

The past is a construct of the mind

Description

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â??The past is a construct of the mind. It blinds us. It fools us into believing it,â?• according to Matthias in the scifi film *Total Recall* (2012). Itâ??s common for block busters to include a couple of lines of quotable pop philosophy â?? as an intellectual challenge amid the fights and ing around with ideas about simulation and reality as in *l Recall*.



Philosophers of history such as Edward Carr, Hayden White and Keith Jenkins provide more nuanced propositions about time. Hayden White argues that historians need to â??consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciencesâ?• (82). Edward Carr summarises this view by affirming that the contents of historical narratives are â??as much invented/imagined as foundâ?• (144).

The facts of history are never â??purely objectiveâ?• according to Carr. Events â??become facts of history only in virtue of the significance attached to them.â?• As everyone knows, history is a matter of interpretation. According to Keith Jenkins, in *Re-Thinking History*,

> no matter how verifiable, how widely acceptable or checkable, history remains inevitably a personal construct, and manifestation of the historianâ??s perspective as â??narrator.â?? Unlike memory (itself suspect) history relies on someone elseâ??s eyes and voice; we see through an interpreter who stands between past events and our readings of them (14).

Here and now

History is about the present anyway. Historian Keith Macfie describes history as a kind of â??self-knowledge, constructed (biologically) from a well-stocked brain.â?• The way we tell history says something about ourselves in the present.

According to Carr:

> Learning from history is never simply a one-way process. To learn about the present in the light of the past means also to learn about the past in the light of the present. The function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them.

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Macfie confirms, â??we cannot actually know a real past, lived or otherwise.â?• All we can know is â??an imagined replica of a once-lived present.â?• We human beings experience a â??lived present,â?• which we accommodate, make sense of and retell through imagined or invented histories. The past is to justify some very present state of affairs.



Historian and colleague Adrian Snodgrass writes of the role of the historian as eliciting from past individual memories and texts, and interpreting them in contemporary terms: â??to strengthen remembrance by demonstrating how it contains the possibleâ?• (143). The historian broadens the scope of memory, by treating the past as â??vast unknown territories.â?• The historian returns from this â??landscape of oblivionâ?• with new understandings for application in the here and now. The historian â??acts to interpret the past for the purposes of the present; the historian translates from one into the other.â?•

In a way it matters little how philosophers account for the phenomenon of history. According to Macfie, the conviction that a real past exists is unassailable: â??So deeply embedded is the human conviction regarding the existence of a real past that can be accessed, primarily by means of memory (the existential foundation of all history), that it is extremely unlikely that human beings will abandon history.â?• The immutability of the past, independently of how we tell it, has practical value and consequences.

The world is not yet ready for the kind of extreme skepticism that asserts the past never really existed or is simply a construct of the mind.



Bibliography

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Notes

- Total Recall (2012) is based on the short story by Philip K. Dick *We Can Remember It for You Wholesale* (1990), which has no character called Matthias who makes such a statement about the past. (I found the story online as a PDF.) Nor does the famous 1990 film *Total Recall* starring Arnold Schwartzenegger.
- I also found a full copy of Carrâ??s classic *What is History* online, but without page numbers.
- The statement by Matthias is pretty woolly. What does â??itâ?• refer to? If itâ??s the past that blinds us into believing in the past then to do this the past must exist. If itâ??s the mind that blinds us into believing the past exists then I think thatâ??s George Berkeleyâ??s subjective idealism. â??Itâ?• in the statement is a floating indexical occurring 3 times, for which you could substitute â??pastâ?• and â??mindâ?• in 8 ways (2 to the power of 3) I think.
- For an amusing take on the teaching of art history read Brian Sewellâ??s article in the THE.
- For an excellent account of Dickâ??s writing related to architecture see Fortin, David T. 2011. *Architecture and Science Fiction Film: Philip K Dick and the Spectacle of Home*. London: Ashgate
- Also see blog posts tagged Memory.

Category

1. Film and media

Tags

1. history
2. time
3. total recall

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