Historical narrative systems

Historical Narrative Systems[*]

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to explore the main idea that lies behind Hayden White's philosophy of history concerning the very nature of historical narratives. My main hypothesis is that Whitean narrativist theory may acquire a significant improvement when seen from the perspective of Systems Theory. In a nutshell, what I intend is to outline some main topics that have arisen during these four decades of narrativist theory, from the point of view of some terms related to Systems Theory, in the understanding that they provide a key to the comprehension of Whitean theory. My *motto* is, then, that we finally understand the core thesis of Whitean philosophy of history, the tropological basis of historiographical discourse, only if we accept the main idea that narratives are, after all, systems that operate under (systemic) tropological procedures. For us to understand what is a *historical system* presupposes that we have previously grasped what is a *system* at all.

Keywords: narrativism - systems theory - tropology - autopoiesis

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo consiste en explorar la idea que subyace tras la filosofía de la historia de Hayden White, concerniente a la naturaleza misma de las narrativas históricas. Mi hipótesis principal es que la teoría narrativista de White podría adquirir un significativo enriquecimiento considerada desde el punto de vista de la Teoría de Sistemas. En síntesis, lo que intento es resaltar algunos tópicos que han surgido en estas cuatro décadas de teoría narrativista, desde la perspectiva de algunos términos vinculados a la Teoría de Sistemas, en el entendimiento de que proveen una clave en la comprensión de la teoría whiteana. Mi lema, entonces, es que finalmente entendemos la tesis central de la filosofía de la historia whiteana, la base tropológica del discurso historiográfico, solo si aceptamos la idea principal de que las narrativas son, después de todo, sistemas que operan bajo procedimientos tropológicos (sistémicos). Para nosotros comprender lo que es un *sistema histórico* presupone que antes hemos aprehendido lo que es un *sistema* a secas.

Palabras clave: narrativismo - teoría de sistemas - tropología - autopoiesis

The objective of this article is to explore the main idea that lies behind Hayden White's philosophy of history concerning the very nature of historical narratives. It is well known that since his revolutionary masterpiece *Metahistory* (White 1973), White established the basis for a kind of analysis that considers historiographical discourse under the light of what it has in common with other kinds of discourse expressed in ordinary language. What it shares with them are its tropological and figural procedures, and so the Whitean approach hinges on tropological techniques to reveal the cognitive, aesthetic and ideological commitments of historical texts.

More precisely, what is of interest for me at this moment is that if from *Metahistory* onwards White has argued for a rigorous analysis of the deep tropological structure of historiographical modes of knowledge, and asked properly about "what is a historical system", and if the answers he gave to these questions have been illuminating and challenging, he has nevertheless never really worked on the implications made in assuming that the domain under scrutiny is configured as a *system*. That is, White asked about what a historical system is. He answered focusing on the historical side of the question. Now I intend to deal with its "systemic" side, in terms of an initial approximation towards Systems Theory.

My main hypothesis is that Whitean narrativist theory may acquire a significant improvement when seen from the perspective of Systems Theory. In a nutshell, what I intend is to outline some main topics that have arisen during these four decades of narrativist theory, from the point of view of some terms related to Systems Theory, in the understanding that they provide a key to the comprehension of Whitean theory. My *motto* is, then, that we finally understand the core thesis of Whitean philosophy of history, the tropological basis of historiographical discourse, only if we accept the main idea that narratives are, after all, systems that operate under (systemic) tropological procedures. For us to understand what a *historical system* is presupposes that we have previously grasped what is a *system* at all.

1. Historical narrative

This is not the place to reconstruct Whitean philosophy of history (cfr. Kellner 1989, Tozzi 2009). Robert Doran (2010) has made relevant contributions to the point that his flight from history to theory, tropology and rhetoric implies no disbelief in history, no distrust at all in the relevant functions of narrative in fostering a historical consciousness. This Whitean linguistic self-awareness provided by post structuralist criticism and literary theory should not be seen, then, as a reversion of what Kellner had aptly coined as "Whitean linguistic humanism" (Kellner 1989). In Doran's view, this humanism steps back, up to Giambattista Vico's idea of human creativity as self-interpretation, the vision of a cultural continuity defined tropologically, modulated in stages of consciousness or mind. Stages that can only be apprehended in social developments are expressed in the common or ordinary language used by the agents of this process of cultural shifting.

White uses tropes like did Vico, or two prominent theorists of literature, Erich Auerbach (1968, 1998) and Northrop Frye (1957), to avoid the endless clash between realists and idealists concerning relationships between discourse, mind and world. The use of the notion of *figure* or of the *displacement dialectics* found in these authors allows White to escape from the reduction of discourse to the antinomy between literal and figurative modes of speech. "There is no literal apprehension of the world that is not at the same time a figural interpretation" (Doran 2010, p. xviii). In this sense what tropology is up to is to focus on the main problem of the definition of a concept of reality by linguistic means. The production of a sense of reality by way of narrative is what is of interest to Frye, Auerbach and, also, White. Having once blown up the clear-cut distinction between literal and figurative modes of speech, the only way to pragmatically distinguish between uses of language is to properly utilize rhetorical devices (as Vico did). With this, it is clear that an invigorated sense of rhetoric is at stake here. The "new rhetoric" is used to produce a differentiation between modes of use of ordinary language, to grasp or track constellations of (epistemic, ethical, esthetical) commitments, expressed in a neutral vocabulary if it is supposed to provide terms of comparison among them.

So, what lies behind this tropological track is the interest to show how a sense of reality is linguistically produced, and to give the keys that help us choose among competitive procedures. To show its very functioning expresses no distrust at all. The keys are found in the understanding that we still are part of what Vico saw as the poetic origin of all cultural formations. This "optimistic" and propositive overtone in White's call to rethink historical narratives separates his work from anti-humanist or nihilistic thought. In Doran´s terms: "White's tropology represents an attempt to reinvigorate a concept of human volition – the inherent freedom of every human community to choose its own past and thereby its present" (Doran 2010, p. xix).

So, in a sense, in White's theory, and clearly in *Metahistory*, we attend at once at the building of a theory of historical writing, of historical consciousness, of historiography as a discipline and of history itself as a concept. All these levels can be comprehended by way of tropological mediations that allow us to move, as interpreters, from one level to the other. Modes of emplotment, of formal argument, and of ideological implications erect, in their combination, the figure of a style in discourse, derived from the tensions and affinities that constrain and enable the free choice of authors within a frame of available resources, permissions and limits.

The formal elucidation of the system of commitments expressed in historical discourse should not lead us to the wrong inference that Whitean perspective is merely formalist. For it is also a vast enterprise in the field of intellectual history, at a high level of self-consciousness. The drift of this consciousness emerges gradually when White passes from the nineteenth century to the agonies of historical thought in the twentieth century. His treatment of modernism allows him to ride all the above-mentioned levels in terms of what he has called "figural real-

ism". This realism is nothing but the expression of what he early adopted from Auerbach's analysis of the representation of reality in Western literature, as it is presented both in his masterpiece *Mimesis* (Auerbach 1946, 1968) and in his preliminary essay "Figura" (Auerbach 1939, 1998).

The main idea here is to defend the point that aesthetic standards and conventions which define "reality" for us in natural languages evolved over time, and thus what was once held to be an appropriate representation of an event may now seem dated. The problem with disciplinary and historicist historiography is, paradoxically, its unacquaintance with the historicity of the conventions that inform historical reality, as it is disciplinary and linguistically modulated. *Figuralism* affirms the contingency of all these conventions, defining history as a (Vichean) creative enterprise in which, far from the idea of history that considers it as a linear series of fixed points of reference, the significance of earlier parts of a story are revealed (fulfilled) only in the later moments. "History as an academic discipline emerged from the effort to forge the identity of the nation-state as the fulfillment of its origin" (Doran 2010, p. xxxi). In the absence of any efficient causal connection, the choosing of a past equals the choosing of a corresponding present. According to this, non-causal, anomalous relationships are established among events in a kind of reverse causation. Therefore, Figuralism is a doctrine that allows us to establish the idea of a dynamic system of retrospective correspondences.

I agree with Kellner (1989, p. 227) and Doran in that with this conceptual frame, White builds a kind of provocative mixture of Frye's *archetypal formalism* and Auerbach's *figural historicism*, obtaining from the former the idea of specters of socially relevant signification that are at stake in the very idea of plot and of narration, and from the latter a prototype for understanding a logic of change, stability and obsolescence of patterns of social reality representation by verbal and narrative means. At the heart of these concerns lies a commitment with the idea of a human agency that chooses to effect certain reverse causations, to construct these retrospective correspondences. So, in a word, human agency – potential of intervention assigned under social permissions and constraints – is invigorated in the context of this consideration about historical narrative dynamic systems (cfr. Kellner 1989, p. 232).

For my present purposes, it is enough to link this characterization of White's theory with three passages or brief articles, where we can see the same topics that arose in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (White 1973), but with a slight slip. First we can refer to "The Structure of Historical Narrative", a paper originally presented at a 1972 Conference (reprinted in White 2010). There, "structure" refers, more or less, to the multi-layered dimensions of narrative (story, plot, and argument). These dimensions, in their turn, constitute the lexical, grammatical and syntactical levels of historical narratives. The lexical elements appear to be related to atomic events, in the kind of distinction between research and writing (or between description and representation) on which ten years later Frank Ankersmit would rely (Ankersmit 1983, 2001,

White 2010, p. 123). But the structure as a whole depends on the kinds of distinction assessed previously by Louis Mink among types of comprehension (configurational, theoretical, categoreal; cfr. Mink 1987). The recognition of these elements and levels provides, in White's article, a sort of argument against "the Hempelians", endowing with cognitive status and legitimacy the procedures employed in telling a story.

Back to 1967 we found a key lecture, that did not appear in print until 1972 (White 1972), in which it is less a matter of marrying Frye's multi-layered levels of analysis with Mink's recognition of modes of comprehension, than to provide a synoptic view of the dynamics of history as a cultural process (we are moving here from "writing" to "historical consciousness" and the very concept of "history"). It is less a topic for "structure" than a piece of analysis surrounding the key concept of "system". The conference title ("What is a Historical System") is revealing. Although White´s the first aim is to clarify "what biological systems are not, rather than what historical systems consist of" (White 2010, p. 126) it is clear from the very beginning that he is not the one to perform this task. Instead, we are concerned with the kind of creative and retroactive affiliation that we can link today with the idea of *causal figuration*. Thus, this Auerbachian thesis is present as early as in 1967. The key to White's argument is the idea that

> the life history of a biological system is in principle exhaustively describable in terms of the laws of genetic inheritance, variation and mutation that govern such systems plus the boundary conditions obtaining in that milieu in which the organism lives. We do not normally invoke the concepts of choice, purpose, or intent when describing the responses that biological organisms or entire species make to *stimuli* coming from the environments (White 2010, p. 127).

On the contrary, we cannot do without such terms in the analysis of historical systems. It is not that White is presenting the already known thesis of the irreducibility of the intentional vocabulary. He certainly says that, but then goes on to assert that "the life of a sociocultural system is only as strong as its power to convince its least inclined potential member that he ought to live his life as a human being this way and not another" (White 2010, p. 130).

And it is here that the above mentioned levels present at White's theory merge one into each other: the concept of history, the theory of historical writing, of historical consciousness and of historiography, all pay their tribute to the idea that in ordinary language there manifests a drift that is crucial in the comprehension of cultural change. The tropological device is there because White, like Frye or Auerbach, is primarily a theorist of cultural change (White 2010, p. 263), and it is from that main topic that the rest of the concerns may be developed: historiography as a discipline or the main issue of historical writing in the era of modernism are important because we are witnessing a major displacement in the cultural drift as a whole.

So, we soon arrive at the point that obsessed Auerbach in "Figura":

> We gain meaning only by sacrificing awareness of the essential evanescence of every sociocultural system, only by obscuring the extent to which any

> such system rests upon fictions that are turned into lived realities by the individual's choices of them […]. And we also lose sight of the fact that when a generation chooses not to honor its received sociocultural endowment as its way of realizing a distinctively human life, we are in the presence not of a crisis in the system, but of a crisis in the lives of human beings who must now choose another way of life (White 2010, p. 131).

Freedom of choice. System crisis. We rest here upon the modalities of cultural change: "the abandonment of Roman civilization and the constitution of medieval Christian civilization were not genetic necessities". In fact, a legacy is abandoned. And another one is grasped, in the understanding that it is more adequate. So this is the new "past reality" for those who are choosing their new ancestors. "Which they treated as if they had genetically descended from it". This "as if" is the key point in the *modal character* of historical systems. "Historical systems differ from biological systems by their capacity to act *as if* they could choose their own ancestors" (White 2010, p. 132). The process of socialization is a process of ancestral substitution, of retroactive putative and non-causal affiliation with past realities that conform, by purely linguistic means, a representation of past reality.

The whole point of Auerbach was to show how Western literature does that. The point of White is to show how historical narratives do the same. Biological systems are invoked here only as a contrast class. "Trees, forests, animal populations and cells may be conceived as the effect of selective causes operating in their pasts; but only human beings are asked to selectively choose their ancestry retrospectively" (White 2010, p. 133). The key point is also the erasure of this very process: "once this ideal ancestry was established it could be treated as if it were the real ancestry" (White 2010, p. 134). Once accepted, this past is the past for that group as a sociocultural entity. No amount of historical objective work can prevail against the choosing power of this "as if" in the system. "The process of retroactive ancestral constitution [...] and the search for new models of comportment [...] this process stands at the heart of the historical system" (White 2010, p. 134). Thus, historical systems are the holy land of figurality. But this figurality must be elided and hidden if it is to exert its powers on us.

The writing of history and the modulation of historical consciousness are nothing but the coupling with the anxiety in the face of the unknown. Trying to offer both sufficient and necessary reasons for any achieved sociocultural state of affairs, historians provide "life", negative entropy, order or form, where there were formerly none of them. "Which they treated as if they had genetically descended from it". The chooser thus forgets that he is a chooser. "Our anxiety in the face of the unknown drives us to embrace the fiction that what we have chosen was necessary" (White 2010, p. 135).

Returning forward to 2010 we found White recalling this 1967 paper. There he asserts that he was trying "to flesh out Nietzsche's thought about historical change as the substitution of a (historical) past from which one would wish to have descended for that (genetic) past from which one really had descended" (White 2010, p. x). A more disenchanted White now affirms that in the end,

neither scientists nor historians wanted history, as they knew it, to change. This *whiggish* attitude tends to forget that "prior to historiography's scientization, history was regarded as a kind of disciplined memory […] a branch of rhetoric and a division of moral philosophy" (White 2010, p. x), concerned with that question that Kant defined as the soul of ethics: What should I (we) do? Being ethics what it is, it is clear that science cannot respond to the role, direction and place of imagination in this broad drift of self creation, even if it is the case that what has to be created is the contour of a common past, a shared legacy on which to act.

Biological, scientific, genetic, causal approximations to the past can only generate the arid and ultimately sterile disquisitions of historiographical discipline. On the contrary, the past as a practical matter remains as the figural space in which the modal and contingent aspects of the problem of forging an operative concept of reality in which to intervene arise. So in the end White finds in the modernist novel a field in which remains an interest in "history" understood not as "a past" but as the figural specter in which the spectacle of human self-making can be presented in all its density and oblique ramifications.

It is in this context that White refers to the concept of *autopoiesis*, as it is presented in Systems Theory by Niklas Luhmann. Again it is no more than a parenthetical reference, but it makes my point clear: White is very eclectic in the uses of terminology from other disciplines or theoretical frames, but he makes no decisive movement in order to benefit his argument from substantive uses of them. In the case of Systems Theory we can see that he used the term in 1967 as he used the concept of structure in 1972, just as a mere significant in order to introduce authors that were central to him: Frye in the case of structure (not being Frye a structuralist at all), Auerbach in the case of his "systemic" comparison between biology and history.

We have no grasp at all of the concept of system when we are confronted with what White says about historical systems. Instead, we catch upon a certain idea of figurality as a protocol of cultural change. So maybe we can resort to the same question that motivated White to write his conference in 1967, and ask ourselves: what is a historical system? Perhaps we can fully subscribe the Auerbachian and Fryean thesis that lies behind White's work. So the rest of this article will be devoted to the idea that we should explore Systems Theory in order to answer the other part of the question. In the end I will put forward some critical points that can threaten this theoretical appropriation and make explicit commentaries upon the benefits that Systems Theory will bring, in order to avoid certain traditional critiques made to the Whitean branch of narrativism in contemporary philosophy of history.

2. Systems

Properly speaking, there is no such thing as a unified General Systems Theory. The possibility of this began to appear in the theoretic field by the end of the 30's, but its point of emergence was clear only when Ludwig von Bertalanffy published his first works on the topic in 1945. By the end of the 40's Systems The-

ory (ST from now on) collides and merges with the flowering of cybernetics (the work of Wiener *Cybernetics* is from 1948) and of information theory (Shannon & Weaver 1949). This caused Systems Theory to be regarded as a part of a vast enterprise in order to reformulate scientific vocabulary, making room for new terms as *homeostasis, feedback, servomechanisms, close systems and open systems* (von Bertalanffy 1968)

Unfortunately, very early ST was identified with cybernetics or with theories of control and *equilibrium* (homeostatic processes). Another interpretation considered ST as a mere branch of biologicism, a reductionist enterprise directed to reconsider the intentional behavior by way of a discrete set of analogies with devices of control and *feedback*. The luck of ST in social sciences was soon confused with the destiny of functionalism or structural-functionalism in the vein of Talcott Parsons (Parsons 1951). In the philosophy of action a first approach was realized by Georg Henrik von Wright (von Wright 1971), as it was clear that ST was useful to analyze the legitimacy of a comprehensive approach to the problem of intentional action in teleological, non-causal or non-deterministic terms.

It is interesting to note that many objections made to ST coincide in their spirit with critiques made to Whitean narrativist approach. Bertalanffy cites three of them: first, that the theory is *true but trivial*. The fact that tropes are found in ordinary language (in White's case) or that hierarchizations, differentiations, competences, equifinalities are equally present in all kinds of systems (in ST's case) is just an arid re-expression of what is known in more accessible terms and provides no new insights.

A second critique – incompatible with the first – is that the theory is *false and wrong*, by virtue of the fact that its superficial analogies hide strong and genuine differences. With or without tropes, historical discourse is not mere literature (White's case). Biological systems and social systems are, in spite of their "organic and holistic character", different in kind.

A last one lies on the fact that the theory is *invalid, generic* and could cause, if stubbornly sustained, a *significant impoverishment* of the effective practice of inquiry.

Too abstract, generic, arid, difficult, superfluous, parasitic, and at the same time, trivial, impractical, ineffective, so, why sustain ST at all?

The whole point in Bertalanffy's theory was to establish a net of concepts useful to deploy ST: first the idea of a *totality*, a differentiated domain submitted to a drift in which other tendencies are recognizable. This totality has a non-summative character (a holistic aspect that goes beyond the mere sum of its elements; hence the priority of the modes of relationship over the consignation of the elements). This domain fluctuates in a tense and tragic life marked by a contradiction. Because when the domain is less differentiated (think, for example, in a vocabulary, a fetus or a technological device) strictly speaking it is indifferent to variations in the environment. So, a poorly differentiated system remains more flexible, but still unspecific, than a more complex one. Its flexibility and its low internal demarcation imply that every incident reverberates in the entire domain.

The other way around is to enter in a drift of *progressive segregation*. This positive or progressive differentiation (as in the case of social division of labor, or detailed vocabularies) increases the results of the domain as a whole, but the cost of specialization is double: first, system's sections acquire fixed traits so they become more specific and less flexible in case of new perturbations; second, the system is not anymore a generic field of reverberations, so each chunk segregated is relatively more autonomous. What is gained in performance is lost in integration and flexibility.

Progressive segregation leads to *progressive mechanization*. Thus the fixed parts become more and more specialized, and indifferent to what is not part of its field of competences. The coordination of these parts suggests the convenience of a principle of *hierarchization* in order to establish dominances and probability spaces. These tendencies towards control and centralization collide with tendencies toward competition and dissipation. Following the analogy with thermodynamics, left to its own devices, a system would produce dissipation, increase entropy, risk and match probabilities, reducing its complexity up to the point of dissolving itself. But this drift is just a limit in the course of a *totally closed system*. What we have instead are *open systems* that can incorporate energy, information and complexity (in thermodynamics terms, negative entropy) in order to recur and reproduce themselves. It is to this idea of system that White refers to in his aforementioned conference.

At this point ST theoretically converges with *cybernetics*: the model of the system began to incorporate an *input*, to exhale an *output*. Its operations are considered from the point of view of recursion, retroactivity and feedback, in order to increase or decrease complexities, dominances, centralizations, and segregations. The model of cybernetics works with internal constraints (*structures*) and with dynamic operations (*functions*) that allow us to consider system modalities in time and space. We can think of rules of antecedence and succession (the kind of operator that von Wright called "*and next*"; von Wright 1968, p. 41), of incompatibility rules (I cannot be single and married at the same time; von Wright 1968, p. 44), of modal operations that arise as long as we are dealing with "all that is not impossible and is not necessary" (von Wright 1968, p. 50).

Structure and functions are thought in this theory as the kind of internal constraints present in the system in order to allow anticipations and reduce uncertainty. To make it even clearer: structures and functions are just results in the recursive process of reproduction of the system in order to administrate a definite level of complexity, flexibility and differentiation (segregation). The internal segregation implies that the system loses resources in order to re-integrate that which with the process of fixation and mechanization became semi-autonomous. Highly differentiated systems gain stability only at the cost of re-connecting its specialized parts, which in itself increases the complexity of the system as a whole. A good example of this is the multiplication of bureaucratic instances in order to improve the efficiency of bureaucracy itself.

All this set of concepts (differentiation, hierarchization, centralization, progressive segregation, structure, function, reduction and increasing complexity, etc.) can be appreciated in von Bertalanffy's classic *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications* (von Bertalanffy 1968), a kind of auto-celebratory publication in order to legitimate a program of research. But my aim is not to make a history or a whole panoramic of this labyrinthine theory. Instead of that, I want to stress what happened with the aforementioned set of concepts when ST began to be appropriated in the realms of social sciences. That is, what happened to Systems Theory when it became a Theory of Social Systems?

The broadest attempt to deploy a Theory of social systems is that of German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. In Anglo-Saxon sociology, Luhmann is usually considered a kind of Parsonian disciple, with conservative orientations – both topics were made explicit by Jürgen Habermas. In this realm two words were apparently enough to discredit "systems": the idea of *equilibrium* and that of control.

But what was clear in Bertalanffy is already transparent in Luhmann: ST is not about *equilibrium* or control (both ideas descend from the old idea of the *balance of trade* that arose in the seventeenth century), because both of them depend on the idea of the existence of a permanent closure of the system. This first model of system (a thing with closures) was abandoned in favor of the *model of the open system* (thermodynamic systems), capable of developing negative entropy, gaining order and complexity by absorption of energy from the environment. In biology, for example, this stage of the theory is represented by the consideration of the efforts made by organisms to get over entropic laws of universe. From this general theory of open systems three subsidiary theories arise: *the input-output or stimulus-response model, that of positive reinforcement and that of negative feedback*. All three are visible in cybernetics, in the model of thermostats and the hope that cybernetics could confer a new dignity to the old and discredited concept of teleology. "Cybernetics, originally understood as the art of driving navigation is transformed, in generalized form, in the art of driving technical systems, but more over, social systems" (Luhmann 2007, p. 65; cfr. Luhmann 1995, p. 39).

But the original aim of cybernetics was to diminish the impact of effects produced outside the system that can only be managed from inside. *Negative feedback* designates all these techniques in order to reduce distance, deviations and perturbations that could affect the reproduction and recursivity of the system. On the contrary, the *positive feedback* or *reinforcement* is about radically changing the initial state of the system, increasing the difference between system and environment. The topic is not about stability but about changes and recursion. About tipping points and *non-reversible processes*. What is at stake here is the comprehension of mechanisms that reinforce deviations and tend to reproduce states of the system that do not take into account the consequences of this very deviations and do not even adjust to programmed finalities.

But with this we reach the limits of the open systems theory. The critiques to this stage of the theory were mainly ideological. Firstly, as if it were a technocratic interest in the theory, by way of displaying a mere vocabulary for cybernet-

ic control of human and social life. Secondly, it was understood that the theory had a preference for stability models, in a *status quoist* vein.

At this point we enter Luhmann's realm; in fact for him what is of interest in the theory is to answer a decisive and simple question: what is designated by the concept of system? Luhmann's answer is doublefold: *a system is a difference between system and environment* (Luhmann 1995, p. 172); moreover, is a recursive difference that is re-produced by means of an operation, a single operation that gives the system its condition of possibility: that of the production of a *difference*. The operation implies that the system is *operationally closed* to the environment, although *causally open* to it (with this it differs both from closed and open systems). *Environment* in its turn is what is not capable of producing a difference inside the system.

> The point of departure of any theoretical-systemic analysis must consist of the difference between system and environment. Systems are structurally oriented towards environment, and without it they wouldn't exist. Thus, it's not that is a case of occasional contact or mere adaptation. Systems are constituted and keep running through the creation and conservation of the difference with the environment, and use their limits to regulate this difference (Luhmann 1995, p. 39).

But there is no such thing as an unquestionable point of departure, so Luhmann chooses to develop the analysis of systems from the very *distinction* between system and environment. With this, the theory is prepared to deal with the problem of observation, or *second order observation*. A fact that could be predicted by the idea that *systemic* refers to a type of *analysis*, not a kind of object. Indeed, the very distinction between system and environment presupposes self-referentiality: "an observer must choose one distinction to indicate (denote) that of what is going to talk about" (Luhmann 1992, p. 25). This second order reflection introduces a self-conscious stance that renders visible all that is made through the selection of that initial distinction.

Thus, a system is a difference that results from the difference between system and environment. System is a disposition upon difference. All that is operating inside a system is the product and the input for new differences. In information theory this is replicated in the classical formulation of Gregory Bateson: "information is a difference that makes a difference" (Bateson 1972, p. 315). The process of differentiation is what drives to the next distinction. Certainly, Luhmann's definition of system deals with Spencer Brown's *The laws of Form*. In Spencer Brown the sign is thought as a single operation that produces a difference. From the very beginning there is no difference between observation and self-reference: the observer must differentiate himself from what is observed, enabling himself to establish new distinctions from the development of this initial reference.

So, to indicate and to distinguish are nothing but the development of self-references in the frame of this *second-order observation*. This reflexive form is at the basis of ST: *to draw a distinction* (Spencer Brown's *motto*) in this context implies

to differentiate system from environment. A system is a *form* (again, in Spencer Brown's terms) compounded by two sides.

Then, it is a matter of indicating the operation that informs the distinction of the system. Luhmann's idea is that only one kind of operation produces, by *recursion* in time, the system. Without time and recursion we only have a "mere event". The ability of the operation to link to and interlock subsequent operations is what pragmatically constitutes the system's drift.

This operation helps us to understand the key concept (of biological ancestry) of *autopoiesis*. This term was first modeled by Chilean biologist Humberto Maturana. What is typical of autopoietic beings is that "their organization is such that the only product is themselves [...] the most peculiar characteristic of an autopoietic system is that it erects itself by its own means, and constitutes itself as distinct from the environment by way of its own dynamics" (Maturana & Varela 1992, pp. 28-30). For Maturana, living creatures are *autopoietic*. For Luhmann, social systems are by the same token capable of *autopoiesis*. Biological and social systems, due to their intrinsic constitution, are self-referential and autopoietic. They produce and reproduce themselves, gaining complexity, increasing or decreasing their segregation process, etc. Their operations and modes of reproduction are by their very nature autonomous. The relationship that they must establish with the environment depends on their internal form of operation.

For Luhmann, social systems depend upon a single operation that distinguishes them: *communication*. Communication is the only phenomenon that qualifies as a distinctive social operator: only communication produces more communication, from communication itself. Communication (not necessarily linguistic) is the only kind of operator from which all the derived communication systems can emerge. "All that exists and can be designated as social consists, from the point of view of a theoretical building founded in the idea of operation, of a single impulse and a single kind of event: communication" (Luhmann 2007, p. 88; cfr. Luhmann 1995, pp. 140-171).

In a nutshell: "from the point of view of the form, the system is a difference that is constantly produced from a single kind of operation. The operation reproduces the system/environment difference, inasmuch as it produces communication only through communication" (Luhmann 2007, p. 89). With this we can merge recursion, links and interlocks with the vocabulary of previously developed cybernetics and Bertalanffy's TS (re-entry, inputs, outputs, complexity, segregation, reduction of complexity, non summative totalities) to produce a *theory of operationally closed systems*. The operational closure's theory establishes that the difference between system and environment is possible only due to the system. Operations within the system are in charge of establishing their own limits, through exclusive functions, and this is why the system can be observed at all. *Indication and identification run in parallel*. So the interlocking logic inside communication generates the conditions for the next communications. At the same time, a demarcation towards environment is produced: operational segregations render indifferent the system towards significant portions of the environment that

cannot be by inner system's operations. With this it is clear that the operational closure's theory implies two theses. First, it may be a trivial one: *system cannot operate in the environment*, in the sense that operations cannot be reproduced in the environment. If that were the case, the difference between system and environment would be abolished. Secondly, system cannot employ its own operations to make (cognitive) contact with the environment.

This is very important for the theory: at the level of system's proper operations, *there is no contact with the environment*. Each observation on the environment is performed inside the system as an internal activity, through distinctions of the system. Knowledge is possible inasmuch as there is operative closure. But this is not a return to the closed Systems Theory (entropic systems): we must distinguish between operational closure and causality. With closure we do not understand thermodynamic isolation, but only an operational one. The operations of the system are recursively possible only due to the results of precedent operations of the system. Thus, causality, though necessary in every systemic vocabulary, is not appropriate to explain the mode in which a system operates and reproduces itself. Causality is a principle of selection that must be attributed to an observer with certain interests. The world can be defined as an infinite series of possible cause-effect relationships that demands an observer in the ability of reducing the complexity of the series through a mode of operation (indication and distinction).

So, if we split up causality from operation (distinction-identification) we can understand how we consider certain technical systems as causally closed (for example, an air con, that reduces all the complexity of the environment to a predetermined set of variables as temperature, humidity, etc.), and that this is a different situation from that in which we have operational closure of (causally) open systems. Social systems are, thus, oriented toward environment and reproduce distinctions derived from the environment inside them, without the fact of having to admit operational effects within.

It is here that Luhmann employs the meaningful expression of Heinz von Foerster: *non-trivial machines* (von Foerster 1981, Luhmann 2007, p. 106). In a cybernetic sense, a machine provides a rule of transformation (a *calculus*) in which a determined *input*, plus the rules, produces a determined *output*. We use a trivialized sense of machine for an artifact predictable with a reliable output. *Non-trivial machines* are artifacts oriented by previously obtained achievements that are driven by an *axis* of recursive control and *re-entry*. They are recursive machines that with each operation *redefine their rules of transformation*.

In ordinary life we presuppose, and are in need of, these processes of trivialization, of predictable *outputs*. The very notion of structure is nothing but the delimitation of the specter of anticipatable or predictable (trivial) outputs inside a frame of distinctions and demarcations. But this presupposition is not everything that is the case: the operational closure results in the consideration of social systems as *non-trivial machines*. The structures of the system can transform themselves only through operations that emerged from within. For example, a

language can be transformed only through communications, and not with fire, or strawberries...

Operational closure links *autopoiesis* with s*elf-organization* and both of them with the next key term in Luhmann's ST: *structural coupling*. But before exposing that, I want to stress the fact that the former two are not identical. *Self-organization* refers to the fact that the system builds certain structures from within. They do not import structures from the environment (due to *operational closure*). *Structure* in this sense is nothing but the limitation of the possible relationships inside the system. If the system itself is a reduction of complexity from the environment, the structure signals the kind of reduction in course. *Autopoiesis*, on the other side, links the system to the next state of the system, departing from the previous limitations and operations. Limiting structuration is a *necessary condition* for the reproduction of the system. But it is not a *sufficient condition*.

Structures are, thus, expectations over the linkage of operations, based on previous states of the system. It is a demand directed to the *trivialization* of the artifacts. *Autopoiesis*, on the contrary, has the structure of an innovative, non-trivial, or metaphoric capacity. *Autopoiesis* means, for Maturana and for Luhmann, the production that consists of producing oneself. It is neither a creation *ex nihilo* nor the invention of the elements, but only the production of a new context of intersection of precedent operations. *Poiesis* is the production of an *oeuvre* (a work, a play). *Autopoiesis* signals the fact that the *oeuvre*, the thing "at work", is the system itself.

With these elements we can refine a little more the distinction between causality and the self-produced operations of the system. Causality shows how the environment can produce (in a limitative or negative way) or induce effects inside the system, although never in a positive form. Breathing and feeding are necessary conditions of the fact that I can write an article on Systems Theory. A fire can burn a library. But neither the air can produce the form of the article, nor the fire write a book. Another Maturana's term, *structural coupling*, shows this interplay (Luhmann 2007, p. 130, Luhmann 1995, p. 209). An example of *structural coupling*, used by Maturana, is musculature, functioning always and almost imperceptibly: related to gravity forces it negatively defines specters of possibilities of movement, without positively determining any of them.

Structural coupling is obliquely disposed with respect to the recursive character of the system. It is presupposed though it never determines what happens within. "In this sense every system is adapted to its environment (or they would not exist), but inside its range of action, they have possibilities of behaving in non determined ways" (Luhmann 2007, p. 130). So coupling is not a relationship with the environment as a whole, but with selected parts of it. What lies out of this selection became indifferent to it. What belongs to this selection functions as *channeled causality* inside the system. This channeling is a condition of possibility for the system to undertake something at all. The (observed) reduction of complexity is a pre-condition of the (recursive) increasing of complexity by means of system's operation.

Inside the system we have a gain in complexity, in a form that reduces the possibility of a linear direct influence of environment upon the system, except in the case of destruction: *destruction is always possible* (the fire in the library). Another important issue linked to *structural coupling* has to do with the fact that the channeled causality consists in providing a permanent irritation and perturbation to the operations of the system. This is what affects *self-organization* and what puts the *autopoietic* process in a state of demand. The very idea of perturbation must be linked with what we said with Bertalanffy: systems are not committed with *equilibrium* or "restoration" theses. A permanent, steady, dis-equilibrium is the normal condition of every *autopoietic* system.

Every perturbation is what dissipates information inside the system. *Information*, in this sense, is nothing but an event that selects system's states. *Information* presupposes structure, but is not in itself one of them. Information is, thus, an actualization of a structural disposition of the system. If we recall that structure is nothing but a *schema of expectations* of linking and interlocking operations of differentiation inside the system, in the course of its reproduction, we can see that *information* is a form of translation of environmental perturbations into system states, through *autopoiesis* and *structural coupling*, resulting in the reproduction of the system.

Finally we can close the circle around the main concepts in Luhmann's ST: the distinction operated through information requires an *observer*. The observer is not a person but a meta-systemic function. *Observation* is an operation from within that employs the precedent distinctions and indications that are basic to the system. So, the observer observes operations in a domain open to observation, but there is no hierarchy, no rule of necessity in the forms of the distinctions employed by the observer. The next step is to systematically establish the forms of observation operationalized by the system. This is what is called *second-order observation*. With this we want to stress, or to focus on, the distinctions employed by first-order observers (Luhmann 2007, p. 167).

Despite the fact that a second-order observation is, at the same time, a first-order observation, the procedure is established with the aim of observing those things that cannot be observed, by virtue of position, by the first observer. "Second-order observation must fix the point from which it is observed how the other observes the world. Or more precisely: which schema of difference is used by those who are being observed" (Luhmann 2007, p. 168). The world is nothing but the presupposed domain in order to apply distinctions, if we want to gain complexity by specialization. But there is no ontological or metaphysical certainty; there are no recurrent contents of the world to which those distinctions can correspond (Luhmann 1991, p. 279). Thus *second-order observation* is a kind of hermeneutical strategy in order to observe what the first-order observer cannot observe: his blind spot. This is a partial constitutive clouding: the differentiation process inside the observation system lies in, and makes a dynamic use of, the contingency of all drawn distinctions.

In the end of this presentation of Luhmann's theory, and establishing a bridge that leads us towards the first section of this article on Historical Narra-

tives, we can say, along with him: "for the second-order observation the world appears as a construction sustained under contingent distinctions. This is why this mode of observation is not necessary, but contingent [...] any ambition to grasp a common ground, a fundamental symbol, a conclusive thinking must be eliminated" (Luhmann 2007, p. 176).

By means of system we achieve a reduction of complexity in order to respond to causal perturbations and structural limitations. In Luhmann's view, systemic operations produce this reduction in the same way as it is produced in a drama or a text conceived as a system of action: by way of deploying a vocabulary that is a selection of reality. This is what Kenneth Burke called *scope and reduction* (Burke 1969, p. 59, cfr. Luhmann 2007, p. 181). The problem arises when, at a level of complexity of a given domain, we reach a point in which there are no possibilities of complete relationships between all the elements and relations within it. We need modes of elision of entire clusters of relations. Portions of the system are considered, for present purposes, as "trivial", and therefore, as dispensable in the analysis. As it should be clear, what is trivial and what is indispensable depends on contingent identifications and distinctions.

There is no ultimate simple element on which reduction could rest. Even more: the concept of element is not the ultimate element in the systemic analysis. *Reduction* is an information procedure, which in itself consists of no less than four differences: *information* itself, as a thematic content; *the act of communication*; *the act of understanding* what is communicated; and last, *the act of endorsement or rejection* of values and senses communicated. Moreover, through the concept of *interpenetration* (due to Parsons, cfr. Luhmann 1995, pp. 199-235) we can think of multiple systems that can exert a retroactive or proactive influence. A system offers its own *complexity* and *self-organization* to another system, if they are taken in order to pursue their *autopoiesis*. Complexity of the former involves *autopoiesis* of the latter. Each system is put in a relation as a cooperating factor, which leaves no traces (as Derrida would say). This hidden presence is what is made visible when it is a matter of rendering explicit the elided chunks of the system previously considered as trivial, and when the *structural couplings* taken as "normal or obvious" are seen as contingent and tortuous processes of reduction of complexity and channeling of causality and perturbation.

With all these elements we can see how systems include and eliminate environmental complexity, how they can structure highly sensitive patterns of transformation while at the same time they are extremely indifferent to all that cannot be treated in terms of their operative functions.

In Bateson and Luhmann's terms, communication is an *emergent reality*, a *sui generis* state of affairs that fluctuates between purposes of structuration and trivialization and *autopoietic* tendencies. The model of multiple selections-operations (*information, act of communication, act of understanding, act of endorsement-rejection*) may help us in the task of understanding the fact that the goal of communication is not transmission but the absorption of uncertainty, via production of redundancy and reduction of excess, in order to produce more communication.

The system of communication has its own goal: reproduction. The absorption helps and facilitates this.

The key element here is the process of reducing the possibilities of rejection, increasing the endorsing of the values and meanings employed in communication. *Authority*, as a capacity of stopping the revision of elided chunks of the system and of avoiding the visibilization of the hidden traces that in its invisible presence increase the economy of the expression, is what is at stake here. In the end, in order to articulate this – disputed, contested, imposed and once again disputed – *authority* we have nothing else but *symbolically generalized media*, which operate in the task of transforming a rejection in an endorsement (or vice versa).

Writing radically modifies the concept of communication; it is reinforcement and a tipping point in social systems: the act of communication and that of understanding are temporally decoupled. The gain in complexity in the contents that can be communicated is immense. With writing, communication is open to an infinite interlocking that is no more linked to the presence and simultaneity of the elements presupposed by the very process of communication.

Discourse emerges gradually as an internally highly differentiated system. Inside the area of discourse as a *symbolic generalized media*, we find *narrative* as a very powerful tool to express deeds and events, actions and models of intervention presupposed in our social environment. *Narrative* is thus defined as an artifact, a *symbolic generalized media* designed in order to provide a concept of reality in which we take part as agents. In *historical narrative* we found an entire branch of narrative in order to produce these models of events, actions and agents. We can see with this process of delimitation (communication, writing, discourse, narrative, historical narrative) how reinforcement and tipping points modify the complexities and the possibilities of communication. But the relationships between past (as an ontological correlate), narration, agents and narrators remain obscure, or even, plagued with fears of radical skepticism and relativism. Or something like that is what is usually said with respect to the narrativist controversies over the last four decades. So now it is time to return to our main concern: what can Systems Theory say to the Theory of Historical Narratives? Or, better yet, what kind of narrativism is that which can emerge when related to Systems Theory?

3. Historical Narrative Systems

In the first section, I exposed what I consider the main elements in Whitean Narrativism. In the second part, I dealt with the conceptual framework of Systems Theory. Now it is time to undertake the task of providing the positive side of this article. Of course what I will present is nothing but an outline of a research program: how to read Hayden White's tropology from the point of view of Systems Theory.

Let´s recall now the criticism made to ST: that it is *trivially true* (giving no insight at all in any specific domain), that it is based on *superficial analogies* (giving no basis for the status of its distinctive methodological procedures), and that it

is *pragmatically invalid* (leading to a considerable impoverishment of empirical research). We can see that the accusations of abstraction, aridity, massive array of jargon in a pseudo-metalanguage, once launched into Luhmann, can be found, with few modifications, in the hostile reviews dedicated to White (cfr. Jameson 1976, Golob 1980, Pomper 1980, Mandelbaum 1980, Himmelfarb 1992, Marwick 1995, Lorenz 1994, 1998). We can even find a common term in the ideological critique of the theory: both narrativism and systemic analysis would lead to conservatism, quietism or a kind of theoretic inflation with no (positive) practical consequences (cfr. Callinicos 1995, Moses 2005).

But this seems to be an unfair reception. We could treat both theories in more specific terms, reconstructing their conceptual network. Then we could establish bridges between both *corpuses*, in order to enrich both theories. So, the warning is clear: we should not think that one theory (e.g., ST) would serve as the foundation for the other. This would be like forgetting a fact that both theories have established so well: knowledge is erected upon contingencies, and production of meaning is a kind of response to this uncertain and ironic stance.

Once this warning has been made we can read White from another perspective. I want to summarize the conceptual set of ST: systems are born from the system-environment difference, by progressive segregation and hierarchization. This leads to self-organization and structuration (configuring spaces of anticipations and expectations) as well as to the linkage of operations that creates a system out of the system itself. This linkage beyond structure, departing from it, is the autopoietic self-creation of the system by way of its operations. The key operation in social systems is communication. Which should not be understood as transmission of an object (content) but as the creation of an emergent reality in the overlapping of acts (of communication, of understanding, of endorsement-rejection) related to information. This creation is oriented towards the reduction of complexity, in passing from the environment to the system. For some purposes we pursue reduction by way of trivialization, anticipation and prediction of outputs, generating trivial machines.

But in the course of autopoietic drift of systems we also employ non-trivial machines that perform a permanent adaptation of its transformational rules. This transfiguration is not unmotivated. It is the response to the fact that systems, though operationally closed, still are causally open and linked to environment. Its structural coupling serves as a channeling of causality by systemic means. So, systems reduce complexity, and in communication they also absorb uncertainty, generating redundancy, adapting expectations, and abolishing excesses.

But in the end, all this frame, all these distinctions are the result of a contingent second-order observation, a conceptual practice that observes how others' observations are functionalized within posited domains. Structures, self-organizations, communications, autopoiesis, operational closures, structural couplings, all results in the production of distinctions in order to indicate, operate and observe from within a system of differences oriented towards a highly complex and intrinsically disturbed environment.

The last three paragraphs are all I want to retain from ST in order to apply it to White's work. *Metahistory* is a kind of second-order observation of the distinctions and operations made for the first-order observers (historians). White's tropological theory reveals the epistemological, ethical and aesthetic commitments at work in historical discourse and imagination. Tropes indicate and distinguish the modes in which historians reduce complexity, absorb anxiety and uncertainty, creating redundancy and orienting expectations. Tropes, in this sense, are nothing but *modes of reduction of complexity* in the process of communication (tending to trivializations and literalizations). The clear distinction, consigned in the introduction to *Metahistory*, between *figure* and *schema* (White 1973, p. 33), is convergent with that of von Foerster (trivial/non-trivial) or that of Maturana (between structural self-organization and *autopoiesis*). A trope is an autopoietic operation in ordinary language that defies anticipations of sense. A literal use of a term, an actualization of the structures of hegemonic vocabularies. In footnote 13 (a classic in White's *Metahistory*, 1973, pp. 31-33) we can see also the tropological expression of the above-mentioned reductions in communication (information, communication, understanding, endorsement-rejection).

Thus, if we go back to the very beginnings of the metahistorical approach, we can see that ordinary language is enthymematic by its very nature, being tropes nothing but modes of elision. These modes have the function of masking and hiding premises that the economy of the expression is not able to display.

But these modes are contingent and disputable. The politics of language arise from there. The process of literalization of what are mainly figurative terms is nothing but the attempt to solve the problem of "essentially contested terms", which are crucial to the distinction-indication of our social world. This process connects discrete verbal practices with broader perspectives that lead to the kind of cultural theorization of which White, Frye, and Auerbach are masters. These outlooks are causally open to disturbances in the world, because their very function is to channel causality in order to produce the structural couplings that systems are supposed to generate. But the internal form of the interpretative systems is operationally closed to these disturbances, depending more on the complexities, reinforcements and tipping points of their respective trajectories. This internal configuration rests on the previous achievements of systemic self-organization or structuration and the kind of linkages that can be erected in the process of autopoietic self-creation.

The emergence of literary modernism or of social theory has as a necessary condition a set of social and cultural challenges that occurred during the twentieth century. But this set is not a sufficient condition. In order to understand the specific distinctions and hierarchizations of that non-trivial machines that are modern narratives and theories, we must understand the previous constraints (schools, traditions) and the communicative effects of alternative protocols that overlap in a sort of competitive frame (politics of language leading to endorsement or rejection of autopoietic distinctions). An entire comprehension of the autopoietic drift of modern narrative is necessary in order to understand the

emergence of modernist anti-narratives. The conceptualization of self-organization and autopoiesis of disciplinary fields is a valid path to avoid the sterile debate around contextualism or formalism in social studies, and around realism or idealism related to discourse, mind, and world. Or, finally, about skepticism, relativism, or objectivism towards our cognitive enterprises.

The very notion of causal figuration (or figural realism) is an attempt to erect a protocol of contingent causality, to reduce complexity and to dispute precedent hierarchizations comprehended under the structuration of metonymical cause-effect relationships. Or, in other words, figurative notions are employed in order to restore *modalities* in history. And it is the same with the term *fiction*: narrative is the space of what the Greeks called *plasmatic* (Frye 1976, p. 28), that is, the possible, what is not necessary, nor impossible. Non-trivial, the output of an emergent reality in the overlapping of communicative reductive and contingent practices.

All this labyrinthian design should lead us to the consideration of this extremely self-conscious, second-order, metalinguistic approach. But, as we saw, second-order observations are, as such, first-order observations. This also helps to explain the fusion of levels in White's theory: a theory of writing that is also about historical consciousness, about historical disciplinarization, about modernism and history in a substantive sense. This historicist formalism that tracks constellations of commitments in ordinary language; this ironic, figurative, self-conscious analysis of discourse is also a second-order observation of the structural couplings of the non-trivial machines that historical narratives are. The superficial commitments (plot, ideologies, formal arguments) show the self-organization, the structures, and internal constraints of narratives. Disciplinary anxieties reveal the need for uncertainty absorption; the masks of meaning in the production of redundancies in the context of causally open, but operationally close, narrative systems. Systems that purport to dispute, validate, reject or endorse authority in the disciplinary process of reproducing by autopoiesis its systemic character.

And, finally, the humanist side, the decisionist moment in White's theory, the point at which he departs from the nihilists, is when he affiliates himself with a long lineage that goes back to, at least, the immense Giambattista Vico. There we find the core of self-creation of human beings, which is nothing, in systemic vocabulary, but the longing of an autopoietic capacity that goes beyond whatever restraint that is found in the system, by way of self-organization. Expectations and disturbances, operational closures and structural couplings, complexities and linkages, always leave place to autopoiesis in the tense life of systems, as metaphors that increase the living border of language.

Of course, this is a very tight outline of what I consider fertile in ST, if we are to understand Whitean narrativism in new terms. Certainly, I did not show anything about the correctness of this interpretation of White's, or even, of Luhmann's work. My point here is that this is an approach that is based on something more than superficial analogies. Certainly, it is not trivial. And, finally, it

would lead to second-order observations of first-order empirical inquiries, which at the same time are first-order observations, that is, inquiries, so there is no room for skeptical arguments as neither are there places for accusations of cognitive impoverishment.

In the end, the value of White's work was to create a conceptual space to evaluate our commitments towards the past, to consider which figurations emerge from them, and which social worlds were implicit in them. The self-consciousness of the past would de-literalize figures inhaled as necessary and inescapable by us. With this, White's hope was to challenge our imagination if we still must choose among those worlds we want to inhabit. The implicit premise there is that the prize for this choosing is *ourselves*: when we re-produce an image of a past time, what is produced in the course of this reproduction is nothing else but *us*. This is why, in the end, for White, *autopoiesis* equals the task of providing a "history", if history is a spectacle "of human self-making" (White 2010, p. xi).

Thus, the value of narrativity in the representation of reality is to reduce complexity up to a level in which we can act in order to produce ourselves in a non-trivial sense. *Autopoiesis*. We can praise White for the fact that he reminded us of what is implied by the narrative character of historical knowledge, and that he asked properly what a historical system is (though he never answered the question at all). The whole experiment of this article is to outline the future of a program of research based on the entanglement of these two findings. Answering what is implied in the systemic character of history allows us to deepen our comprehension of narratives, and enables us to ask how they function, what they generate, why they are so important for us, if they are historical, and if they are systems.

That is, if they are after all, historical narrative systems.

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