**History's Theatre**

*Greg Dening*

**On Producing Effects**   
Theatre is a fearsome thing for fundamentalists of every sort. For those who believe that the truth is on the surface of things, there is no comfort in having to work for it. To discover, too, that love and hate, good and bad, and all of living can be represented, is to set the mind wondering whether all the world is a stage. Worse, to turn oneself into something else by acting, raises the question what else do we have in our power to transform.

I think that we never know the truth by being told it. We have to experience it in some way. That is the abiding grace of history. It is the theatre in which we experience truth. But we have to work at it, because the truth is always clothed in some way by story. History is always parable to the truth. The truth is always there but in some other form than we might expect. The truth is there with the same qualities with which we experience it in everyday life -- sometimes uncertainly, sometimes contradictorily, sometimes clouded by the forces that drive us to it, sometimes so clearly that it blinds us to anything else.

Of course, it is only the romantic and the totalitarian who believes that the theatre of their histories drives a reader to the one truth and the one meaning they want to display. Reading and interpreting is much more roguish. Some years ago, the Commonwealth Government tired to educate the Australian public to the dangers of AIDS by creating some theatre in a television clip. Death, the Grim Reaper, was shown as a figure playing ten-pin blowling. The bowling pins were men, women and children. They bounced and clattered away randomly as Death scored. There was some alarm express at the time at the brutal starkness of the advertisement. Many felt it was too shocking. It was overkill, some said. Then we learned in the weeks that followed that the chief effect of the advertisement was a sharp drop in the membership of ten-pin bowling clubs.

It is a depressing story for anyone who thinks that writing history is theatre. How does one produce the effects one wants in one's stories? Presumably, if one knew that, one could rule the world or at least sell a lot of something. Maybe the answer is that one can never be sure of producing the effects one wants. Maybe Roland Barthes was correct: the reader is the true writer of the text. Maybe a history writer should think of him or herself as a composer. That way it is the reader who is the performer and the thing performed, the history I write, is the score for all sorts of flights of the imagination. I think I can settle for that. A book on a shelf has a sort of immortality. And if I could use my experience as a reader to buoy my spirits as a writer, I know that the text of even the most forgotten book can make the imagination soar...

'Effects' is a word of the theatre and representation. We meet it nowadays in such phrases as 'effects microphone', 'special effects', the one catching and controlling the noise of crowds, the crunch of bodies, the crack of bat on ball, to give a sense of presence and immediacy; the other exploiting the blinkered view of camera or stage to create the illusions of realism. There is more than a two-hundred-year history to its changing use in criticism as thinkers from Denis Diderot to Richard Wagner puzzled with the problem of how the manipulation of signs could be conventional and real at the same time. But the problem is not just an aesthetic one. Everywhere--where a missionary friar whispers over bread and wine that they are body and blood, where an observer provides an 'illustration' for an ethnography, where a voyaging captain makes an example by a bombardment--everywhere where there are signs made, there is the possibility and the likelihood that the sign-maker and the sign-seer will have a manipulative strategy to effect in someone else some meaning.

Every narrator has to produce effects as well. But in an age in which 'reality effects' suffuse historical paradigms, the judgement that 'he/she writes well' can be the ultimate put-down. The turgid command respect for seeming to be scholarly. Being 'only an ordinary historian' is a coy boast. Ever since the 'enlightened' discovered perspective, being the spectator has allowed one to bumble words for the sake of appearing to be honest. Plain-speaking is seen to be untheatrical, even if it is theatre of another sort. Indeed, being literary when one is meant to be something else is seen as somewhat feminine. Hegemony, for preferences, is dull and male.

Renato Rosaldo [1](http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-July-1996/dening.html#1) has often urged us to reflect on the fullness of living that historians ordinarily miss--and ethnographers only sometimes catch. In particular he has reflected on the paradox that elements of the highest human import in living are unlikely to have cultural elaboration, unlikely to be in a 'forest of symbols'. Catch the words of some narrator telling the story of some hunt, for example, and they are found to be bland, trite and without apparent depth. (We only have to remember how nearly unintelligible the transcripts of the 'Nixon Tapes' were to know how silence, presence, gesture and tone filled the Oval Office.) Framed in a significant landscape, and when the biographies of teller and listener are bound together in rich understanding of telegraphic forms, the words catch and narrate the 'force' of human emotions. The 'force' is there in living and needs to be represented. We should add 'force', Rosaldo says, to those other words of our analytic expectancies--thick description, multivocality, polysemy, richness and texture.

The 'force' is there to be represented in our history-making, I would argue. But more than that, to produce effects in our narration, our history-making itself must have 'force'. I wish I could now describe how the 'force' can be made to be present in our writing. I offer a few thoughts instead. They are made on the presumption that comes from Nietzsche in his reflection on the Birth of Tragedy. The effects one produces in one's history-making should be powerful enough to outlast the experience of reading our histories and in some way change our audience.

Style, suggested Peter Gay, is not the dress of thought, but part of its essence [2](http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-July-1996/dening.html#2). It is a happy thought, but not nearly liberating enough. Style itself can be binding and blinding. We have to add what Roland Barthes said (and excuse his genderisation): 'The writer--and in this respect he stands alone, apart from, and in opposition to all speakers and mere practitioners of writing--is he who refuses to let the obligations of his language speak for him, who knows and is acutely conscious of the deficiencies of his idiom, and who imagines, untopically, a total language in which nothing is obligatory'[3](http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-July-1996/dening.html#3). And something more, this time Stanley Fish: 'The meaning of an utterance is its experience--all of it' [4](http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-July-1996/dening.html#4). Rosaldo's Ilongot hunters' stories stand bland and trivial when we transcribe them. We cannot experience them as utterances.

But we for our part begin our history-making on an empty piece of paper. Our utterance is an inscription. To produce our effects, to make our utterance an experience we have to discover ways to make the silences present. The silences must be there, not as emptiness, but, in Paul Valéry's words, 'the active presence of absent things'.

The effect most worth producing for a writer, it seems to me, is a creative reader. We have to stir the exegete, make the critic, join them to a conversation. What tricks do we have for that? Aphorisms? Riddles? Perspectives of Incongruity? Irony? Metaphor? All of those. Our readers need to be rid of their fear of flying. They will not easily do that if they catch ours. We need to perform our texts. We need to perform in our texts

Academic history has lost its moral force because it has been subverted by its own reality effects and has lost its sense of theatre. Academic history has come to believe that accuracy is truth and that to represent the past accurately somehow clones the past. There are very few academic historians who do not know what E.H.Carr meant when he wrote: 'the belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretations of the historians is a preposterous fallacy, but one which is very hard to eradicate'[5](http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-July-1996/dening.html#5). But there are also very few academic historians who write history as if what he said were true. Reflective history ensures that the interpreting is discernible in the interpretation. In an age which has experienced Picasso, Stravinsky, Mickey Mouse and Dale Carnegie, a sense of the multivalency of things is an expected realism. In an age that has experienced horror beyond measure from the perversions of true believers, we are well educated to the interpretation of signs. A history that is seen to believe its own fictions is a fraud and a bore. It loses moral force on both scores.

The brilliance of theatre is that it represents experience and offers us the conventionalities by which the representation can be interpreted. We do not enter a theatre as if it were a Time Machine in which past experience is repeated. Henry Kissinger said of the tape-recording Richard Nixon had made in his Oval Office for the sake of true history: "That's not history. Eight years of tapes takes eight years to listen to". No! Even the most accurate replication is not representation. The energy expended in replication squeezes out everything else. Ultimately such replication is the stultifying nostalgia of re-enactments and living museums. Experience represented in the theatre is dressed with the same particularities of everyday experience and has the larger-than-itself quality of everyday experience, but is transformed by being selected and shaped for interpretation. It does not replicate reality. It redresses reality. Theatricality in history-making will do the same.

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**Notes and references**

1. Rosaldo, Renato, "Ilongot Hunting as Story and Experience" in Victor W Turner and Edward M Bruner, *The Anthropology of Experience,* University of Illinois Press, 1986.

2. Gay, Peter, *Style in History,* Jonathan Cape, 1975.

3. Quoted in Lionel Grossman, "History as Literature. Reproduction or signification" in Robert F Canary and Henry Kozicki (eds) the *Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding,* University of Wisconsin Press, 1978, p. 37.

4.. Quoted in Tracy Strong "Dramaturgical Discourse and Political Enactments. Towards an Artistic Foundation for Political Space" in Richard Harvey Brown and Stanford M Lyman, *Structure Consciousness and History,* Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 247.

5. Carr, E H, *What is History?,* Penguin, 1961.