

Metahistory

Judith Barry

Northrop Frye discussed metahistory as a synonym for a 'speculative philosophy of history' based in a Hegelian model. Hayden White's book Metahistory developed a methodology for analyzing how history is not only a chronology of events, but also the product of many other factors including the narrative form it employs – he called this emplotment – as well as the ideological/philosophical positions that it encapsulates as it produces a legitimizing narrative.

Developed during the period when the master narratives/humanist models of Western representation were being examined across the social sciences as well as in art, film, and other forms of popular and literary culture, the concept of *meta* as an operation that could be performed on the discourses producing these histories provided access to the ways deeper structures of meaning can be teased out of the very same language that is used to discuss it.

Linguistically based in semiotics and poststructuralist philosophy, metahistory appeared alongside the rise of postmodernism(s), feminism(s), and postcolonial studies located within specific geographies (the subaltern, the trickster, the concept of hybridity, and others). These operations allowed for the emergence of new understandings and knowledge bases, elucidating how "subjects" are interpolated within the fabric of culture as both the form and the content of discourse was unpacked, described, analyzed, represented, re-represented, imaged, and understood differently, but never finally.

That this was undertaken using philosophies predominantly developed in the West, no matter the origins, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds of these thinkers, has for the most part remained unexamined. Nonetheless what constitutes the humanities as a discipline has indeed changed. Edward Said's orientalism gave rise to Homi Bhabha's hybridity; meanwhile, Gayatri Spivak and bell hooks interrogated the subaltern, and Jean Fisher's trickster provided agency particularly for artists such that by 2008 the Guangzhou Triennial could be titled *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*. Simultaneously, modernist traditions across the transnational cultural world can now be described as emerging out of, rather than being imposed onto, the terrain of cultural differences emanating from an understanding of the elasticity of these terms. Today, the discussions around cultural difference need no longer make use of postcolonial discourse as it was first understood in relation to a series of binary oppositions: center/periphery, authentic/derivative, or self/other, to mention but a few. As Jean Fisher has remarked, the trickster was global before colonization, and as the postcolonial is a set of ever-shifting relationships, postcolonialisms provide a "fertile ground for the play of tricky tactics." Four such examples in contemporary artists' work are Larissa Sansour's *Nation Estates* (2012) and *A Space Exodus* (2009) and Elia Suleiman's *The Time That Remains* (2009) and *Divine Intervention* (2002).

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