological relativism of such horizons of meaning, which Reinhart Koselleck pointed out in his letter to Carl Schmitt of 23 January, 1953.[2] As much as it provides a hermeneutic framework that spans the ages, it contributes little to the historical dating of the various readings that an idea or conception expressed in the past has later generated. What we need, then, is a historical analysis of the different readings or forms of reception that such ideas have generated in different contexts. Then we no longer need to attribute the trans-historical "classicism" of some historical works to their intrinsic "aura," as Chris Lorenz did, but can instead attribute it to their historical reception.

Finally, to clear up a misunderstanding, virtual historiography does not presume to judge what real or unreal possibilities existed in the past, as Chris Lorenz implies. Rather, it aims to restrict discussions of alternative possibilities to those that contemporaries already considered. This does not deny that things turned out quite differently than any contemporary could have imagined. Of course, every virtual historiography must also report on the unintended consequences of past actions and contingent events.

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2   Jan Eike Dunkhase (ed.), *Reinhart Koselleck – Carl Schmitt: Der Briefwechsel 1953–1983 und weitere Materialien* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019), 9–13.

However, its portrayal benefits from the fact that virtual historiography explores the horizon of what could once be said and imagined.

Latency and temporalization: The question of the internal temporality of ideas points in a different direction. This is the subject of Rūta Kazlauskaitė's comment. Referring to findings from the theory of predictive processing, she agrees with the view that the brain's activity of anticipating the future is itself inscribed with a temporal orientation. The constant correction of anticipations by new experiences and the associated rejection of presumed knowledge of the future therefore does not present itself to her as a "problem" of the inconsistency of historical representations, whose transience must appear to the historian as detrimental to their scientific character, but as a normal activity of the brain, in her words as an "inherent aspect of human experience and making sense of history."

However, this raises the question of whether the brain constantly anticipates future possibilities, or whether it also considers possibilities that have no temporal coefficient, or possibilities that are not derived from personal experiences, such as C.G. Jung's archetypes. In such cases, they cannot be refuted by new experiences and therefore do not trigger learning processes. This raises the question of how the historical latency of such concepts relates to their temporalization.

Timeframes are not necessarily part of the production of concepts and ideas that push for their realization. Rather, their immanent temporality sometimes remains latent at first. In other words, people do not necessarily create temporal horizons, even when they put them into action, however compelling this may seem to the historian's retrospective view in recapitulating past projects. The builders of medieval cathedrals, for example, or the Venetian merchants who sent their trading ships far across the ocean in the sixteenth century, usually had no concrete notion of the timeframe their projects would take to complete. In any case, there is little mention of this in the historical sources.

Historians are often quick to assume that contemporaries calculated timeframes, even if they proved to be factually incorrect, since they can reconstruct in retrospect how long such projects took to complete. They struggle to realize that there is no need to estimate the duration of a project, neither for its design nor for its execution. A well-known example for this is Luther's project of planting an apple tree in his garden, not even wanting to know whether it would to bear fruit before the end of the world.

The situation is different when the promoters of such projects or their contemporaries anticipate temporal horizons for them, as has become increasingly common since the early modern period. Such anticipations lose their former timeless latency and acquire a temporal dimension – a process that can be called the temporalization of ideas in the sense of a historical

process. "Temporalization", however, usually means something more and something different: namely, the temporal extension of the realization of an idea in anticipation of future points in time. Step by step, the idea is realized through the successive transition from a present to a future state, with time passing from one step to the next. In this way, otherness is transformed into the future and thus drawn into the concept of a temporally extended reality.

This is the process that Britta Hochkirchen addresses in her program of image analysis. According to her, images, whether painted or drawn, modeled like sculptures or technically produced like photographs, always contain in their material appearance a discrepancy with what they represent in reality, and this difference can be interpreted, again from the point of view of the (contemporary or retrospective) observer, as an anticipation of a reality that is only latently contained in the image. But it can also be subjected to a process of temporalization that is realized when it is released as a draft for the future. This innovative approach, however, raises questions that need to be further discussed: How can such visions of the future be derived from the images in a methodologically viable way? Does this require additional linguistic evidence? Or could the images also be read as materializations of a pictorial "language" of the future, which in its "changed form" opens up a view of a possible future?

In the early twentieth century, aesthetic "languages" of the future, such as abstract painting, atonal music, and architectural and industrial design often broke with tradition and created alternative forms of expression to create a socio-political and market-oriented tension between the present and the future. Automobiles, for example, were often designed in a stream-lined look that suggested futurism to potential buyers. Questioning artworks regarding the possibility of realization has also often been a concern of art interpreters, especially in recent times: For example, Stefan Willer's literary texts, whose depiction of possible worlds, despite their fictional character, does not necessarily have to be fictitious, i.e. not realistic. Rather, the future offers them a space in which that which is not yet can be in the future.[3]

For a virtual historiography, such aesthetic "languages" of the future offer a broad field of investigation. It will also be a matter of coming to terms with the disappointments that the realization of such futuristic projects has repeatedly provoked: Precious Bauhaus-style residential and industrial complexes turned out to be social hotspots and ruins of concrete; scandal-ridden beacons of hope for 'new music' turned out to be shrill sound

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3   Stefan Willer, "Vom Nicht-Wissen der Zukunft. Prognostik und Literatur um 1800 und um 1900," in *Literatur und Nicht-Wissen. Historische Konstellationen in Literatur und Wissenschaft, 1750–1930,* ed. by Michael Gamper and Michael Bies (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2012), 171–196.

structures that appealed only to a small fan base; streamlined road cruisers became oversized gas guzzlers, and so on.

With her reference to the analysis of historical temporality in novels and films such as "Here," "The Changing Same Ep. 1, The Dilemma," and "The Book of Distance," Rūta Kazlauskaitė draws attention to another valuable aspect of virtual historiography that is closely related to the last. The experimental interweaving of different temporal levels of past, present, and future in these works of art makes them an excellent training ground for sharpening the perception of historical time. I think she is right in assuming that staging them would afford virtual historiography great benefits.

Taken together, the comments do not only point to problems that need to be clarified, but also to additional dimensions along which the concept of a virtual history should be further developed.

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Lucian Hölscher is a German historian whose specialties include social and cultural history, the history of religion, and the history of the future of the modern era. He completed his Ph.D. on *Öffentlichkeit und Geheimnis* under Reinhart Koselleck in 1979 and collaborated with him in the 1980s on the publication of the encyclopedia *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* at Bielefeld University. In 1991, he took the Chair of Modern History and Theory of History in Bochum. His publications include *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft* (1999; 2nd edition, 2020), *Neue Annalistik* (2003), *Geschichte der protestantischen Frömmigkeit* (2005), *Semantik der Leere* (2009), *Zeitgärten. Zeitfiguren in der Geschichte der Neuzeit* (2020) and *Schattenwelten. Die dunkle Seite der Aufklärung* (2023).

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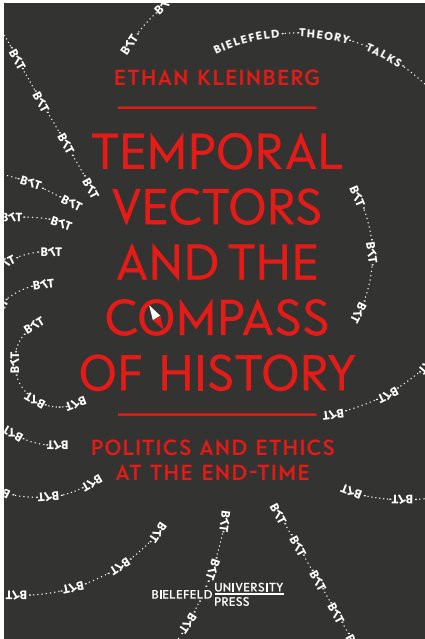
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