

**THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION IN
UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORICAL
PAST**

**EL ROL DE LA IMAGINACIÓN EN LA
COMPRENSIÓN DEL PASADO
HISTÓRICO**

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Abstract

This paper emphasizes the significance of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics in interpreting and understanding historical texts. Historical facts are not objects —they require interpretation. Paul Ricoeur argues that history can be compared to fiction as history can never accurately portray the past, and it thus incorporates fictitious and imaginative elements. According to Ricoeur, the idea of historical representation is based on imagination. Only with the help of the imagination can one represent the past and identify with it. Ricoeur's narrative theory shows that the *past* is presented as a narrative, and it is reconstructed with the help of narratives. Historical narratives, which reflect the past and therefore include non-referring concepts, can be compared to non-referring concepts of fictional narratives. Non-referring concepts in both historical and fictional narratives require imagination and narrative understanding.

Keywords: Ricoeur, history, fiction, narrative, imagination.

Resumen

Este artículo enfatiza la importancia de la hermenéutica de Paul Ricoeur para interpretar y comprender textos históricos. Los hechos históricos no son objetos, requieren interpretación. Paul Ricoeur sostiene que la historia se puede comparar con la ficción, ya que la historia nunca puede retratar con precisión el pasado y, por lo tanto, incorpora elementos ficticios e imaginativos. Según Ricoeur, la idea de representación histórica se basa en la imaginación. Sólo con la ayuda de la imaginación se puede representar el pasado e identificarse con él. La teoría narrativa de Ricoeur muestra que el pasado se presenta como una narración y se reconstruye con la ayuda

de narraciones. Las narrativas históricas, que reflejan el pasado y por lo tanto incluyen conceptos no referenciales, pueden compararse con los conceptos no referenciales de las narrativas ficticias. Los conceptos no referenciales en las narrativas históricas y ficticias requieren imaginación y comprensión narrativa.

Palabras clave: Ricoeur, historia, ficción, narrative e imaginación.

Introduction

Paul Ricoeur is considered one of the most distinguished philosophers of the 20th century. He made a significant impact on philosophy, narrative theory, history, Theology, and linguistics. Ricoeur develops a novel approach to exploring social life and human action in his *Time and Narrative* (1984-1988), *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967), *Freud and Philosophy* (1967), *Freedom and Nature* (1966), *The Conflict of Interpretations* (1974), *Time and Narrative* (1984-1988), *Oneself as Another* (1992) and *From Text to Action* (1991a).

Paul Ricoeur worked on his three-volume *Time and Narrative* from the late 1970s to 1983, bringing together philosophy, history, and literary theory from the viewpoint of threefold *mimesis*, which links the realms of text and life (action). According to Ricoeur, “there is no self-understanding that is not mediated by signs, symbols, and texts, in the last resort understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms” (1991a, p. 15). This paper aims to investigate Ricoeur's hermeneutics and narrative theory for comprehending the historical past and historical narratives. Ricoeur's ideas of emplotment and imagination can be applied to historical texts.

While history and fiction are clearly not the same (historians argue, poets invent), there is a convergence of the imaginative intentionalities of history and fiction at the level of the reader. Here history and fiction 'concretize' each other's intentionalities. For narrative theory this concretization corresponds to the phenomenon of 'seeing as' in metaphorical reference (analyzed in detail in the *Rule of Metaphor*) (Kearney, 1995, p. 175).

According to Ricoeur (1988), historical narratives, which reflect the past and therefore include non-referring concepts, can be compared to fictional narratives' non-referring concepts. Imagination plays a significant role in both historical and fictional

narratives. While historical texts and ideas refer to objects and events that are no longer part of our reality, they cannot be considered non-referential, according to Ricoeur; they still influence and transform our current understanding of reality. From this viewpoint, as Ricoeur (1988) states, we speak of the “fictionalization of history” and the “historicization of fiction”. As a result, historical narratives can be thought of as a variant of fictional narratives¹, and fictional narratives can be thought of as a variant of historical narratives (Becanovic-Nikolic, 1998).² This takes us back to the issue of whether a clear distinction between “real” and “unreal” can be drawn. Imagination plays a significant role in both historical and fictional narratives.

Part of Ricoeur’s central goal in the imagination lectures is to demonstrate that imagination is not something marginal to or occasional in thought but rather permeates all thought and conceptualization. We have learned, says Ricoeur, from both the psychology of perception and ordinary language philosophy that there is no such thing as an impression, but an impression that is direct and unadorned by human structuring. Instead, perception is always structured by physiological and imaginative processes (Taylor, 2006, p. 94).

Paul Ricoeur’s Ideas of the “Fictionalization of History” and the “Historicization of Fiction”

Paul Ricoeur (1988) argues that history can be compared to fiction as history can never accurately portray the past, and it thus incorporates fictitious and imaginative elements. The idea of historical representation, according to Ricoeur, is based on

¹ Ricoeur employs the term ‘narrative’ in a generic sense. He distinguishes between the diegetic and dramatic modes.

² According to Ricoeur (1984), the interweaving of history and fiction makes time human.

imagination. Only with the help of the imagination can one represent the past and identify with it. In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur argues that:

History refigures time by certain reflective instruments such as the calendar, the idea of the succession of generations, and archives and documents as traces of the past. Those reflective instruments reveal the 'creative capacity' of that history (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 104). The fictionalization of history embraces a certain role of the imagination in the intention of historians to depict the past as it really was. Past occurrences cannot be perceived, and in this way, the room for imagination is open. (Ivic, 2018, p. 49).

Ricoeur claims that reading records and documents is the only way for a historian to get the information he needs for his work. A historian, as someone who is expected to reflect on the past in his work, works with traces, which is not the case for an author of a fictional narrative: "Through documents and their critical examination of documents, historians are subject to what once was. They owe a debt to the past, a debt of recognition to the dead, that makes them insolvent debtors ...Insofar as a trace is left by the past, it stands for it. In regard to the past, the trace exercises a function of 'taking the place of', of 'standing for' or *Vertretung*" (1988, p. 143).

Ricoeur compares and contrasts the quasi-historical nature of fiction and the quasi-historical nature of history: "The interpretation I am proposing here of the 'quasi-historical' character of fiction quite clearly overlaps with the interpretation I also proposed of the 'quasi-fictive' character of the historical past. It is true that one function of fiction bound up with history is to free, retrospectively, certain possibilities that were not actualized in the historical past" (1988, pp. 191–192).

Historical narratives, which reflect the past and therefore include non-referring concepts, can be compared to non-referring concepts of fictional narratives. Non-referring concepts in both historical and fictional narratives require imagination and narrative understanding.

Catherine Z. Elgin (1983) asserts that denotation is timeless; thus, it includes all tenses, even the past. This means that the term 'dinosaur' denotes every dinosaur who ever lived, so the denotation of this term cannot be considered as 'null.' However, this cannot be argued for historical events that are recoverable in textual form and always require imagination in order to revert to former ways of living and even speaking. (Ivic, 2018, p. 54).

Non-referring concepts that reflect past events and things shape our experience by assisting us in comprehending current events and things. Although non-existent, those ideas form and reshape our culture. Ricoeur (1979) discusses both non-existent entities portrayed in the poetic *mythos* of fictional narratives, and the unobservables that reflect past events in historical narratives in his *Time and Narrative*. This investigation leads Ricoeur to the issue of what reality is. Paul Ricoeur seeks to address the question of whether there can be a clear difference between real and imaginary.

In the *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, Ricoeur argues: "I am by no means denying the absence of symmetry between a 'real' past and an 'unreal' world, the object being instead is to show in what unique way the imaginary is incorporated into the intended having-been, without weakening the 'realist' aspect of this intention" (1988, p. 181). Ricoeur argues that he will not distinguish epistemological and ontological approaches in his analysis of real. His main goal is to figure out what the "real past" is. He claims that historical documents are reconstructions of "real" events (Ricoeur 1988, p. 100), and that it is "exactly the meaning attached to the word 'reality,' when applied to the past" that he hopes to revive (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 100).

According to Ricoeur, the quasi-historical character of fiction interweaves with the quasi-fictional character of the historical past: "It is because of its quasi-historical character that fiction can exercise its liberating function with respect to possible hidden elements in the actual past. What 'could have taken place'—the object of poetry

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as opposed to history, according to Aristotle—fuses with the potentialities of the ‘real’ past and the ‘unreal’ possibilities of pure fiction” (1988, p. 354).

Paul Ricoeur emphasizes the ontological, refigurative nature of reference. Non-referring concepts not only form our reality, but they are also continually rewritten and reread.

‘Our’ Homer is not identical with the Homer in the Middle Ages, nor is ‘our’ Shakespeare with that of his contemporaries. Rather, it is that different historical periods have constructed a ‘different’ Homer and Shakespeare for their own purposes and found in these texts elements to value or devalue, though not necessarily the same ones. All literary works, in other words, are ‘rewritten,’ if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them. Indeed, there is no reading of a work that is not also a ‘rewriting.’ No work, and no current evaluation of it, can simply be extended to new groups of people without being changed, perhaps almost unrecognizably, in the process; which is one reason why what counts as literature is a notably unstable affair (Eagleton, 2003, p. 12).

Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, representatives of the theory of reception, stressed this point. They believed that the theory of reception is based on both historical and individual grounds (Henderson and Brown, 1997). When a text is read by many readers, Jauss and Iser point out that different realizations of the text are possible (this is the domain of reception aesthetics). They claimed, on the other hand, that such readings and interpretations varied in various historical periods (this is the domain of receptive history) (Henderson and Brown, 1997). Those readings and interpretations always rely on imaginative processes.

Many scholars deny any connection between history and narrative text. According to Ricoeur, there is an indirect connection between history and narration. Ricoeur argues that historical knowledge derives from narrative understanding. Relying on the notion of narrative understanding, Ricoeur achieves his hermeneutic goal – that the examination of narrative is not limited to the text, but to include what precedes

the text, as a reality of the world and as sediment of tradition, and then the reception of the narrative text which is based on narrative competence and narrative understanding (Becanovic-Nikolic, 1998, p. 77). Ricoeur's notion of narrative understanding transcends sharp distinctions between the present and the past, the temporal and the atemporal, the real and the fictional.

Ricoeur blurs the distinctions between fictional, historical, and scientific discourse. He problematizes binary oppositions such as reference/non-reference, real/unreal, and literary/metaphoric (Ivic, 2018). Through examining the relationship between historical narratives and fictional narratives, Ricoeur aims to clarify the relationship between historical explanation and narrative understanding. At the heart of this research is Ricoeur's problematization of Wilhelm Dilthey's distinction between explanation and understanding.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1996) made a distinction between the approach used in the natural sciences and the method used in the humanities. According to Dilthey, in the natural sciences, explanation is the basic process, while in the humanities, understanding is the primary method. Dilthey claims that a scientist uses causal relations to explain a specific event, while a historian tries to understand the meaning of a specific event.

Ricoeur's conception of hermeneutic interpretation (which is based on the dialectics between explanation and understanding) unifies the humanities and natural sciences. Ricoeur (1981) claims that the words "explanation" and "understanding" have undergone significant changes. The concept of explanation has changed, and it is not only taken from the natural sciences, but also from the linguistic model. Understanding

has undergone changes in modern hermeneutics that have separated it from Dilthey's psychological concept of comprehension. Ricoeur's (1976) hermeneutics embraces the dialectics between understanding and explanation.

Historical Narratives as a Variation of Fictional Narratives

The entire postmodernist discussion on history is based on the question of whether the past can be considered a narrative. Ricoeur's narrative theory shows that the *past* is presented as a narrative, and it is reconstructed with the help of narratives. Hayden White (1973) introduces a linguistic turn in historiography and argues that history may be perceived as a narrative mode. White ascribes emplotment to the narrative structure of history by providing the following arguments: (1) Both historical and fictional narratives belong to the same type of configurations regarding narrative structure; (2) That history is writing, and the historian's work is a literary artifact (Ivic, 2018).

According to Ricoeur, the distinction between historical and fictional narratives should not be understood too strongly, "since the complete meaning of the most fictional narratives cannot be assessed without taking into account its relation to the real world, whether it be a relation of imitation in the narrow sense of copying or an imitation which incorporates such complexities as irony, decision, conscious distortion negation, and so on" (1991b, 105).

Ricoeur compares narrative configurations and historical explanations:

History can also be described as 'seeing as.' We learn to see a given series of events as tragic, comic, and so on. What it is, precisely, that makes for me the perennality of certain great historical works, whose scientific reliability has been eroded by documentary progress, is the appropriateness of their poetic art and their rhetoric with

respect to their way of 'seeing' the past. The same work can be both a great book of history and a fine novel (1988, pp. 185–186).

Ricoeur emphasizes that no fundamental difference can be made between events framed by plot and historical events: "The indirect derivation of the structures of history starting from the basic structures of narrative . . . allows us to think that it is possible through the appropriate procedures of derivation to extend to the notion of historical event the concepts of singularity, contingency, and absolute deviation imposed by the notion of emplotted event" (1985, p. 208).

In *Time and Narrative* (1984–1988) and *The Law of Metaphor* (1977), Ricoeur develops his narrative theory. He explores Aristotle's *Poetics* as a capacity for emplotment creation (*la mise en intrigue*) (Ricoeur, 1985). Ricoeur (1984) develops his poetics by extending Aristotle's concept of *mythos* (plot) and introducing his threefold *mimesis* concept.

Following a narrative, whether fictional or historical, necessitates its reactualization when reading. The text and its reader are connected by emplotment (which Ricoeur closely identifies with the productive imagination). When Ricoeur (1984) uses Aristotle's term *mythos*, he uses the expression *la mise en intrigue* (emplotment, the building of the plot) instead of *intrigue* (plot), because he emphasizes that the process of the genesis of the narrative is dynamic (Becanovic-Nikolic, 1998). Ricoeur defines plot as an intelligible structure that holds together initiatives, circumstances, ends and means, and unwanted consequences. In *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 2, Ricoeur explores Aristotle's theory of plot (*mythos*):

Plot was first defined, on the most formal level, as an integrating dynamism that draws a unified and complete story from a variety of incidents, in other words, that transforms

this variety into a unified and complete story. This formal definition opens a field of rule-governed transformations worthy of being called plots so long as we can discern temporal wholes bringing about a synthesis of the heterogeneous between circumstances, goals, means, interactions and intended or unintended results (1985, p. 8).

Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* (1984-1988) is significant because it expands the meaning of the terms: "plot", "narrative paradigm," "reference," "*mimesis*," "time," and so forth. Ricoeur includes yet another perspective from which historical texts and literary narratives can be interpreted by broadening the meaning of these terms.

Ricoeur's narrative theory is based on the idea of threefold *mimesis* (*mimesis* 1, prefiguration; *mimesis* 2; configuration and *mimesis* 3, refiguration). Ricoeur argues that in *mimesis* 1, "to imitate or represent an action is first to understand what human action is in its semantics, symbolic system, and its temporality" (1984, p. 64). As a result, narrative texts would be unintelligible if they did not seek to mold reality, which already exists in the realm of human praxis. Ricoeur defines *mimesis* 2 as the 'kingdom of as if' (1984, p. 65). It has a mediating role that stems from the complex nature of the configurative process, which is why Ricoeur prefers the terms "emplotment" over "plot" and "ordering" over "system" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 65).

Mimesis 2 and 3 are connected by the act of reading, watching, or listening. *Mimesis* 3 reflects the intersection of the reader's world and the world of the text. According to Ricoeur, "therefore, it is the intersection of the world unfolded by fiction and the world wherein real action unfolds" (1984, p. 72). Ricoeur emphasizes that the operation of emplotment is part of *mimesis* 2 (configuration). Emplotment mediates by "drawing a configuration out of simple succession" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 66), connecting heterogeneous narrative events in temporal succession with the central thought of the

intelligible whole. In this way, narrative unity is created. Ricoeur emphasizes that it is the power of productive imagination on which the synthesis of the heterogeneous elements in emplotments is based.

Ricoeur's conception of narrative is of a hermeneutic character. Ricoeur aims at broadening the idea of plot (*mythos*) as an imitation of action (1985, p. 10). Relying on Aristotle's definition of *mythos*³, Ricoeur argues that "plot was first defined, on the most formal level as an integrating dynamism that draws a unified and complete story from a variety of incidents" (1985, p. 8).

In the framework of Aristotle's conception of plot, "plot could only be conceived of as an easily readable form, closed in on itself, symmetrically arranged in terms of an ending, and based on an easily identifiable causal connection" (Ricoeur 1985, pp. 8-9). In the twentieth century, with the advent of the stream-of-consciousness novel, the notion of plot seemed to be troubled (Ricoeur 1985, pp. 9-10). For this reason, Ricoeur broadens the idea of representation of reality and truthful representation.

Ricoeur's broadens Aristotle's concept of *mythos* and perceives it as "the synthesis of heterogeneous" in the broadest sense (1985, p. 156). Ricoeur's conception of plots is "a plea for the precedence of narrative understanding over narratological rationality" (1985, p. 158).

According to Ricoeur, every configuration stems from productive imagination:

In Kant's first *Critique*, the categories of the understanding are first schematized by the productive imagination. The schematism has this power because the productive imagination fundamentally has a synthetic function. It connects understanding and

³According to Aristotle, *mythos* is "an imitation of an action that is whole and complete in itself" (Poetics, 50b23-25).

intuition by engendering syntheses that are intellectual and intuitive at the same time. Emplotment, too, engenders a mixed intelligibility between what has been called the point, theme, or thought of a story, and the intuitive presentation of circumstances, characters, episodes, and changes of fortune that make up the denouement. In this way, we may speak of a schematism of the narrative function. Like every schematism, this one lends itself to a typology of the sort that Northrop Frye, for example, elaborates in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1984, p. 68).

Narrativity is based on the idea of intertwined references between historical and fictional narratives. This presupposition is based on Ricoeur's idea of plot as a configurative principle which may be ascribed both to historical and fictional narratives (Becanovic-Nikolic, 1998). Both historical and literary texts require narrative understanding. Ricoeur's concept of narrative understanding mediates between two opposite approaches. The first one denies the narrative character of historiography, and the second one equates historical narrative with fictional narrative. Ricoeur's research shows that the construction of historical text occurs in accordance with the process of narrative configuration—*mimesis* 2. His ideas are significant in that they may be applied to scientific theories and historical as well as literary narratives.

Conclusion

Historical meaning stems from the narrative organization of historical events, which contributes to the development of a plot (Ivic, 2018). Historians rely on narrative competence, which includes both causal explanations of sequences of events and understanding intentions and motives on which particular human actions are based (Reynhout, 2013). Thus, narrative understanding mediates between fictional and historical texts (Ivic 2018).

Both historical texts and fictional narratives are based on the configurative process of building of a plot, offering the receptive ability to follow a story that includes

cognitive and hermeneutic processes of narrative understanding (Ivic, 2018). Both historical and fictional narratives involve a mimetic (and hermeneutic) arc, which includes prefiguration (*mimesis* 1), configuration (*mimesis* 2), and refiguration (*mimesis* 3). Ricoeur argues that even in historical texts⁴ that seem distant from narrative modes, configurative elements that are analogous to emplotment may be discovered in their deep structures (Becanovic-Nikolic, 1998). The common denominator of scientific, historical, and literary texts is productive imagination on which the configuration (*mimesis* 2) is based.

⁴ For instance, the works of Fernand Braudel and Jacques Le Goff.

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