

essays



introduction

‘A Fragmented Stew of “Themes”
and “Issues”’

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The essays collected in this special issue of the journal grew out of the Rethinking the Past: Experimental Histories in the Arts conference that took place at the University of Technology, Sydney in July 2006.¹ Drawing together scholars from a broad range of fields, the aim of the conference was to rethink the task of historiography via an exploration of experimental representations of, and/or engagements with, the past in fields as diverse as film, photography, literature, theatre, fictocritical writing, video, and new media. Scholars at UTS have, for many years, experimented with alternative, unconventional ways of both writing—and engaging with—the past and, in 1996 (in this journal’s previous incarnation as *The UTS Review*), Stephen Muecke and Meaghan Morris devoted a special issue to the topic entitled ‘Is An Experimental History Possible?’²

In his analysis of the work of Daniel S. Milo and Alain Boureau, Muecke argued in the opening article that the task of an experimental historiographical practice is to ‘systematically defamiliarise and displace historical objects’ in a manner which encourages us to imagine, engage with, and make sense of the past anew.³ In a much more recent article (written in response to Prime Minister John Howard’s critique of a ‘postmodern culture of relativism’, and its perceived impact on the teaching of Australian history in schools⁴), Muecke draws on the experimental scientific practice of ‘testing things out’ as a model for an experimental approach to researching, writing, and learning about history. ‘[S]omeone’, he notes, ‘who is prepared to experiment with history, in the great tradition of experimental method (testing a new hypothesis against measurement of data), will be prepared to think relatively rather than absolutely’. Such a method, he claims, is ‘innovative’ because ‘it asks what if?’⁵

This connection—between an experimental historiographical method and the opening up of alternative possibilities—was one of the key themes driving the conference. As convenor,

I was particularly interested in encouraging participants to explore the role that the arts have played in both redeeming marginalised aspects of the past and opening up spaces within official, historicist accounts of the relationship between the past in the present within which the possibilities of the past (and the future) can be re-imagined and re-explored.

My own particular interest in this field grew out of my research into the work of Alexander Kluge—the German writer, filmmaker and television producer who has, for many years, explored the role that an experimental historiographical practice can play in encouraging us to rethink both the past and the present outside conventional, narrative-driven accounts of particular periods. For Kluge, what is problematic about these narratives is not only their carefully crafted, linear structure, but the degree to which the process of exclusion out of which they are fashioned—and the ideology of historical necessity through which they are often rendered meaningful—prohibits our capacity to conceive of the possibilities of the past, the present and the future in different terms. Why, Kluge asks,

do we carry in us such a fixed conception of the probable order of events, which is only the sum of what is impressed upon us by the objective history or the media? Why do we hang on to it so energetically, while the imagination circles elsewhere ... [and while] the sum of improbabilities is actually just as great as the sum of all probabilities.⁶

Although Kluge's own engagements with the past span a broad range of fields,⁷ his 1979 film *The Patriot* (*Die Patriotin*) is exemplary for the way in which it both demonstrates—and enacts—the role that an experimental historiographical practice can play in redeeming traces of the past that have been buried under conventional, narrative-driven accounts of particular events and periods.⁸

The film's protagonist is the fictional character Gabi Teichert—a high school history teacher from the German state of Hesse, who is deeply troubled by the highly reductive, official narratives that appear in the textbooks assigned to her students. As Kluge states in voiceover in the opening minutes of the film, Teichert is a patriot because 'she takes an interest in all the dead of the Reich'—an interest which is specifically focused on redeeming those voices, memories and materials that would challenge her students to conceive of the extent to which the history of their country could have turned out very differently. 'It would be bad', she states, 'if that which is known about the history of my country were ultimately the truth. There is always a way out.'⁹

Driven by a desire to imagine alternative possibilities, Teichert heads into the field in search of forgotten, discarded materials with which she can rejuvenate the high school history curriculum. Later in the film, we view her in the midst of her experiments in a basement laboratory surrounded by test tubes and beakers (see Figure 1). Armed with various tools (including a hammer, a drill, a saw and a sickle) she sets to work on the materials, sawing



into books and drilling holes into the tightly organised, linear narratives around which the history curriculum is structured.

Teichert's experimental methods are, however, frowned upon by both her colleagues and the parents of her students. In a

meeting of the history department convened to discuss the curriculum, Teichert's colleague firmly states that the version which draws a line 'from Bismark to Hitler' is the only 'consequential extrapolation [*Fortschreibung*]' of the course of German history—a point of view supported by the head of the department who claims that 'from now on, we must concentrate on keeping the topic of history limited'.

Although Teichert is very much a product of the time and place in which *The Patriot* was produced,¹⁰ the political climate that served as a catalyst for the film shares some similarities with the current political context in Australia, in which Prime Minister John Howard has called for a 'root and branch renewal of the teaching of Australian history in our schools'.¹¹ In a different kind of patriotic gesture, on the eve of Australia Day in 2006 Howard announced that the time had come to restore a sense of 'structured narrative' to the history curriculum in both primary and secondary schools. History, he stated,

has fallen victim to an ever more crowded curriculum to subjects deemed more 'relevant' to today. Too often, it is taught without any sense of structured narrative, replaced by a fragmented stew of 'themes' and 'issues'. And too often, history, along with other subjects in the humanities, has succumbed to a postmodern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated.¹²

Figure 1: Gabi Teichert (Hannelore Hoger) in the laboratory. From *Die Patriotin* © Alexander Kluge, reproduced with permission

As Julie Bishop, federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, announced in her introduction to the 2006 Australian History Summit, convened by the government to tackle this issue, the task is 'to identify the key historical narrative that every Australian school student should learn as part of a well-rounded schooling experience'.¹³

As both Bishop and Howard have made clear, the kind of narrative they have in mind is one which is not only clear and chronological in its structure, but which imparts the 'national story'¹⁴ in a manner that gives credence to 'the great and enduring heritage of Western civilisation'.¹⁵ As journalist Janet Albrechtson has suggested, the development of such a narrative would play an important role in 'undoing the *progressive* curriculum foisted on Australian schoolchildren'—a curriculum in which '[p]rogress is rather nasty and a source of embarrassment to the authors'.¹⁶

Although Albrechtson's use of language is confusing, she argues that the history textbook in question is 'progressive' in a negative sense, because it seeks to 'inculcat[e] a sense of shame in young students about Western civilisation'. She writes:

There are sneering references to Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Charles Darwin—as examples of Europeans who believed in the 'superiority' of Western civilisation, over, say the hunter-gatherer existence of local indigenous people. Reading the text is like learning about Darwin's evolutionary theory in reverse gear.¹⁷

Thus, according to Albrechtson, what is, paradoxically, problematic about this 'progressive' text is the extent to which it challenges the historicist conception of history as a form of evolutionary progress. Within this schema, Howard's desire to restore a sense of 'structured narrative' to the history curriculum is seen as a corrective to such texts, because the 'national story' it will impart will be a clear and chronological account of Australia's so-called march of progress toward the future.

Importantly, the image of history that emerges from this picture is one that is driven by a motor that is somehow independent of the politics of the day. Indeed, as Walter Benjamin discussed in some detail, what is dangerous about historicist accounts of history is the extent to which they naturalise the choices and decisions made by those in positions of power.¹⁸ Speaking, for example, of his decision to wage war against Iraq, George W. Bush declared in his 2002 'State of the Union Address' that 'history has called America and our allies to action',¹⁹ while in his 2002 'Remarks to the Nation', he stated that '[o]ur generation has heard history's call, and we will answer it'.²⁰

What is deeply problematic about Bush's alignment of history with a conception of progress that is driven by violence and war is not only the extent to which it naturalises his call to violence, but the degree to which it provides us with the impression that it is not possible to do anything to prevent or change the situation. 'The rulers at any time', Benjamin writes, 'are

the heirs of all those who have been victorious throughout history'. Historicism, in this sense, can thus be seen as a form of 'empathy with the victor'.²¹ Its delineation of politically motivated decisions and events as stepping stones in history's march of progress towards the present creates a climate within which it is difficult to conceive the possibilities of the future outside the parameters established and maintained by the ruling status quo.

In this context, the significance of *The Patriot* and, indeed, Kluge's experimental histories more generally, lies in the degree to which they challenge the naturalisation of the relationship between the past and the present performed by historicist accounts of history. 'It must', Kluge states, 'be possible to present reality as the historical fiction that it is. Its impact on the individual is real ... Men die as a result, are pulled apart, are subjected to bombing raids, are dead while alive, are placed in asylums as mad etc.',²² but that does not mean that these realities could not have been prevented, that the 'deadly outcomes' suffered by these people could not have turned out very differently.²³

This concern with the role that an experimental historiographical practice *could* play in encouraging us to imagine alternative possibilities is also manifested in *The Sinking of the SIEV X: A Case Study for Secondary Schools*, a dossier compiled by Don Maclurcan to be used in Australian history classes for year 11 students.²⁴ The case study (which is highly fragmentary in its structure) contains an eclectic collection of materials (including official government documents, statements from journalists, politicians and refugees, interviews, parliamentary briefing papers, cartoons, tables, fact sheets and newspaper articles, as well as a DVD containing audiovisual materials such as clips from *Dateline*, *Sunday* and the documentary series *Punished not Protected*), all of which address, discuss, analyse and provide facts about the 2001 sinking of the SIEV X and the subsequent death of 353 asylum seekers.

As stated on the official website for the case study, the committee's aim in developing the dossier was to:

provide a balanced, impartial set of materials for a 6-week Case Study, via which, year 11 students can develop the confidence, knowledge and skills to address the question, 'Was the sinking of SIEV X and subsequent loss of life preventable?'²⁵

Judging by the strong criticism levelled at the case study by both government ministers and the conservative press, the dossier's 'messiness', and its questioning of the extent to which such loss of life could have been prevented, does not sit comfortably with those who have called for the rejuvenation of the Australian history curriculum.²⁶ Julie Bishop, for example, condemned the case study as 'an outrageous attempt to disguise a political agenda as school curriculum', describing it as 'a bizarre mix of unfounded allegations and rumour presented as fact' that is 'clearly intended to influence the opinions of school children rather than educate them with a factual version of events'.²⁷ Kevin Donnelly (former chief of staff to federal

minister Kevin Andrews) was also highly critical of the case study, describing it as 'just another attempt at an issues or theme approach to history which quite rightly has been condemned as failing to give students a comprehensive understanding of the background and overall narrative'.²⁸

It is certainly true to say that the diverse collection of materials which make up the dossier pose a challenge to those seeking to develop a neat, narrative-driven overview of the event. In a similar vein to *The Patriot*, however, the significance of the case study lies precisely in the degree to which its 'messiness' defies the neat, historicist conception of history that informs Howard's vision of the 'national story'. Indeed, what is so valuable about the 'fragmented stew of "themes" and "issues"' out of which the case study is constructed is the extent to which it challenges the sense of inevitability associated with historicist accounts of history and, in doing so, encourages us to conceive of the extent to which the SIEV X's journey (and, by extension, other disasters and events) could have turned out very differently.

History, in this sense, is thus transformed from a 'form of empathy with the victor'²⁹ into a resource that enables us to critically interrogate, and to learn from the mistakes of, the past in our attempts to fashion a more just, inclusive, and humane kind of future. This is not to suggest, as Donnelly has argued, that the SIEV X case study implies a 'predetermined answer' in its questioning of the extent to which such loss of life could have been prevented.³⁰ As Maclurcan has made clear:

the people who developed this Case Study take no position in terms of the questions investigated in this study, particularly those relating to responsibility, nor do these materials imply a predetermined answer on the issue of whether or not the sinking and subsequent loss of life was preventable.³¹

Indeed, in contrast to Albrechtson's criticism of 'progressive' texts that present students with 'a one-sided version that shuns critical analysis',³² the significance of the SIEV X case study lies in the degree to which it encourages students to develop a critical, investigative and imaginative relationship to the past. As Klaus Neumann has argued in a different context (in his analysis of the illegal incarceration of Cornelia Rau), '[r]ather than normalising the present, as a whiggish history would', historical analysis could 'stress the exceptionality of the present and stress that the status quo is a provisional state of affairs'.³³

Although the essays contained in this issue vary in their approach to a broad range of texts and topics that span a diverse range of countries, regions and periods, the collection itself could be said to produce what Alun Munslow has described as the sense of 'vertigo' generated by texts that 'disrupt the routine perception of the past as history with only one road and one destination'.³⁴ For Kluge and, indeed, for Benjamin, this process of disruption is significant

because the 'blasting of historical continuity'³⁵ with which it is associated opens up a space within which the possibilities of the past, the present and the future can be imagined and explored anew.

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1. I would like to thank the Ian Potter Foundation for providing me with a grant in support of the conference.
2. 'Is An Experimental History Possible', special issue of *The UTS Review: Cultural Studies and New Writing*, vol. 2, no. 1, May 1996.
3. Stephen Muecke, 'Experimental History? The "Space" of History in Recent Histories of Kimberly Colonialism', *The UTS Review: Cultural Studies and New Writing*, vol. 2, no. 1, May 1996, pp. 1–2. The book in question is Daniel S. Milo and Alain Boureau (eds), *Alter Histoire: Essais d'histoire experimentale*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1991.
4. John Howard, 'A Sense of Balance: The Australian Achievement in 2006', address to the National Press Club, Great Hall, Parliament House, 25 January 2006, Media Centre, Office of the Prime Minister: <<http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2006/speech1754.cfm>>
5. Stephen Muecke, 'Experimental History won't Change the Battle of Hastings', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 January 2006, p. 11. Sections of this article are contained in Muecke's essay in this volume.
6. Claus Philipp, 'Vertrauenswürdige Irrtümer: Ein Gespräch mit Alexander Kluge', *Kolik*, vol. 13, p. 10. My translation.
7. Since the 1960s, Kluge's experimental approach to representing and communicating the past has taken filmic, television and literary forms. See, for example, his 1964 book *Schlachtbeschreibung*—an experimental historical account of the battle of Stalingrad which is constructed out of a highly eclectic montage of materials (including diary entries, government reports, interviews about strategy, radio messages, responses from the clergy, government instructions to the press, medical reports about the dead, the mad, and the wounded, as well as guidelines for soldiers on how to deal with the treacherous winter conditions without freezing to death). Alexander Kluge, 'Schlachtbeschreibung', in *Chronik der Gefühle. Band I—Basisgeschichten*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2000, pp. 509–793. An English translation of an earlier version of this book has been published as *The Battle*, trans. Leila Vennewitz, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1967.
8. My discussion of *The Patriot* here draws on my article 'From History's Rubble: On the Future of the Past in the Work of Alexander Kluge', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2005, pp. 429–48.
9. Alexander Kluge, *Die Patriotin. Texte/Bilder 1–6*, Zweitausendeins, Frankfurt am Main, 1979, p. 450. My translation.
10. *The Patriot* can, in part, be seen as Kluge's response to the Hessian Cultural Ministry's 1977 decision to amalgamate 'history' with 'geography and 'social studies'. As Anton Kaes has pointed out, this attempt was made despite the fact that 'a poll in 1977 had shown enormous deficits in students' historical knowledge'. See Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts and London, 1989, p. 239.
11. Howard.
12. Howard.
13. Julie Bishop, *The Australian History Summit: Transcript of Proceedings*, 17 August 2006, Australian Government, Department of Education, Science and Training: <http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/policy_initiatives_reviews/key_issues/Australian_History_Summit/< p. 3>. Both Bishop and Howard have expressed dismay at the idea that history could be taught in a way that does not privilege a chronological, narrative structure. For example, in a debate broadcast on the ABC's *The 7.30 Report*, Bishop claimed that 'in order for people to understand Australian history, they have to see it in a narrative way'. *The 7.30 Report*, 28 February 2007. A transcript of the debate is available online at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/>>

- content/2007/s1859834.htm>. A similar sentiment was expressed by Howard in his address to the history summit, when he stated: 'How you can just teach issues and study moods and fashions in history rather than comprehend and have a narrative has always escaped me'. *The Australian History Summit: Transcript of Proceedings*, p. 1.
14. Tony Taylor, 'An Overview of the Teaching and Learning of Australian History in Schools', quoted in *The Australian History Summit: Transcript of Proceedings*, p. 4.
 15. Howard.
 16. Janet Albrechtson, 'Textbook Case of Making Our Past a Blame Game', *The Australian*, 1 February 2006, p. 12. My emphasis.
 17. Albrechtson, p. 12.
 18. See, for example, 'On the Concept of History' and 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2003, pp. 389–400 and 401–11 respectively.
 19. George W. Bush, 'The President's State of the Union Address', 29 January 2002, The White House, Office of President George W. Bush: <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>>.
 20. George W. Bush, 'President's Remarks to the Nation', 11 September 2002, The White House, Office of President George W. Bush: <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020911-3.html>>.
 21. Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', p. 406.
 22. Alexander Kluge, 'The Sharpest Ideology: That Reality Appeals to Its Realistic Character', trans. David Roberts, *On the Beach*, vol. 3–4, Summer 1984, p. 23.
 23. Alexander Kluge, *Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome*, trans. Christopher Pavsek, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1996.
 24. Don Maclurcan (ed.), *The Sinking of the SIEV X: A Case Study for Secondary Schools*, Sydney, SIEV X Secondary Schools' Case Study Committee, 2006.
 25. *The Sinking of the Siev-X: A Case Study for Secondary Schools*: <http://sievxreader.com/about_1.html>.
 26. 'The Prime Minister', Maclurcan notes, 'has called for a "revitalisation of history" in Australia. When the only suggested Australian Case Study on the NSW's [sic] Board of Studies syllabus is "Bodyline Bowling and the 1932–33 Anglo Australian test series" I'd have to agree with him'. Maclurcan, *The Challenges Facing Those Developing Independent Educational Materials*, speech delivered at Gleebooks, Sydney, 4 December 2006. Available online at: <http://sievxreader.com/about_1.html>.
 27. Bishop quoted in Cath Hart, 'Kit asks Students to Decide on Siev X', *The Australian*, 19 October 2006.
 28. Donnelly quoted in Hart.
 29. Benjamin, 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', p. 406.
 30. Donnelly quoted in Hart.
 31. Don Maclurcan, Speech, Main Committee Room, Parliament House, Canberra, 19 October 2006. Available online on the case study's official website: <http://sievxreader.com/about_1.html>.
 32. Albrechtson, p. 12.
 33. Klaus Neumann, 'The Cornelia Rau Case: A Historical Perspective', *Australian Policy Online*, posted 25 May 2005: <http://www.apo.org.au/webboard/results.shtml?filename_num=12063>.
 34. Alun Munslow, 'Introduction: Theory and Practice', in Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone (eds), *Experiments in Rethinking History*, Routledge, New York and London, 2004, p. 11.
 35. Walter Benjamin, 'Convolute N' in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1999, p. 475.