Historians and narrative: searching for a representation mode

Narrative has been the major and almost unquestionable form of historical representation until the first half of the XX Century. Peter Burke (1991) mentions that in the age of the Enlightenment, authors like Voltaire and the Scottish social theorist John Millar were already challenging historical narrative. Millar wrote of the “surface of events which engages the attention of the vulgar historian” (Millar as quoted by Burke, 1991). However, it was around the 1920s, when various authors raised several issues, which would question the scientific value of historical narrative. One of the main reasons was the influence of Marx’s ideology and the social science methodology among historians, which determined a criticism of their scientific and social role. At the center of that criticism was the historical narrative focus on the individuals. The current belief determined a diversion towards the analysis of societies and their structure. Moreover, those historians defended that “scientific history could be achieved which in time produce generalized laws to explain historical change”. If until then the what and how questions were the main concerns of historical narratives, the shift should be towards the why historical questions. (Stone, 1979)

Those new experiments towards a scientific history were not restricted to the content of historical representation. The shifts in historians’ methodology raised an important debate on historical representation, namely traditional narrative. The unparalleled interdisciplinary collaboration fomented an analytic representation very different from the descriptive narratives used by historians until then. Furthermore, historians were becoming used to quantitative data in their research. Their representation no longer fitted in the storytelling method. Therefore, the representation alternatives came from those related disciplines and oriented the critique of that group, the
structural historians, towards traditional narrative.

Narrative and structural historians differ in many issues while representing the same historical moment. The formers tend to base their historical explanation on individual character and intention as opposed to the latter's focus on the existing society's structure such as economy, politics, demography and so on.

Narrative champions construct their version on the assumption that individual historical agents are more significant than structural aspects to explain an historical event. Therefore, a descriptive narrative is more suitable for their historical representation. Their description is usually set up in a chronological order where events and personal decisions are linked together. Those historians were criticized for personifying collective entities such as Government and Church and oversimplifying historical events, elaborating a representation which could not be scientifically verified. Besides that and because of that, their rivals argued that from the same set of primary documents, historians could elaborate opposing and still valid versions.

Although structural historians do not exclude narratives in their historical representation, they avoid their descriptive beginning-middle-end structure. They assert that there should be a distinction between popular and academic history. According to them, academic historians should avoid telling stories and concentrate on the analysis of problems and structures (Burke, 1991). Some of the criticisms towards structural historians concern their rigid, reductionist and determinist attitudes. Diminishing the importance of historical characters, reduces their individuality and suggests that any person in that situation would take the same decision. The analysis abstraction also scales down the sense of flow of time in their representation.

The debate on modern narrative

Peter Burke wrote that the debate should not be "concerned with the question, whether or not to write narrative, but with the problem of what kind of narrative to write" (Burke, 1991). Burke presented several literary experiments, which challenged the notion of narrator or chronological sequence and responded to many historical narrative shortcomings.

According to him, the film historian Siegfried Kracauer "seems to have been the first to declare that modern fiction, more especially the 'decomposition of temporal continuity' in Joyce, Proust and Virginia Woolf, offers a challenge and an opportunity to historical narrators". Hayden White got more recognition than Kracauer when he suggested that historians should abandon nineteen-century's literary realism and pay attention to the "literary insights of its own age (including a sense of discontinuity between events in the outside world and their representation in narrative form)" (White, 1966; Burke, 1991).

Burke identified three major problems of historical narratives in which literary experiments could offer alternative solutions. The first one is the representation of conflicts such as civil wars, which has very distinct versions. He demonstrated surprise that historians don't apply novelist techniques such as telling the story from different points of view to overcome those problems. History is written, most of the times, in the winners' version. Some literary experiments offer powerful devices to present to the readers both sides of the conflict and allow them opportunity for a more thorough interpretation. He exemplifies with the literary works by Aldous Huxley, William Faulkner and Lawrence Durrell. While he was finishing his essay, as he noted, Richard Price published the book "Alabi's World" on Surinam's eighteen-century history. His study presents four different voices: the black slaves, the Dutch administrators, the Moravian missionaries and the
author himself. In this acclaimed work, Price exhibited the differences between opposing versions by the antagonistic agents and also in time through his own voice and the historical agents (Price, 1990; Burke, 1991).

The second problem refers to narrative competence in representing the truth. According to Burke more and more historians are realizing that they present just a “particular view of what actually happened” (Burke, 1991). A major problem is that, typically, history books present that particular view as the representation of past reality. Authors don’t communicate to the readers the awareness that their work is just one version of the facts. Traditional narrative is not very adequate for this task. Price’s book, again, presents a successful effort to overcome this problem with his voice opposed to the three other selected agents. Another alternative, presented by Burke, is fiction’s first-person narrator.

The third issue raised by Burke addresses the dispute between narrative and structural historians. According to him, none of the two groups was able to offer an historical representation alternative without bringing about other shortcomings. Thus, he proposes a synthesis between their most valuable features. The result would be a thick description or thick narrative. That term was coined by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), the author of the classic account on cock fighting in Bali. A description, or narrative, is thick when it is embedded with a noteworthy analytical interpretation not only of the facts described but also of the overall structure in which they are circumscribed. Burke suggests that those structure analyses could act as brakes, or accelerators, between the events on narratives. He cites Tolstoy’s “War and Peace” and Shimazaki Toson’s “Before the Dawn” as important novels which exemplify that attitude. He adds that historians can learn from novelists some of their techniques but it is not an easy move for them to solve their literary problems. “Since historians are not free to invent their characters or even the words and thoughts of their characters, they are unlikely to be able to condense the problems of an epoch into a story about a family, as novelists have often done” (Burke, 1991).

The most adopted solutions by historians who are exploring in this direction is the micronarrative. It was adopted by some of the former structural narrative champions and is becoming fashionable. Micronarratives are stories about ordinary people and their settings used as a “means of illuminating structures” (Burke, 1991). Burke presents several examples. Among them, he cites Natalie Davis’s version of a sixteenth-century’s farmer, on his way back home in the south of France, after many years away, found his place occupied by another man who claimed to be the farmer himself. The story is used to present the values of society in that place and time such as the status of French rural women and current relations between husband and wife or parents and children. He quotes the author, whose goal was that of “embedding this story in the values and habits of sixteenth-century French village life and law, to use them to help understand central elements in the story and to use the story to comment back on them” (Davis, 1983; Burke, 1991). Burke accepts that micronarratives, as powerful alternatives to historians, present some difficulties in linking microhistory to macrohistory or local details and general trends.

In Burke’s essay, he diagnoses several limitations on historical representations. Those limitations were evidenced in the debate between narrative and structural historians. They also demonstrate historians’ conservative approach to their most important vehicle that provides access to their research. One of the symptoms of historian’s conservative attitude is that a great part of the discussion concerning the debate on historical narrative is carried out by philosophers, with little
participation of historians. Burke proposes directions that they could take in a search for new forms of narrative, which could overcome some of those problems. He distinguishes several experiments in twentieth-century literature and cinema. Those experiments are seldom acknowledged by historians and could benefit their interpretation of past reality.

Although most devices recognized by Burke in cinema come from literary experiments, they are clearly exhibited in some prominent films. Besides Kracauer’s contribution mentioned above, Natalie Davis’s “The Return of Martin Guerre” was launched almost at the same time as the homonymous film in which she was historical consultant (Vigne, 1982; Davis, 1983). Another remarkable film is Akira Kurosawa’s “Rashomon” [FIGURE 01] (Kurosawa, 1950). In his film, Kurosawa constructed a simple story of a samurai found dead and his wife raped, within a very creative structure. The film has four different versions – like some historians’ experiments described above – presented in flashbacks: the bandit, the main suspect, assumed that he killed the samurai after a sword dispute but affirmed he had consensual sex with his wife; the raped woman confirmed the rape and suggested she was the murderer; the dead man’s version, told through a medium, ratified the rape and declared a suicide; and the only witness presented elements of the other three versions without any conclusion.

Kurosawa didn’t intend to offer a definite version but rather conclude the impossibility of knowing what really happened. Not even those who were participants in the event could elaborate similar versions. Once, when the film producers were not understanding the script, Kurosawa explained that “[h]uman beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing. This script portrays such human beings – the kind who cannot survive with lies to make them feel they are better people than they really are. It even shows this sinful need for flattering falsehood going beyond the grave – even the character who dies cannot give up when he speaks to the living through a medium. Egoism is a sin the human being carries with him from the birth; it is the most difficult to redeem. This film is like a strange picture scroll that is unrolled and displayed by the ego”. (Kurosawa, 2002)

RIO-H

RIO-H was conceived as a web-based alternative for the presentation of a place’s history. It rests on a database of historical documents related to specific places within the city of Rio de Janeiro.
Janeiro, in Brazil. Those documents are searched from 3D model's images of different periods in the city's history [FIGURE 02]. Each database entry can be linked up to five different places in the city model, five different historical periods and five keywords for searching the information. The database entries are classified in different categories such as photographs, newspaper's articles, paintings, fiction books, official documents and videos. Therefore, the readers should start the documents' searching from historical places in the 3D models' images representing the city. The readers are able to search documents which present different versions or aspects of a place's history. Thus, they should be able to elaborate their own historical narrative from the spaces within a city.

3D historical models
The 3D models were elaborated in the Laboratory of Urban Analysis and Digital Representation (LAURD-PROURB) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. They render historical periods in the city, represented in cuts selected from available antique maps or aerial photographs. The models were constructed from the 3D model of the existing city with the support of historical graphic information. The current city model is represented by the existing situation of the city in the year 2000. Thus, each historical model was elaborated backwards based on previous maps and in the remaining constructions and streets, deconstructing the changes done over the years until 2000. In order to facilitate their construction, every model was structured in three main parts: the natural landscape, with the topography and the shoreline; the street network; and the main buildings.

The representation of the landscape is critical for this project due to the history and the characteristics of the city. The city growth was always driven by the relationship with the natural landscape. Sometimes this relationship required a defensive or effortful attitude and others the natural assets supported urban enterprises. Thus mountains and waterfront were several times changed over the history to conform to major urban changes. Infills and hill dismantles are not uncommon in Rio's urban evolution. Besides that, the city dwellers always used the waterfront and the mountain as a guiding resources or references for places. Until today, the city is more known for its natural configuration than for the built environment. The city landmarks built by its inhabitants are often exhibited near the natural landscape. Therefore, even requiring complex modeling solutions, the topography was constructed with fairly rich details. The topography was always the most problematic part of the model. It required a lot of workstation's disk and memory to manage the models and complex procedures to place streets or buildings on it.

Those historical models of the city were not constructed to be realistic representations of the city of Rio. Actually it is important to emphasize their abstractionism. Each model should be accessed as a reduction of an historical city fragment. Therefore, its role as a spatial representation is mainly to locate the “historical image” – or “dialectic images”, as Walter Benjamin stated (1999) – elaborated by the readers in the space of the city they already know. The simplicity of the model, based on a digital Cartesian system, is necessary to bring about the great complexity of
city history.

The organization of historical urban 3D models poses additional important issues. It's much easier to represent an existing situation than past moments of the city, which are never completed documented. Modeling an "incomplete" and more abstract city can overcome lack of information problems and also facilitates readers to construct their own images of that period. That could be done with the support of other historical documents and their knowledge of that existing space in the city. Therefore, 3D models have an important role to locate within the city past events and associate past and present spaces.

**Historical database of Rio de Janeiro**

The database for Rio de Janeiro's historical documents was elaborated in order to organize the historical data related to Rio and its connection with the spaces within the city. The database of historical information linked to the city space is composed by a great diversity of file types. It is constituted by primary documents such as letters, photographs, maps, official documents and also other sources like journal articles, historians' texts and even novels. It was designed as regular databases that keep records of historical archives. In addition to the regular information such as authorship, type of media or file quality, the database hosts the information which connects each entry to the 3D models. The entry should be linked to one or more historical 3D models and to areas within those models. Thus, for each entry the database offers 5 possibilities to relate to one of the eight preliminary 3D historical models (1600, 1650, 1713, 1750, 1808, 1850, 1910 and 1928); 5 possibilities of areas within the model, which could be buildings, squares, streets or small urban spaces; and 5 subject keywords, for conducting the historical search engine.

At this preliminary stage of the investigation, historians have not carried out the research for historical data yet. The information gathered about few buildings and included in the database aimed mainly to verify this investigation's assumptions. It was confirmed that a critical phase of the data filling process is the keywords’ selection for each entry. The keywords systemize the list of files related to a building, assembling them by different subjects and themes. Thus they facilitate and direct the readers to the files they want to retrieve. The selection of the keywords could conduct a search towards different ways to view the city history. The database should not be seen as a neutral tool that automatically displays historical data to any one that would access it. Those responsible for planning and developing it should take the responsibility to clearly define their main objectives and how the information would be available through the places and keywords.

**The web-based tool: RIO-H**

RIO-H is a web-based system structured by a Macromedia Flash movie file connected to a Microsoft Access database using ASP (Active Server Pages) to query the database and relay information back and forth. The Flash movie file is the front end, which presents the dynamic content to the readers. It was chosen because it is almost a standard to most web users and offers powerful tools to manipulate graphics, animation and sound, and the ability to interface with ASP pages.

The RIO-H's Microsoft Access database is hidden to the readers who navigate through the 3D renderings of the historical models. The first decisions when accessing the information on the system are done through the images. First choosing the date of the historical model and, once the model is loaded, one building or street should be selected in the 3D model, which would relate to an ASP page to connect to the database. Therefore, the areas of the city, selected in the 3D models,
relate to a first query to the database.

Once the area is selected, the database returns every keyword associated with that area in that particular historical model (Place + Time). The readers can choose one keyword or, if they want a more focused result, two keywords. The result is a list of every entry in the database that have in their fields that historical 3D model (Time), that area (Place), and one or two keywords (Subject) depending on the reader’s choice. The following result is another list of files from different sources [FIGURE 03]. The files are grouped in nine different categories of source types associated with their correspondent buttons. If the reader chooses to press one of the buttons, the system would list only the source type’s files selected. Thus, the readers follow this order in the process of searching the files: Time, Place, Subject and Source Type. The last one is not mandatory and is a way to refine their searches. One possibility to identify the file’s source is to move the mouse over the file title in the list. The button associated to its source type category will change to its negative. From the list of files, the readers choose those they want to retrieve, elaborating their own image of that space in the past, from the downloaded documents [FIGURE 04].

Besides the images from the historical models, RIO-H offers the possibility to switch the historical model image to the rendering of the current model, representing the city in the year 2000. That switch can be done anytime during the navigation if the mouse passes over the “2000” sign. That is an important feature of the system to allow the readers to recognize the places in the past while they relate them to the present. Therefore, the readers are always aware of the city they know and they have experienced. They should relate that remembrance to the files they read in order to produce their image of the past city.

One of the aims of the experiment is to use spatial information to bond historical fragments in a coherent narrative and also to strengthen historical continuity to the presentness of each reader. Space becomes more important and less abstract than time. Therefore, historical narrative can be created in different formats facilitating a clear understanding of the city past and, furthermore, of the readers’ present and future.
An alternative for a city’s history

Peter Burke didn’t consider electronic documents when he argued about modern narratives and literary experiments in his essay “History of events and the revival of narrative” (1991). Web-based documents and hypermedia offer a great opportunity to present and distribute historical research but historians have seldom explored those techniques. Books are always regarded as the primary vehicle for historical researches and images have played a secondary role even for most of the investigations on urban or architectural history. RIO-H aims to present an alternative for this tendency. It illustrates that historians could evaluate electronic narratives as tools to overcome some of traditional narratives difficulties.

The issue of different points of view in the representation of the same event is addressed by RIO-H. When different documents of similar subjects are confronted in the system, the reader is aware that they have different origins and authors. Many times they have conflicting versions. Those different versions may be unbalanced since the ‘elite’ version is better documented than others. However, this device creates an opportunity to place together information that is spread across different locations and from different authors who have different perspectives of the same event.

Besides the issue of different perspectives for an historical event, several others related to the historian’s narrative are raised by RIO-H. It is important to mention some of them in this work, such as the existence of much historical evidence that is not considered by the historian, the impossibility of neutrality in a historian’s representation, the relation between past history and present, or the use of images in their publications.

Researchers evaluate historical events through limited evidence to which they have access. Historians usually include in their publications inferences that fill in gaps that are not registered in their sources. Analogous to the different versions mentioned above, historians often fail to make readers aware of those inferences or the limitations of their sources. An important point is that affording different document versions for the readers, as in RIO-H, implies that there may have innumerable others which are not included in that vehicle and many more which are lost forever.

Historians always struggle to choose on which documents they will base their work and the others, which they will disregard. This choice and several others that emerge during their research and particularly their representation, confirm the active participation of historians. RIO-H can be seen as a collection of historical documents available through an electronic database. Thus, the authors of this system would have a somewhat neutral position. However, they also have taken several choices when they decided which documents to be included and, particularly, when they classified those documents. Choosing keywords, for example, defines the readers’ route to access the sources and direct their navigation through the system. Therefore, the construction of the “readers’ narrative” will depend much on the decision of RIO-H’s authors.

Historical publications rarely utilize 3D city models in their works. Their use is critical in RIO-H and the choice to include renderings from those models as a point of departure to search information has several reasons and implications. As already mentioned, the renderings generated by the models are simple and do not intend to be photorealistic. They may resemble perspective maps developed for tourists with only the city landmarks. The only complete model, with every building, is the one which represents the city in the year 2000. The previous ones are simpler because their main purpose is to locate the readers within the past urban fabric and to facilitate the relationship between the searched area in the
past and the current city. The renderings from the 3D models of the past should not attempt to convey the complexity of reality in that moment because they could never reproduce it. The reader should elaborate their own images of that period with various degrees of complexity depending on their previous experience with that space and how they relate the searched documents to the city space they know. When the 3D renderings support the location of the historical information in the city, they contextualize it and help to clarify a puzzling set of relationships from past society. Therefore, the space organizes the historical information, taking for granted its complexity but trying to display it in an organized form. This procedure should be a way to facilitate the creation of a sense of place in readers who already have some relation to that space.

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