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► **To cite this version:**

Rodrigo Díaz Maldonado. Historical Experience as a Mode of Comprehension. Journal of the History of Philosophy, 2019, 13 (1), pp.86-106. 10.1163/18722636-12341352 . hal-02545246

**HAL Id: hal-02545246**

**<https://amu.hal.science/hal-02545246>**

Submitted on 6 Apr 2022

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# Historical experience as a mode of comprehension\*

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## Abstract

In the past two and a half decades, Frank Ankersmit has developed a complex notion of historical experience. Despite its many virtues it has at least one major difficulty: it implies a sharp separation between experience and language. This essay aims to bridge this gap, while preserving the positive aspects of Ankersmit's theory. To do this, I will first present the ontological and epistemological implications of Ankersmit's notion of historical experience. Next, I will present my objections to his idea. Finally, I will propose two modifications to his notion of historical experience: first, in the epistemological sense by considering historical experience as a form of Louis Mink's configurational comprehension and, second, in the ontological sense by relating historical experience with the *vitalist* ontology of José Ortega y Gasset.

## Keywords

Historical experience, configurational comprehension, Frank Ankersmit, John Dewey, Louis Mink, José Ortega y Gasset.

## 1 Introduction

The notion of historical experience has become an important subject in the fields of historiography and philosophy of history. In historiography the concept is related to a broad range of intellectual movements during the last 30 or 40 years, from the *histoire des mentalités* and cultural history, to women's history and the latest developments in the study of memory and historical trauma.<sup>1</sup> In philosophy of history, the notion of experience has become prominent in the last 20 years, though not as a subject in itself, but as a subsidiary problem of historical epistemology. The main reason for this seems to be that most philosophers of history have regarded the notion of historical experience as an oxymoron: experience is limited to things that are actually present, and since the past is by definition not longer present it is impossible to have experience of it. Recently, however, authors such as Martin Jay, Joan Scott, Hayden White, Hans Gumbrecht and Eelco Runia, have considered the problem of experience in relation to

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\* This article would have been impossible without Rik Peters' support. To him it is dedicated.

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the development of historiography and its relation to experience in the last decades see: Peter Burke (editor), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2nd ed., 2001); Bernard Lepetit (direction), *Les formes de l'expérience. Une autre histoire sociale* (Paris, Éditions Albin Michel, 2nd ed., 2013).

historical writing from perspectives which lie outside epistemology.<sup>2</sup> With regard to these and other authors the recent work of Frank Ankersmit keeps a position of its own because he explicitly seeks to develop a philosophical understanding of the nature of experience and its relationship to historiography.

Ankersmit starting point is the question: "What makes us aware of the past at all?"<sup>3</sup> His response to this question is a highly elaborated and complex notion of historical experience by which he seeks to prove that it is possible to have a direct and immediate contact with the past in the sense that it is prior to any use of language or other forms of representation. Viewed from the perspective of most practicing historians, this theory can at best state an interesting theoretical problem, but without having any practical consequences. The historians' concerns are different, and they are right when they think that having awareness of the past, no matter how, is more than enough to justify historical practice. But from the point of view of the philosophy of history Ankersmit's question is evidently a very important one because it explicitly addresses the question why the past can be an object of thought at all. Moreover, and in contrast to the dominant trend in philosophy of history in the past four decades, Ankersmit's answer moves away from language into *noumenal* reality. It is because of this move that his ideas on experience have become so controversial among philosophers of history. And this is why in the past fifteen years many arguments have been raised against Ankersmit's notion of historical experience. Some critics regard it as a clear philosophical mistake, while others see it as an example of sheer mysticism.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in the view of many of his critics Ankersmit's theory of historical experience is completely at odds with his former and better-known ideas on narrative and representation.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I will not discuss these criticisms. In my opinion they are mostly based on an *a priori* rejection of the possibility of historical experience. In contrast to most commentators, I basically agree with Ankersmit about the role of historical experience in modelling our historical consciousness and social identity. Furthermore,

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<sup>2</sup> There is a vast literature on the concept of experience, especially from the philosophical perspective. However, in the field of the philosophy and theory of history the list shortens considerably. Some important examples from different perspectives are: Hans Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Marin Jay, *Songs of Experience. Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Eelco Runia, "Presence", *History and Theory* 45 (February 2006); Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience" *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Summer 1991); Hayden White, *The practical past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014) .

<sup>3</sup> Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005), 481, xv.

<sup>4</sup> See especially: C. Behan McCullagh, "Bias in Historical Description, Interpretation, and Explanation", *History and Theory* 39, n.º 1 (2000), 39-66; Michel S. Roth, *Memory, Trauma and History: Essays on Living with the Past* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2012) 293, especially chapter 10 "Ebb Tide: Frank Ankersmit"; Paul A. Roth, "Whistling History: Ankersmit's Neo-Tractarian Theory of Historical Representation", paper presented at the INTH Inaugural Conference, Ghent, July 2013 (full draft available in [http://www.inth.ugent.be/?page\\_id=3912](http://www.inth.ugent.be/?page_id=3912)); Peter P. Icke, *Frank Ankersmit's lost historical cause: a journey from language to experience* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> The best exposition I know of Ankersmit's trajectory, and perhaps the most balanced criticism of his ideas is: E. Domanska. "Frank Ankersmit: From narrative to experience", *Rethinking History* 13:2 (2009), 175-195.

unlike most commentators, I believe that Ankersmit's concern about experience is a logical development of his previous philosophy, and constitutes a sound attempt to establish a new philosophy of history.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, I think that Ankersmit's analysis of historical experience, especially at the level of the individual, produces more problems than those it solves. My most important objection is that Ankersmit's theory of experience generates an unbridgeable gap between experience and representation.<sup>7</sup> The main aim of this paper is, therefore, to modify the theory of historical experience in order to close, or at least reduce, the gap between experience and representation, while preserving the major philosophical tenets of Ankersmit's theory. In my view, this goal can be achieved, firstly, by considering historical experience as a form of *configurational* comprehension as defined by Louis O. Mink; and, secondly, by relating its ontological implications to the *vitalism* of José Ortega y Gasset. But before developing those notions, I will first present Ankersmit's main arguments as faithfully as possible.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 The place of experience

According to Martin Jay there have been two main accounts of experience in relation to historical knowledge.<sup>9</sup> First, there was the life experience of people in the past, so that the main task of historians is to recreate or represent that experience through historical research and discourse. This notion led to contemporary historical practices such as the *histoire des mentalités*. Secondly, experience was conceived as something that occurs in our minds when we are thinking historically. This notion of historical experience is related to theory of history or epistemology. In contrast to Jay's, however, Ankersmit has neither of these senses in mind because in his view historical experience is primarily the moment when a society or an individuals enter in contact with their past. According to Ankersmit, this contact occurs when, in the occasion of an extraordinary event, a gap is generated between past and present. Without this occurrence past and present would stay unified. It is therefore only *after* the gap has been opened that we become aware of

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<sup>6</sup> In the Introduction of *Sublime Historical Experience*, Ankersmit states that he is trying to overcome what has been said in the last 40 years about historical truth and historical representation (or narrative). His interest on experience is not, however, a recantation of his previous work, but the exploration of a new problem which logically precedes the problems of truth and representation.

<sup>7</sup> An interesting attempt to close this gap has been made recently by Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, who introduces the notion of expression as the bridge between non-linguistic historical experiences and historical representations. Although I sympathise with most of Simon's ideas, I think that he does not fully achieve his goal because he keeps Ankersmit's notion of a pure historical experience intact. See: Zoltán Boldizsár Simon "The expression of historical experience", *History and Theory*, 54 (2015), 178-194.

<sup>8</sup> My analysis of Ankersmit's ideas is mostly based on the Spanish version of his *Sublime Historical Experience*: Frank Ankersmit, *La Experiencia histórica sublime* (México, Universidad Iberoamericana, 2010), because it is the only available translation of the second and revised edition, which was originally written in Dutch. However, almost all the quotes were taken from the first edition: F. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience. Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 216-260.

the past and it becomes a potential object for historical research.<sup>10</sup>

To clarify Ankersmit's position we may compare it briefly with that of Reinhart Koselleck. Both authors start from the same point, but they come to substantially different conclusions. Like Ankersmit, Koselleck thinks that experience is a necessary ingredient for any historical representation.<sup>11</sup> In his view, all historiography springs from experience and deals with it, as its subject matter, directly or indirectly. From this perspective, the process by which historians in the past translated experience into narrative, constitutes the methodological heritage of history as a discipline. For this reason Koselleck pays so much attention to the history of historiography which he explores very thoughtfully. These explorations clearly reveal that Koselleck is primarily interested in the transformation of experience into narrative representations, and not in experience itself. For his part, Ankersmit agrees with Koselleck about the importance of experience for representation, and this agreement is the ground for his theory of the great social convulsions as explanations for changes in historical consciousness.<sup>12</sup> But, in contrast to Koselleck, his philosophical interest focuses on experience *before* it has been transformed into historiography. In other words, unlike Koselleck who is interested in the shape of experience once transformed in representation, Ankersmit is primarily interested in the precise moment when we become aware of the past, that is, in what happens *before* any representation has been made. In this primordial moment, Ankersmit argues, historical experience creates the past by differentiating it from an otherwise a-temporal present.

According to Ankersmit, philosophers of history have not been able to recognise this role of experience because their transcendentalism (present, in his estimation, in almost all of our philosophical traditions) always introduces something (*i. e.* language, epistemology, symbolic systems, and so on) between the past and ourselves. Seen from this perspective, Ankersmit's main aim is to restore a notion of an authentic contact with the past, or in his own words, the idea of an experience of the past in its "quasi-noumenal nakedness".<sup>13</sup> The big problem is, however, whether such immediate experience of the past is possible. To understand how Ankersmit solves this problem I will briefly examine the ontological and epistemological foundations of his theory.

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<sup>10</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 102. The many implication of this idea are fully developed in chapter 8, 317-368.

<sup>11</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, 'Erfahrungswandel und Methodenwechsel', in Koselleck *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000, pp. 27-78. For this article I consulted the Spanish translation: R. Koselleck, 'Cambio de experiencia y cambio de método. Un apunte histórico-antropológico' in *Los estratos del tiempo: estudios sobre la historia*, Barcelona-Buenos Aires-México, Ediciones Paidós, 2001, pp. 43-92.

<sup>12</sup> This idea appears repeatedly in Ankersmit's works. See: F. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), chapter 7; Marcin Moskalewicz, "Sublime experience and politics: Interview with Professor Frank Ankersmit", *Rethinking History*, 11:2, (2007), 251-274; Ankersmit, "Invitation to historians" *Rethinking History*, 7:3 (2003) 413-437; Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), chapter 9.

<sup>13</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 125.

### 3 The ontological problem

As usual, Ankersmit is very clear about the position of his opponents. In this case, the most prominent one is constructivism, a foe not because of its methodological or epistemological theses, but for its ontological implications, which are deeply hostile to the idea of a direct contact with the past. In the opinion of constructivists, we cannot have experience of the past for one basic reason: the past, by definition, no longer exists. We can only experience things that are present to us, here and now. From this point of view, history can only be an intellectual construction based upon present evidence. An outstanding spokesman of this position is Michael Oakeshott, who maintains that history is not made by the deeds of people in the past but constructed by the understanding activity of the historian in the present.<sup>14</sup> For Oakeshott, as well as for most British idealists, experience is neither the contact with external reality, nor the perception of some kind of distance that separates past from present. In the words of David Boucher, for thinkers like Oakeshott "experience proper is thought: therefore all experience is a world of ideas, or imaginings."<sup>15</sup> From the constructivist perspective, therefore, "historical experience" is equal to "historical thinking". Obviously, this equation presupposes the existence of a subject which performs the thinking activity. It is this presupposition Ankersmit attacks as a relapse into transcendentalism resulting in a dissolution of the experienced object into the subject. On this basis, he rejects all constructivist theses with regard to experience, no matter how useful they may be to explain other aspects of historical practice.<sup>16</sup>

In order to make sense of historical experience without transcendentalism, Ankersmit embraces a different ontology.<sup>17</sup> His position is consciously indebted to the

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<sup>14</sup> "What we must now observe is that 'the past' is a construction we make for ourselves out of the events which take place before our eyes. Just as the 'future' appears when we understand the present events as evidence for what is about to happen, so what we call 'the past' appears when we understand current happenings as evidence for what has already happened. In short [...] 'the past' is a consequence of understanding the present world in a particular manner." Michel Oakeshott, "The Activity of Being an Historian" in M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and other essays* (New York: Basic Book Publishing Co., 1962), 146, 352.

<sup>15</sup> David Boucher "The Creation of the Past: British Idealism and Michael Oakeshott's Philosophy of History", *History and Theory*, 23:2, (1984), 193-214,196.

<sup>16</sup> "In many respects the constructivist's argument is a most convincing account of the nature of the historian's relationship to the object that is studied. It certainly does most adequately explain a large part of the practice of history. And the more responsible variants of so-called narrativist historical theory are, essentially, an elaboration of the constructivist's position." Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 114.

<sup>17</sup> Even though the constructivist ontology is mainly based on the Hegelian idea of the dialectical union of subject and object, Ankersmit's view differs from it because he is talking about some point in which there is no way to make any distinction. In dialectical thinking, subject and object always presuppose each other, while in Ankersmit's position there are not subjects and objects at all before experience. In my opinion, this is the background for his notion of "experience without a subject of experience", designed to avoid the problem of transcendentalism.

historicist tradition of Ranke and Humboldt.<sup>18</sup> I will refer to it as *ontology of consubstantiality*, because it conveys the idea of a primordial and substantial union between subject and object. Ankersmit's argument for this ontology runs as follows:

[...] we are consubstantial with history. History is in us and we are in it; we are concretisations of history and history is an abstraction of our self. There is only a continuum without fixed and clear boundaries.<sup>19</sup>

As we see, Ankersmit's starting point is the primal unity of past and present. As long as this unity is undisturbed they remain undistinguished from each other. In this situation there is only an eternal present, as experienced by the cows in Nietzsche's famous *Second Untimely Meditation*.<sup>20</sup> It is only after something interferes that is possible to make a distinction between past and present. For Ankersmit this interference is experience, which generates the *apparent* gap between past and present. This gap is apparent because Ankersmit is talking here about a distinction *within* a unity, which means that past and present are still holding together *even after* the distinction has taken place. Ankermit expresses this view with a metaphor inspired by Walter Benjamin's notions of *aura* and *Erfahrung*: present and past (or subject and object) are like the two halves of a snowball that is falling apart. Before the break up there are no differences between the two parts, there is only the snowball; after the break apart, however, each half's surface conserves the imprint of the other half.<sup>21</sup>

In this sense, historical experience is the paradoxical perception of both distance and closeness (that is, of the breaking apart *and* of the imprints preserved in each half of the snowball) that we feel with one part of our own identity.<sup>22</sup> This part of our identity is the past. Therefore, historical experience is not the same as contacting some external reality. If that were the case, the ontology of consubstantiality presupposed by this line of reasoning would be compromised. Taking this into account, Ankersmit's notion of experience seems less controversial: if the past is constituent of our present self or identity, as I think no one would deny, there is nothing strange about getting in touch with it, even in a paradoxical way.

This way of using experience to differentiate between past and present is, in my

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<sup>18</sup> See: Ankersmit, "Invitation to historians" 2010 p. 434; and *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, chapter 1. This idea evolved in Ankersmit's more recent work into an adaptation of Leibniz's monadology.

<sup>19</sup> Ankersmit, *La experiencia histórica sublime*, 257-258, my translation. This idea is further developed in its ethical and moral implications in F. Ankersmit, "The Ethics of History: from the double binds of (moral) meaning to experience", *History and Theory*, 43:4 (2004), 84–102.

<sup>20</sup> F. Nietzsche, "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life", *Untimely Meditations*, 1874.

<sup>21</sup> Obviously this is an extremely schematic presentation of a very rich and complex argument. See Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 180-189.

<sup>22</sup> The idea of distance as the key concept to understand the relationship between past and present was further developed by Ankersmit in: "The Transfiguration of Distance into Function" *History and Theory* 50:4 (2011), 136-149. For more discussion on this topic also see: Hans Kellner "Beyond the Horizon: Chronoschisms and Historical Distance", *History and Theory* 50:4 (2011), 38–50; and Jaap den Hollander "Contemporary History and the Art of Self-distancing", *History and Theory*, 50:4 (2011), 51-67.

opinion, one of the strongest points of Ankersmit's theory. It provides a sound explanation of how the past becomes a possible object for historical consciousness while preserving it as a part of our identity. For Ankersmit the past is not a thing that we can analyse as a physical object, and I totally agree with him. However, this notion of historical experience becomes very problematic as a result of Ankersmit's insistence in keeping it out of the domain of language. As I have discussed above, for Ankersmit experience takes place *before* the division of subject and object, which implies that language is not a part of experience, because all use of language presupposes at least one subject to use it. This position perfectly fits with Ankersmit's rejection of transcendentalism. But how we can talk of experience without a subject? Ankersmit's answer to this question is his concept of "experience without a subject of experience",<sup>23</sup> which is nothing more than the logical corollary of the initial proposition about the primal, or consubstantial unity. However, in spite of its logical background, the idea of an "experience without a subject of experience" is implicitly and explicitly stated, in *Sublime Historical Experience*, in a highly metaphorical and poetical way. In Ankersmit's own words, we fuse with the past in a "short but ecstatic kiss";<sup>24</sup> the past it is some sort of revelation that occurs only eventually and never at will. When this revelation happens, our selves dissolve into pure experience.<sup>25</sup>

Ankersmit's position on experience is problematical because it reaches the limits of what we can meaningfully talk about.<sup>26</sup> The main problem is that if our selves dissolve into pure experience, how can we come back and talk about this? In a sense, therefore, pure experience is to historical consciousness what black holes are to physics: we know that they exist, but no one can go to see how they look inside. In Ankersmit's theory, the absence of language in experience constitutes its purity and it is this purity that make the move from experience to representation impossible. In contrast to Ankersmit, I claim that such a move is possible without necessarily relapsing into the idea of a transcendental subject. What we need here is a different conception of the process of experience. Below I shall try to provide one. But before that, I will explore the epistemological companion of this consubstantial ontology.

#### **4 The epistemological implications**

Ankersmit is perfectly aware that his ontology requires a new form of epistemology which is capable of avoiding all subject/object dichotomies. Consequently, he searches for an epistemology in which our interaction with the world has the quality of an unproblematic continuity, an epistemology "where a certain amount of fusion of self

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<sup>23</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 229.

<sup>24</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 121.

<sup>25</sup> Ankersmit, *Experiencia histórica sublime*, 68-70.

<sup>26</sup> In my opinion, however, focusing our attention exclusively in this point would be equally useless and misleading. This seems to be the case of Peter Icke's book. I do not know how this line of pure negative criticism could lead to any profitable conclusions, unless total disqualification is accepted as a profitable conclusion.

and world is natural".<sup>27</sup> Seen from the perspective of the history of philosophy, his answer is an innovative step backwards. He borrows Aristotle's theory of sensory perception, with its preference for the sense of touch, because it allows us to consider knowledge not as a result of observation (as in the Cartesian tradition), but as a close interaction based on experience. In Ankersmit's words:

In this Aristotelian "model" of experience, there is, first, the experience, and next, the subject is formed by the experience, whereas the object has no existence outside and beyond its formative role. There is, so to say, only the surface of the experience; object and subject are merely its obedient shadows.<sup>28</sup>

As Ankersmit rightly observes, this model of experience fits much better to the problems posed by art and representation than its Cartesian counterpart, because in the Cartesian tradition everything is about the truth, whereas, in the realms of representation and art (to which historical writing belongs), the problem of truth has a very secondary function, if it has one at all.<sup>29</sup> If we translate this epistemological notion into the past/present distinction, the result is that the past is no longer an object we can observe, but a formative part of our identity. We are in a permanent and intimate touch with our past; we are moulded by it constantly. Seen from this perspective, historical experience is, then, the moment when we realise the past's presence. According to Ankersmit, however, in this awareness of the past are not involved the "normal" procedures of the historian working within a historiographical tradition, but rather the opposite: experience is a process of "decontextualization" that eliminates the distance with the past. Or in Ankersmit's own words: "For a moment there is only the past itself, revealing to him [to the historian] its quasi-noumenal nakedness with an unusual directness and immediacy".<sup>30</sup>

In order to develop this notion of experience, Ankersmit uses John Dewey's theory of aesthetical experience, because it explicitly rejects the transcendentalist division of subject and object. Following Monroe Beardsley's and Kenneth Clark's commentaries of Dewey's aesthetics, Ankersmit distinguishes several steps in the aesthetical experience, namely: "first impression", "scrutiny or examination", "remembrance", and "renovation".<sup>31</sup> However, in his notion of experience Ankersmit includes only the "first impression" because of its passive and unreflective character, which enables him to keep language out of the equation. Ankersmit proceeds in this way because he thinks that in the next step, "scrutiny" or "examination", the regular process

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<sup>27</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 248.

<sup>28</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 249.

<sup>29</sup> "There is a dimension of meaning in human existence -as exemplified by (the writing of) history and by how we relate to our (collective) past- where truth has no role to play". Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 239.

<sup>30</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 125.

<sup>31</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 250-251.

of distancing, and finally dissolving the object into the subject, has already begun. So, in order to avoid transcendentalism, Ankersmit reduces the pragmatist notion of aesthetical experience to the "first impression", and pays little attention to the active and reflective aspects of it.

Still, no matter how "impressionist" this notion of experience may seem, it is intended to provide some kind of understanding of the object that produces the impression in the first place.<sup>32</sup> This understanding is purportedly not attached to any kind of transcendental schemes. Those are calculated, in Ankersmit's view, to offer a medium to relate world and language once the separation of subject and object has taken place. The problem is, as we have seen, that experience takes place *before* or in the contact moment. Thus the understanding it provides is allegedly pre-linguistic. Nevertheless, Ankersmit has previously defined historical experience as a kind of "intellectual experience".<sup>33</sup> This raises the question: how can historical experience be "direct" or "pure" (which means immediate and de-contextualized) and at the same time "intellectual" (which means mediated and contextualized)? To solve this dilemma Ankersmit relies on the notion of "psychic distance" formulated by Edward Bullough in 1912.<sup>34</sup> With the help of this concept (from top to bottom alien to Dewey's aesthetics) the work of art (which is the object in this case) is separated from our necessities and personal interests. Thus being de-contextualized and objectivised, we can have a direct experience of the object. In addition, Bullough also provides the contextualisation needed: his notion of the "antinomy of psychic distance" speaks about the right amount of psychic distance required to have an aesthetical experience: if we are too psychically distant from the object, it will fall out of our attention; if we are too close, it will be digested by our own self and personal interests. Obviously, this distance can only come from our personal formation and historical context. Ankersmit's conclusion is as follows:

Certainly, PAE [Pragmatist Aesthetical Experience] can occur only in an appropriate context of experience of a capacity of aesthetic experience -if such a context is absent, overdistance prevents the work of art from having any impact on us. *But the presence of such a context does not in the least imply that PAE is necessarily tainted or colored by it.*<sup>35</sup>

In other words, even when some degree of "harmony" is needed between the part of the past that is experienced and the historian who is having the experience, the experience itself remains de-contextualised. It stays as a "first impression", pre-linguistic and pre-cognitive, i. e. *pure* experience.

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<sup>32</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 252-254.

<sup>33</sup> "This book [...] proposes the unusual thesis that there is also such a thing as "intellectual experience" and that our minds can function as a receptacle of experience no less than our eyes, ears, or fingers". Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> E. Bullough, "'Psychical distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle", *British Journal of Psychology*, 5:2 (1912), 87-118.

<sup>35</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 256. Ankersmit's italics. In the Spanish edition is just "experience" instead of "PAE" and the italics are gone.

## 5 The process of experience

In spite of its complexity, the solution provided by Ankersmit to the problem of the relationship between context and experience is still unsatisfactory. First, because it is not compatible with the "consubstantial ontology" presupposed by Ankersmit himself. Secondly, because the reduction of experience to a "first impression", contrary to Dewey's notion of experience, makes the move towards representation impossible. To start with the first objection: if we accept the idea that experience occurs within a context, which consist of our previous formation and personal identity, and say that the context *does not affect* the experience at all, we must accept that there is some substantial difference between us and something else we call the past which is not a part of our previous identity. Only in this way experience can be pure, in the sense of not being tainted or colored by the context. This position thus suggest the existence of an external past outside the "primal" unity of subject and object. As such, it raises the question: what kind of past is this? If it is external, we are once again moving within the limits of the transcendental division of subject and object. If it is not external, then it is an internal part of our identity and the experience we can have of it is always experience of the context, which means that the experience is not longer pure.

In my view, this dilemma can only be solved by giving up the idea of the purity of experience in the sense Ankersmit gives to that notion. After all, the impression we get of the past by experience is, from the very beginning, "tainted" by its context because it is, in fact, the impression made by one part of that context. This context is not, to use Ankersmit's metaphor, a cloud that prevents us from seeing the past.<sup>36</sup> On the contrary: it is the place in which the past is held together with the present. If we accept, as I do, the idea of the ontological union of past and present, there is no need of the concept of "pure" experience because this implies, as we have seen, a "second" past different from the "original" past that is part of our identity. Of course, we can feel the distance that separates us from some past part of our identity: it is something that we can experience in everyday life; but to feel this separation as an irremediable loss, as traumatic or ensconced in nostalgia, is something that depends on the context that we ourselves are. The difference between just feeling the distance, on one side, and ascribing to that feeling a particular meaning, in the other, is the same that we find between just having experience and having *an* experience, to use Dewey's terms. I shall explain this last distinction while presenting my second objection that the reduction of experience to a first impression is alien to Dewey's notion of experience; for him *all* the process is needed in order to have not just experience but *an* experience.<sup>37</sup> This view entails that we cannot speak of a coherent and complete experience until the end of the process, until we have gone from first impression to renovation. For Dewey, *an* experience is therefore not only the result of impressions, but also comprises thoughts and memories. To have *an* experience is to interact with the world in such a way as to make contact with its internal order and meaning:

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<sup>36</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, especially section 7.3 "Decontextualization and Authenticity", 275-280

<sup>37</sup> See: D. C. Mathur, "A Note on the Concept of "Consummatory Experience" in Dewey's Aesthetics", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 63:9 (1966), 225-231.

For life is not uniform uninterrupted march or flow. It is a thing of histories, each with its own plot, its own inception and movement toward its close, each having its particular rhythmic movement; each with its own unrepeated quality pervading it throughout."<sup>38</sup>

Perceiving these "pervading qualities" not only involves surrender to the object but also its construction through abstraction and thinking. Thus, at some point, experience itself implies language and, therefore, the possibility of its representation. In contrast to Ankersmit, Dewey stresses that aesthetical experience is not only always active, but also that it is inexorably bound to its context, and this context comprises all the vital organisation and resources of the living creature.<sup>39</sup>

The most important implication of Dewey's view is that life itself has some kind of meaning that is revealed through experience.<sup>40</sup> At first sight, this idea seems to stand opposed to Louis Mink's famous dictum, "Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles, or ends". However, if we do not attend to the obvious discrepancies of Dewey's and Mink's views, and focus on their ideas of the process of experience itself, it becomes clear that Dewey's notion of experience can be related to Mink's idea of *comprehension*. In this context, it is crucial to notice that Mink holds that "experience come to us *seriatim*". For this reason, Mink explains, that in the first instance experience has no "plot", "inception" or "pervading qualities" because those things come later in the series. In the first instance we only have the mental act of "grasping together" things "which are not experienced together, or even capable of being so experienced, because they are separated by time, space, or logical kind".<sup>41</sup> According to Mink, this act of synopsis is present in "every variety of experience", and he calls it "comprehension". He distinguishes three different modes: theoretical, categorial and configurational. The kind of comprehension that we specifically associate with history (and with music, poetry, visual arts *and* political action) is the configurational one. Thanks to it, Mink point out, we are able to grasp different experiences as belonging to a "single and concrete complex of relationships".<sup>42</sup> In other words, thanks to configurational comprehension we are able to understand unconnected elements of experience as parts of one unity. However, this mode of comprehension is

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<sup>38</sup> John Dewey, *Art as experience* (1934) (New York, Penguin Books, 2005), 37.

<sup>39</sup> "In every integral experience there is form because there is dynamic organization. I call the organization dynamic because it takes time to complete it, because it is a growth. There is inception, development, fulfilment. Material is ingested and digested *through interaction with that vital organization of the results of prior experiences that constitutes the mind of the worker*." J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 57. My italics.

<sup>40</sup> This obviously places Dewey's philosophy of experience closer to the phenomenological tradition recently represented by David Carr. However, for Dewey not all experience has the temporal organisation suggested by Carr: "For in much of our experience we are not concerned with the connection of one incident with what went before and what comes after". J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 41.

<sup>41</sup> Louis O. Mink, *Historical Understanding*, ed. Brian Fay, Eugene O. Golob, and Richard T. Vann (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 48-49.

<sup>42</sup> Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 52-53.

not a form knowledge, "nor even a condition of knowledge", but "an individual act of seeing-things-together, and only that".<sup>43</sup> Moreover, and this is very important, it is not an intellectual operation that comes *after* the experience, but it rather happens *during* the experience. In other words, in Mink's view, the act of comprehension constitutes experience itself! In short, comprehension is a non-linguistic or pre-linguistic act which provides, albeit in a transiently and relative way, the same sense of unity and completeness that Dewey associated with the idea of *an* experience. In addition, the active character of comprehension fits better with Dewey's view of experience as a process running itself to its own culmination.

This sense of the unity of an experience is, in my opinion, also central to Ankersmit's notion of historical experience:

History comes to us *in wholes, in totalities*, and this is how we primarily experience both the past itself and what it has left us -as is the case in the arts and in the aesthetic experience. The explanation is that history does not rise up before our minds from data found in the archives in the way that a detective may infer from the relevant data who committed a murder: It is, instead, a "displacement" of the present as dictated by these data, and, as such, it is experienced as *a totality* no less than is the case with the present.<sup>44</sup>

As we see, Ankersmit, like Mink, stresses the unity of experience. However, in contrast to Mink, Ankersmit draws a clear distinction between historical experience and comprehension. For him, historical experience is and should be "receptive" whereas comprehension (or historical intuition) is an "active" projection, which means that it comes *after* the experience. In other words, even though Ankersmit recognises an "intense interaction" between experience and comprehension, he holds that historical comprehension is a result of historical experience, which itself remains pure and de-contextualised.

But a different view of these things is possible, if we hold, with Mink, that experience has, from the very beginning, a configurational character. This view transforms experience from a passive reception into an active projection. Later on I will show the ontological implications of this transformation. Here it is enough to say that thanks to the configurational character of experience we are able to experience *and* understand the past in the form of wholes or totalities in the sense Ankersmit ascribes to them. But above all, it is this active conception of experience that enables us to narrow the gap between experience and representation. Given its active character, configurational comprehension can be seen as constituting the first step in the *process* of experience. This process starts as the mental act of "grasping together", but it is only after we have gone through all its overlapping stages, that is, from comprehension to memory and renovation, that we can say we have had *an* experience. In this sense, the linguistic representation of *an* experience is not the rejection or domestication of experience, but its fulfilment. Representation is built over experience, of course, but it

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<sup>43</sup> Mink, *Historical Understanding*, 55.

<sup>44</sup> Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 119. My italics.

does not transcend experience, it rather preserves it. Even if Ankersmit is right that some great historians such as Huizinga or Tocqueville were capable of having pure historical experiences, all that remains for us are the linguistic representations of those experiences. And if we may feel something similar to what they felt in their contact with the past, it would be only by *reading* them.<sup>45</sup>

With this interpretation I do not want to suggest that there is an exact correspondence between experience and representation, but only that we can move from one to the other. In this context, I stress that I do not claim that reality itself has a narrative structure or meaning. Clearly, it may well be possible that some parts of the flux of experience fall far beyond the reach of language, but the kind of experience that it is possible to associate with history (i. e., the experience of totalities) is, in the first place, the product of an act of comprehension and, second, it is *an* experience in Dewey's sense, which means that its fulfilment requires its construction through abstraction and thinking. From this perspective, there is no quarrel between language and experience; language is continuous with experience, though not identical with it. Therefore, experience might be expressed in the form of linguistic representations without losing its directness and emotional intensity.

## 6 The ontological problem with an attempted solution

What Ankersmit has shown to us is the aesthetic quality of experience, which in Dewey's view is responsible for bestowing unity to *all* intellectual experiences. Undoubtedly, this dimension is one of the major features of experience, and Ankersmit is right in calling our attention to it. A long tradition has taught us to sterilise all the emotional charges related to the past, transforming it into a pseudo-object for scientific observation or, more recently, into something that exists only in the language we use to talk about it. However, the correction of this is not to be found in the denial of the place that language has within experience; a denial that resolves our relationship with the past into a passive acceptance of the impressions produced by the past itself.

The aesthetical unity of experience is certainly important, but is not equal to *pastness*. For Ankersmit, aesthetical experience and historical experience are the same. There is nothing in his argument that allows a distinction. Actually, this identity of aesthetic and historical experience is exactly what Ankersmit is trying to prove. These two forms can be distinguished from other forms of experience (every day experience for example) or from other notions of experience (like the empirical experience in natural sciences), but not between them. Thus, historical experience has not an exclusive or specific character: the sense of the past that should be its hallmark is dissolved in the first impression. From this perspective it is impossible to explain why we should consider some experiences as historical and others not. And we can find no help in the idea of the "authenticity" of historical experience, because our question is not if the experience is real or not, but rather how it is possible to say that it is historical. Up to this point the only thing we can say is that there is experience, of course, even pure and authentic experience, but not yet historical.

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<sup>45</sup> This point is implicitly recognised by Ankersmit when he is discussing the synesthetic potential of Huizinga's use of language in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. See: Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, 203-206.

This problem is the result of two different but related factors. The first one, as we have seen, is the consideration of historical experience as the product of a passive reception rather than as the outcome of an active projection.<sup>46</sup> In Ankersmit's examples, historical experience is something that suddenly happens to the historian, never at will, and mainly when he/she is looking at relatively ordinary objects that the past has left us, objects in which an "aura" of the past itself has been preserved. It is, to use Ankersmit's terminology, "a surface phenomenon". But if we accept Dewey's account of experience, and see it as a form of comprehension in Mink's sense, the "surface" is always the result of a constructive intellectual effort. The fact that the "aura" can only be perceived by highly trained and sensitive historians tells clearly that the context is much more active in modelling our experience than what Ankersmit is willing to admit.

This takes us to a second factor mentioned above. In my view, the passive character of experience is the result of a missing ingredient in Ankersmit's ontology, namely the future. It is worth noticing that I am not talking of the future in connection with phenomenology or narrative. Here, I understand the future in two senses, first, as a part of the ontological context of experience, and second, as an necessary element of the projective character of comprehension. The interaction between these two senses, which I will present next, is the cornerstone for a new notion of historical experience.

The consequences of not including the future within the ontological context of experience were clearly identified by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset in 1928, when he wrote:

Human life, the being of man, has almost always been interpreted as a result of received impressions. Accordingly to this, we would be like a spiritual snow ball formed by past and present, wrapped on themselves. Our life would not be original action, but only reaction to what we had or have in front of us. Our soul would be only the dust left by ancient roads, we would be pure consequence, the automatic result of the surroundings -never the leading characters of our own existence. But this is a radical mistake [...] The truth is strictly otherwise: we live in the present, at the actual point, but the present does not exist primarily for us. From the present, like from a soil, we live towards the immediate future.<sup>47</sup>

Against the passiveness comprised in the snow ball metaphor, Ortega offers a dynamic conception of human life as an activity directed by the future. He explains that the most basic fact of human life is that we have no other alternative than to be in constant activity to keep ourselves alive. This idea may seem trivial, but it has important consequences. First, that there is nothing like a pre-established human nature or substance, transcendental or otherwise. Our self is pure activity: it is nothing more and nothing less than what we have done and what we are planning to do in the face of ever-

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<sup>46</sup> The passive nature of experience was highlighted by Ankersmit since 1993, in an address delivered at the Groningen Rijksuniversiteit. I got access only to the Spanish translation: Frank R. Ankermit, "La experiencia histórica", *Historia y Grafía*, 10 (1998), 209-267.

<sup>47</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, "Meditación de nuestro tiempo" (1928), in José Ortega y Gasset, *Obras completas* (Madrid: Taurus, 2010) v. VIII, 45. My translation.

changing circumstances. Life, then, is the radical reality within which all the other realities must find their place, including the past. And life occurs under certain circumstances which are not only made by external objects, but by the beliefs, traditions, ideas, conceptual and legal systems, etc., that are the ingredients of the social world within which we have to live, whether we like it or not.<sup>48</sup> What we call culture is therefore the concretisation of an historically specific response to the circumstances, that is, a specific form of living. It is not, or at least not completely, an accumulated layer of traditions separating us from the past. Therefore, circumstances are both internal (as parts of the subject) and external (as parts of social and material world) and they constitute the departure point of all activity. Within this *vitalist* ontology there is no room for transcendentalism: reason, thought and language, even the truth, are functions of life, just like digesting.<sup>49</sup>

According to Ortega's ontology, we are not subjects simply thinking about an external world of objects. Subject and object are not substances which can *contact* each other. They coexist in the form of mutual interaction: an object is outside the subject, not as a thing in itself, but in the form of an incitation to the subject's activity. The subject, for its part, is not a transcendental self or pure identity, but the active selection of some parts of reality and the action exerted on that reality.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, the interaction between subject and object cannot be the passive reception of external or internal impressions, nor the imposition of the subject's rationality over the object. It is, instead, a process of "selective integration", which is for Ortega the essence of human life.<sup>51</sup>

This conception of human life as pure activity gives place to the idea of an equally active process of experiencing the past. This means that we actively confront the past with all the feelings, beliefs, memories and thoughts, language, previous experiences and future oriented projections that give shape to our identity.<sup>52</sup> Or to put it in Ortega's terminology, we approach the past with exactly the same things we use to live and to solve problems in our present circumstances. Certainly, the aesthetic (or sublime) character of experience may interfere with the ordinary conceptual schemes that we use to process reality. But this does not mean that our selves passively dissolve

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<sup>48</sup> Ortega's best exposition of his theory of life is: José Ortega y Gasset, "History as a System" (1936) in Raymond Kilibansky and H. J. Paton (editors), *Philosophy and History. The Ernst Cassirer Festschrift*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 363.

<sup>49</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (1923) in *Obras completas*, v. III, 579.

<sup>50</sup> This idea is one of the backbones of the practical historicism defined and studied by Rik Peters. See: Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action: The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, De Ruggiero, and Collingwood*, (Exeter: Imprint-Academic, 2013). For an elaboration of its implications for practical historiography and the relationship between experience and language in rhetoric, see: Rik Peters, "Calliope's ascent: defragmenting philosophy of history by rhetoric", *Rethinking History*, 20:2, (2016) 1-24.

<sup>51</sup> See: José María Izquierdo Arroyo, "La vinculación onto-gnoseológica de sujeto-objeto en Ortega" in José González-Sandoval Buedo (ed.), *Ortega y la filosofía española*, (Murcia: Sociedad de filosofía de la religión de Murcia, 2004) 87-118.

<sup>52</sup> The most complete version of Ortega's notion of thought and language as functions of life is *El tema de nuestro tiempo*. For a recent argument in favour of considering language as a form of experience, see: Colin Koopman, "Language is a Form of Experience: Reconciling Classical Pragmatism and Neopragmatism", *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 43:4 (2007), 694-727.

into pure experience. On the contrary: what we experience are just difficulties or facilities in our human existence, situations which demand some kind of action. Actually, the experience of totalities is the experience of confirmations or interruptions of our projects and expectations. When everything goes according to our expectations, we experience continuity. If, conversely, things are not going as we have planned or desired, we experience discontinuity and instability. In both cases, again, the experience is only possible because our being consists precisely of projects and expectations. In both cases, as well, we have to decide *what to do next*.

Consequently, I think that Ortega's ontology is a better companion to the notion of experience as a comprehensional process than the ontology of consubstantiality. Its active character fits better with the projective character of experience and comprehension as understood by Dewey and Mink. It also gives place for a specific form of historical experience: we become aware of the past when some problem in our present circumstances demands a solution. This problem may be as insignificant as recovering a missing car key or as complex as the reconstruction of a social identity after a traumatic historical event. In both cases, however, the solution will necessarily comprise, and depart from, an account of what has happened before. Within the context of Ortega's ontology, historiography is not the scientific domestication and sterilisation of the past nor its purely aesthetical contemplation. Historiography is, rather, one among the many forms that we have to transform reality. It is an act of "selective integration" which renders experience into a function of practical life. This means that we do not suddenly make "contact" with the past in its quasi-noumenal nakedness; on the contrary, we actively search for it as something we need to face present circumstances. And we do not seek for whatever past we may find, but only for the one we need in order to solve our present problems.<sup>53</sup> In Ortega's words: "It is only because of what we ask, of what we demand and expect from the future, that we turn our sight to present and past: to find the means to satisfy our needs. The future is the captain, present and past are mere soldiers".<sup>54</sup> I believe that this future oriented perspective might apply even to the most extreme cases of traumatic or sublime historical experiences. Think, for example, in the many instances of conservative historiography which commonly appear after revolutionary processes or traumatic historical events. In these cases, their authors not only intended to save from oblivion a past which has been destroyed, but they also used that past to provide a guide into the shadows of the future, even when the future seemed dreadful and hopeless to them.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ortega's notion of the practical past is quite different from the one that has been recently reactivated by Hayden White inspired by Oakeshott. First, because they have completely different ontological backgrounds; practical historicism for Ortega, constructivism for Oakeshott-White. Second, because for Ortega, against Oakeshott-White, there is not division between the practical and the historical pasts. For Ortega, a past which is not a function of life is not practical nor historical, it is not a past at all: it is plainly a form of in-authenticity, a corrupt form of consciousness. See: Hayden White, *The practical past*, especially Preface and Chapter I; and Ortega, *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, *passim*.

<sup>54</sup> Ortega, "Meditación de nuestro tiempo", 46-47.

<sup>55</sup> Even Jacob Burckhardt's contemplative and nihilistic historiography could be a good example of this, thought in a negative way: it was intended to overrule all possible hope about the future of Europe. See: Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 230-264.

I only have to add that the active version of experience I have tried to present here is not dependent on any metaphysical description of the actual meaning of time, nor is based on any transcendentalist scheme. It is based on the ontological statement of the *coexistence* of subject and object as activities within the ultimate reality of life. If this is true, even our most elaborated thoughts and representations of the past are *eo ipso* forms of historical experience. Let me be more precise. According to Ortega, life is absolute presence: "If, then, *there is* a past it must be as something present, something active in us *now*".<sup>56</sup> This is not a constructivist conception of history, because the past in it is not something gone and lost but present and active within us.<sup>57</sup>

Ortega's version of the living past is in line with the historicist tradition which Ankersmit seeks to continue. If we follow its implications, it would be clear that contacting with the past is not different from acting in the present. This is so because, in Ortega's view, the past, like the present, is not a substance but an activity, the actual process that has made us what we are, social and individually. This *vitalist* conception of the past, still to be fully developed, gives place to a form of historical experience that preserves the aesthetical and emotional elements of our relationship with the past, without abandoning the use of language nor relapsing into transcendentalism. Within this conception of historical experience, there are not two different and separated moments: a set of sensitive impressions followed by the infeasible work of translating those impressions into language. What we really have is only one single process running forward to its own fulfilment. This means that the linguistic representations of the past are not only objects which deserve our intellectual attention; rather they are means to transform (or preserve) the collective reality in which we have to live. They are, actually, the process of experiencing the past in order to serve and save the future.

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<sup>56</sup> Ortega, "History as a System", 310.

<sup>57</sup> This idea has strong resemblances with the notion of the living past, which has been studied by Rik Peters in his *History as Thought and Action*.