

History as Dialogue

On Online Narrativity¹

CHIEL VAN DEN AKKER

103

Digital history covers a wide variety of information technology driven initiatives about the past. Many reflections on digital history either consider the auxiliary sciences of history or public history, whilst they tend to disregard historical understanding as it is traditionally achieved in the academic historical narrative. The problem is that the historical monograph no longer seems an appropriate model for historical understanding in a digital environment. How then, are we to conceptualise online historical understanding? Information technology, we are told, is participatory, interactive, dynamic, and collaborative, enabling direct communication. It can therefore be argued that the dialogue is the underlying concept of information technology. We may push this concept even further, at the risk of being misunderstood, and present it as an online alternative for academic history writing. The function of such an exercise is to underline and provoke a much needed reflection on historical understanding in the digital age.

It is indisputable that information technology brings us impressive means to research and represent the past. One cannot be but amazed by the virtual reconstruction of Rome, the online archive of social life in early modern London, the mapping of the Republic of Letters, the real time simulation of the Apollo 11 flight, Europe's portal to its cultural heritage, and Google Lab's visualisation of word frequency in millions of books over time, to mention only a few widely known examples.² Some of these initiatives belong to what is commonly referred to as public history; others are examples of academic projects. We may add that the distinction between public and academic history is less evident than it was before.³

This small selection of examples already makes clear that the term digital history covers a wide variety of initiatives that are about the past. Limiting ourselves to academic history, we can observe that the new tools



and techniques first and foremost strengthen and improve upon the existing auxiliary sciences of history. The tools and techniques for text mining and text analysis improve upon such fields as diplomatics and palaeography, whilst techniques making databases interoperable strengthen the archival science and allow new opportunities for such fields as prosopography. One could also argue that some of the digital tools and techniques constitute a new auxiliary science of history, especially when one thinks of some visualisation techniques. Some scholars discuss or experiment with new modes of online academic history writing; many reflections on digital history however, either reflect on the auxiliary sciences of history or on public history whilst they tend to disregard historical understanding as it is traditionally achieved in the academic historical narrative. This observation informs this essay.

Historical understanding in the digital age

When philosophers of history like Arthur Danto, Louis Mink, and Frank Ankersmit discuss historical narratives, their focus is on the narrative as an instrument of understanding that is on a par with but distinct from theory, rather than on the narrative as a literary artefact that is similar to fiction (Hayden White emphasized the latter, but also, it can be argued, to underline the former).⁴ Narrative structures enable the understanding of events in their development, that is, in relation to later events, providing retrospective, comprehensive understandings of the past. A central lesson of these narrativist philosophers is that history writing is not simply a matter of presenting the results from historical research: and it is this lesson that we should take to heart when we think about digital history. Mink argues that:

◀ History's Muse Clio writes history, advised by Athena (Goddess of wisdom) and watched by the naked Truth.
Jacob de Wit (1695-1754), *Allegorie op het Schrijven van de Geschiedenis* 1754.
Amsterdam Museum.

1 This essay is funded by NWO, grant 640.004.801. The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, guest editor and the editors of *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

2 Respectively <http://www.romereborn.virginia.edu/>; <http://www.londonlives.org>; <https://republicofletters.stanford.edu/>; <http://wechoosethemoon.org/>; <http://www.europeana.eu/portal/>; and <http://books.google.com/ngrams/> (11 March 2013).

3 See Fien Danniau's contribution to this issue, 118-144.

4 Their main works are A.C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York 1985); L.O. Mink, *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca, London 1987); F.R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague 1983); H.V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, London 1973).

[...] despite the fact that an historian may ‘summarize’ conclusions in his final chapter, it seems clear that these are seldom or never detachable conclusions; not merely their validity but their meaning refers backwards to the ordering of evidence in the total argument. The significant conclusions, one might say, are ingredient in the argument itself, not merely in the sense that they are scattered through the text but in the sense that they are *represented by the narrative order itself*.⁵

Whereas the detachable conclusions of the sciences are inferred from the evidence; the ingredient historical conclusions are ‘indicators which point to the way in which the evidence has been ordered’. The ‘distinctive characteristic of historical understanding’, Mink argues, ‘consists of comprehending a complex event by “seeing things together” in a total and synoptic judgment which cannot be replaced by any analytic technique’.⁶ This point is often missed in reflections on digital history.⁷ To understand a historical conclusion we have to read the entire book in which it is proposed. Think for example, of the conclusion of the noted historian Jonathan Israel. He tells us that modern man came into being at the end of the seventeenth century during what he refers to as the Radical Enlightenment.⁸ Only after having read his book it is clear to us how society changed and which individuals and events illustrate that change.⁹ The coming into being of modern man is not something that can be inferred from the evidence; it is not an empirical finding, but rather a viewpoint enabling us to understand and order the evidence. From this it follows that the results from digital research should somehow be incorporated in online history writing. Instead of producing evidence, digital methods and tools produce ‘elements’ that are to be understood in terms of a historical conclusion. Several initiatives already engage with the question of online historical writing, incorporating digital research and visualization techniques. The enriched publication is the best example of such initiatives

5 Louis O. Mink, ‘The Autonomy of Historical Understanding’, *History and Theory* 5 (1966) 24-47, 39.

6 *Ibid.*, 42-43.

7 Not by Ryan Shaw. See his ‘From Facts to Judgments: Theorizing History for Information Science’, *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 36:2 (2010) 13-18.

8 Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford 2002).

9 On the crucial notion of illustration or exemplification, see my ‘The Exemplification Theory of History: Narrativist Philosophy and the Autonomy of History’, *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6 (2012) 236-257.

and a promising new way of disseminating historical understanding.¹⁰ Its model is derived from the historical monograph rather than from information technology itself.

The problem with the idea of incorporating digital research and its results into history writing however, is that the genre of the historical monograph no longer seems an appropriate model for historical understanding in a digital environment. Although we can read an historical monograph on an e-reader or computer screen, we are not making use of the possibilities offered by information technology by doing so. (There is also the minor issue of whether we like to read from a screen. According to Robert Darnton, even Bill Gates confessed to prefer printed paper for extensive reading.¹¹ E-Readers and computer screens, in contrast to books, are not made for extensive reading. This is not due to some technological defect that will be remedied in the near future; it is just that the book as it is, is perfectly designed for the purpose for which we use it. Typically, the best e-reader is the one best imitating the book.) What happens, as Ann Rigney nicely phrases it, when the monograph is no longer the medium?¹²

In this essay, I want to bring to the fore what I take to be the underlying concept of the various responses that have been provided to this question. Information technology, we are told, is participatory, interactive, dynamic, and collaborative, enabling direct communication. It can therefore be argued that the dialogue is the underlying concept of information technology. We may push this concept even further, at the risk of being misunderstood, and present it as an online alternative for academic history writing. The function of such an exercise is to underline and provoke a much needed reflection on historical understanding in the digital age.

In an online dialogue between eight historians on digital history, Michael Frisch recently remarked the following:

10 A good example is William G. Thomas and Edward L. Ayers, 'The Differences Slavery Made: A Close Analysis of Two American Communities', <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/AHR/> (11 March 2013). Their conclusion 'that slavery and modernity need to be seen as parts of the same process in the United States [...]. Rather than a fight of modernity against slavery, the American Civil War could be seen as a fight between

variants of modernity, not as the inevitable clash of the future against past', is a typical ingredient historical conclusion.

11 Robert Darnton, *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future* (New York 2009) 69.

12 Ann Rigney, 'When the Monograph is no Longer the Medium: Historical Narrative in the Online Age', *History and Theory* 49 (2010) 100-117.



By playing the video game Assassin's Creed II, which takes part in Florence and other parts of Tuscany, people acquire a sense of what the Renaissance was like.

Screenshot of Assassin's Creed II, Ubisoft.

The goal [of digital history] is not to displace argument, synthesis, interpretation, and understanding in favor of a celebration of infinite possibility, but to broaden the participation in a dialogic process of engagement, questioning, and reflection on answers.¹³

In this essay I will try to explain what Frisch could have meant and why it is important.

The term ‘narrativity’ that I use throughout this essay refers to those representations of the past that either implicitly or explicitly tell a story. I will use the term ‘academic history writing’ to emphasise the distinctive characteristic of historical understanding as it is achieved in the historical narrative, the ingredient historical conclusion providing a comprehensive view of the past.

Three responses to the question of online narrativity

Rigney points to ‘film and other audio-visual media, as well as the role of the visual arts, museums, and video games as alternative platforms for shaping and disseminating historical knowledge’, to argue that “‘the book’” should no longer provide the exclusive model for theoretical reflection on narrativity and the production of historical knowledge.¹⁴ The old notions of emplotment, explanation, and representation are to be replaced by a new vocabulary consisting of such terms as interactivity, participation, accessibility, distributed authorship, and dynamics.¹⁵ These are the concepts that we need to understand what she, following Henry Jenkins, refers to as our convergence and participatory culture.¹⁶ Rigney makes an important point: historical theorists should indeed theorise the diverse media and formats with which knowledge of the past is transmitted, for people do acquire a sense of what for example the Renaissance was like by playing *Assassin’s Creed II*, watching the television series *The Borgias*, or by exploring the many Renaissance related sections of the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹⁷ However, we should note that the alternative platforms that Rigney refers to are not alternatives to academic history writing; they are other, possibly equally legitimate, means of presenting history. This of course, leaves the point she

13 Daniel J. Cohen, Michael Frisch, Patrick Gallagher, Steven Mintz, Kirsten Sword, Amy Murell Taylor, William G. Thomas III and William J. Turkel, ‘Interchange: The Promise of Digital History’, *Journal of American History* 95 (2008) 452-491.

14 Rigney, ‘When the Monograph’, respectively 106 and 108.

15 *Ibid.*, 117.

16 *Ibid.*, 110.

17 <http://assassinscreed.ubi.com/nl-nl/games/assassins-creed-2/index.aspx>; <http://www.sho.com/sho/the-borgias/home>; <http://www.metmuseum.org/> (2 August 2013).

makes intact. It is just that we want to make a distinction between public and academic history, even if we admit that this distinction will be more difficult to maintain in online environments, and focus on historical understanding rather than on knowledge about the past.

Then what about the electronic book as a new sort of academic book? Do we not, as Robert Darnton rhetorically asks, ‘face the possibility of supplementing the traditional book with electronic publications specifically designed for certain purposes and publics’?¹⁸ Books are read linearly: word after word, sentence after sentence, line after line, page after page, and chapter after chapter. The electronic book, by contrast, uses a mixture of media – images, audio, video – next to ‘hyperlinked texts that invite the reader to jump around in many directions’.¹⁹ Of course, it can be argued that the (paper) book can be read in different sorts of ways too: however, to understand a book we need to know its structure, and it is this structure which is built up linearly. Understanding a book requires knowledge of its genre related structure, whether the book is build linearly or not. So although the electronic book might be structured differently, knowing its structure – for example knowing how to navigate through its components – is a prerequisite for arriving at an appropriate understanding of the book.

Darnton proposes to restructure the electronic book in layers ‘arranged like a pyramid’. He distinguishes between six layers:

The top layer could be a concise account of the subject, available perhaps in paperback. The next layer could contain expanded versions of different aspects of the argument, not arranged sequentially as in a narrative, but rather as self-contained units that feed into the topmost storey. The third layer could be composed of documentation, possibly of different kinds, each set off by interpretive essays. A fourth layer might be theoretical or historiographical, with selections of previous scholarship and discussions of them. A fifth layer could be pedagogic, consisting of suggestions for classroom discussion, a model syllabus, and course packets. And a sixth layer could contain readers’ reports, exchanges between the author and the editor, and letters from readers, who could provide a growing corpus of commentary as the book made its way through different publics.²⁰

Darnton emphasises that the electronic book is not a substitute for but a supplement to existing books.²¹ It is thus no alternative for academic history writing either. Darnton’s proposal seems in line with the possibilities offered

18 Darnton, *The Case*, 70.

19 *Ibid.*, 85.

20 *Ibid.*, 76.

21 *Ibid.*, 77.

by information technology: his layered e-book is dynamic and makes use of hypertext. The collaborative, variable, and interactive nature of digital media however is only accounted for in the last and sixth layer. Where Rigney points out that the stand-alone monograph no longer suffices as a model to think about historical knowledge production, the monographic model, characteristic of academic history, is unaffected by digital technology in Darnton's view and remains the starting point for his six layered e-book rather than the possibilities offered by new media. Digital media is used as an extension of or extra feature to the historical monograph. To be sure, this is an observation, not a criticism, and it does not undermine the merits of his proposal. However, since Darnton's proposal is an extension of the historical monograph, as he points out himself, it is not fully satisfactory from the point of view of the possibilities offered by information technology.²²

A third response to the question of online narrativity is to emphasise that online narratives are different in kind from the old monographic narratives. Information technology fashions new narrative forms. This is of course also what in part underlies the previous two responses. The enriched publication is most typical of such new narrative form (and the aforementioned 'The Differences Slavery Made: A Close Analysis of Two American Communities' by William Thomas and Edward Ayers is its best example). The following distinctions between the 'old' and the 'new' narrative can be made:

old narrative	new (online) narrative
book, article, review	enriched publication, wiki, blog, exhibition
monographic	collaborative, participatory, interactive
linear	non-linear, hypertextual
panoramic	collage
writing and reading	direct communication

There is an overlap in these distinctions. For example, as professionals, historians write authoritative monographs and the panoramic interpretations they offer are ordered in a specific way to be read in that order, hence the linear nature of the monograph. Enriched publication, collaborative writing,

22 William G. Thomas takes his and Ayers' project (see above, note 10) to be an alternative to Darnton's pyramid structure: 'The authors propose a prismatic model [...] one that allows readers to explore angles of interpretation on the same evidentiary and historiographical

background'. Thomas, 'Computing and the Historical Imagination', in: Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens and John Unsworth (eds.), *A Companion to Digital Humanities* (Oxford 2004) 1-11, there 8. This is close to what Darnton's third and fourth layer is concerned with.

wiki's, blogs and the use of hypertext are examples of new forms of writing.²³ The hypertext, best conceived as linked building blocks that are meaningful in themselves, 'make room for association and personal paths of readers'²⁴, breaking with the linearity of the old narrative. The panoramic interpretation of the monograph is exchanged for the interactive, participatory online narrative.

It is clear that information technology supports new narrative forms: and a comparison between the old and new narrative forms could be made to determine if and how historical understanding is best achieved. An observation of the Swiss historian Peter Haber, however, points us in another direction. Haber observes that writing using a word processing program involves dialogical thinking. This is so because the writer not only has his own text in view; he also has other texts behind or besides his own on his screen.²⁵ Of course we may object that this is not something new, for when writing with a pen or typewriter, we also have other texts in mind and books laying open on our 'traditional' desktop. Haber, however, does have a point when he observes that because of the Internet, the computer as a 'writing platform' is turned into a 'communication platform'.²⁶ Haber thus seems to agree with those authors who describe the information age as a second orality that emerged from writing and print culture.²⁷

The point is that information technology and the new concept of narrativity it supports is about direct communication rather than about reading and writing. The participatory, collaborative and interactive nature that is always associated with information technology makes sense precisely because of its function as a tool for direct communication. This is why the online dialogue can be said to be the underlying concept of online narrativity. Now let us push this concept a bit further and think of the online dialogue as an online alternative to academic history writing.

The dialogue as a model for historical understanding

The online dialogue is best situated between the written and the spoken word. An online dialogue resembles a conversation – the spoken word – in that two or more speakers converse with one another. The online dialogue also resembles the written word in that, in contrast to ordinary spoken

23 For a good discussion of these new forms, see Peter Haber, *Digital Past. Geschichtswissenschaft im Digitalen Zeitalter* (München 2011) 115-133.

24 *Ibid.*, 119. My translation.

25 *Ibid.*, 124.

26 *Ibid.*, 125.

27 For example J.C. Nyíri, *Tradition and Individuality: Essays* (Dordrecht, etc. 1992) 80-81. The term was coined by Walter J. Ong in his *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (London, New York 2002 [1982]) 3, 133-135.

conversations, responses are the result of thoughtful deliberation. The online dialogue is also different from collaborative writing, since each participant adds his or her thought in response to a question or proposition from another participant. The in-between situation of the dialogue is in line with the dynamic and conversational nature of the Internet. An online dialogue is likely to have more than two participants. However, since the structure of the dialogue develops via the structure of questioning and answering there are likely to emerge two or three groups of participants.

The possibility of responding is a reason to favour the spoken word above the written word. This is, at least, the opinion of Socrates in response to Phaedrus in a famous passage in Plato that reads thus:

That's the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive: but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words: they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, they go on telling you just the same thing forever.²⁸

If we understand this passage in the context of information technology providing a communication platform, then it tells us that we are to take advantage of the possibilities offered by information technology: in the online dialogue we ask questions, we participate and collaborate, and we are able to make use of the variable, dynamic and interactive nature of the Internet, deploying, if we wish, every tool, technique, and medium at our disposal.

The question is how can the online dialogue achieve what the monographic narrative aimed at before? How can it support comprehensive, retrospective understanding? Crucial is the concept of dialectic in the sense given to it by Plato. Dialectic is the opposite of rhetoric, the technique used by the sophists whom Plato so vehemently dislikes. Where dialectic focuses on shared understanding, agreement and truth, rhetoric is about make-believe and persuasion.

The dialectic of giving and asking for reasons constitutes the heart of the dialogue.²⁹ The dialogue thus is not simply an exchange of ideas, for as Davidson observes: the

28 Plato, *Phaedrus* 275D.

29 Donald Davidson, 'Dialectic and Dialogue', *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford 2005) 251-259, there 254.

dialogue supplies the nexus in which thoughts and concepts are formed and given meaning. [...] we have no clear thoughts except as these are sharpened in the process of being grasped by others.³⁰

Here understanding emerges from conversation.³¹ The Socratic method of *elenchus*, of examining, testing and refuting the meaning of words, in its progression of asking and answering questions, aims at establishing a clearer idea about its subject matter. Here asking and answering questions is a process leading to agreement and shared understanding. It does so by bringing out inconsistencies, by mutual interpretation, and by a serious commitment of the participants to the issues that are being discussed.³² As for being committed, this means that participants should say what they believe to be true (rather than telling what 'one' or 'others' believe or want to believe to be the truth). In addition to being true, contributions should be informative, relevant and perspicuous. These are the four maxims of conversation that should be taken into account in the online dialogue.³³ When there is talk about participation, collaboration and interaction, are not then these the maxims that are required?

Since understanding emerges in the dialogue, the end of the dialogue is not what matters most: rather the dialogical process is. Advancing understanding is the aim of the *elenctic* dialogue. To be sure, the *elenctic* dialogue is not the only type of dialogue there is.³⁴ However, it is the one best suited for gaining historical understanding. It does so by clarifying concepts in a process of questioning and answering leading to agreement and shared understanding. The concepts to be clarified are the historical conclusions or ideas. Historical understanding is not arrived at by a progressive empirical testing of conclusions, as if the truth of a historical conclusion were to be established by means of verification, but by testing its internal coherence and what is intrinsic to it. It is here that what Mink referred to as the ingredient historical conclusion is on a par with the hypothesis of the *eidos* (form) and where it is to be distinguished from the detachable conclusions of the sciences.³⁵ Historical conclusions are not inferred from and proven by the

30 Davidson, 'The Socratic Concept of Truth', *Truth*, 241-250, there 249.

31 Something which especially comes to the fore in Plato's *Philebus*. See Davidson, 'Gadamer and Plato's *Philebus*', *Truth*, 261-275, there 265-266.

32 I draw these three characteristics from Davidson's 'Plato's Philosopher'.

33 See H.P. Grice, 'Logic and Conversation', in: P. Cole and J. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts* (New York 1975) 41-58.

34 For other types of dialogue, see Douglas Walton, 'The Place of Dialogue Theory in Logic, Computer Science and Communication Studies', *Synthese* 123 (2000) 327-346, there 336. Walton omits the *elenctic* dialogue in his overview.

35 On this distinction between hypothesis in science and the hypothesis of the *eidos*, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, translation and introduction by P. Christopher Smith (New Haven, London 1980) 33.

evidence; they enable us to understand the ‘evidence’ as ingredient to or ‘participating’ in the historical conclusion.

This then, is a model for historical understanding. In an online environment, historical understanding is to be arrived at in dialogue with others. Historical understanding develops in the dialogue, as past reality, as it is inferred from its remains and the appropriate methods of analysing those remains, is seen from the vantage point of the developing historical conclusion. The dialogue thus will not simply turn into a narrative to be read online, for central to it is the dialogical process of giving and asking for reasons with the goal of achieving agreement and shared understanding. Here information technology strengthens interpretation rather than weakening it.³⁶

A project recently initiated by Bruno Latour with the title ‘An Inquiry into Modes of Existence’³⁷ may serve as an example of an online elenctic dialogue. Latour’s project is concerned with modernisation and investigates the disjunction between experiences of modernisation and accounts of modernisation. It offers a digital environment ‘that will turn readers into co-researchers’. Researchers are invited to comment on an ‘interim report’, propose new documents, offer critique, and ask new questions. This the project refers to as ‘diplomatic negotiations’ and the project’s team ‘mediators’ are to make sure that this process runs smoothly in order that the inquiry becomes a collective work. The two-year project’s aim is to have ‘advanced in the exploration of a proposition’ and the end goal is

[...] to propose an alternative for the term ‘modernize’, one that is compatible with the expression ‘ecologize’ and which we [the project team] sum up with the term ‘composition’. Learning how to compose the common world, this is what is at stake.

The alternative for the term ‘modernise’ is the (name of the) ingredient historical conclusion which is to be arrived at during the project. Understanding develops in the dialogue, as the participants give and ask for reasons: and this is only achieved when they commit themselves to the maxims of conversation, and the ‘mediators’ are to make sure that they do so.

36 Cf. Rafael Capurro, ‘Digital Hermeneutics: An Outline’, *AI & Society* 25 (2010) 35-42, there 36, who argues the latter.

37 Bruno Latour, ‘An Inquiry into Modes of Existence’, <http://modesofexistence.org/> (2 August 2013).

Conclusion

The objection may be made that what I offered in the last section of this essay is a *Gedankenexperiment*, for even though online discussion platforms such as H-Net already exist, the online dialogue as conceived here does not, and it might never come into being (with perhaps some notable exceptions such as Latour's project). This of course, is true. Furthermore there are no a priori grounds to suppose that the contributions of those historians who would engage in an online dialogue would be true, informative, relevant and perspicuous.

Be this as it may, I would like to stress that we need to reflect on historical understanding in our digital age. This essay, with its emphasis on the online dialogue, is meant to further that reflection. It is not intended as a prediction, prescription or utopian vision of historical understanding in the age of information technology. This being said, the elenctic dialogue as presented here does serve as a model for online historical understanding, a model that, I think, is best in line with new technologies. In the first part of this essay, I presented the online dialogue as a concept that underlies information technology. Information technology is participatory, collaborative, dynamic, interactive and variable, enabling direct communication. These features, which are widely discussed, ideally require that participants commit themselves to the maxims of conversation: their contributions should be true, informative, relevant, and perspicuous. In an online environment, historical understanding is arrived at in dialogue with others.

In the introduction of this essay I quoted a remark from my ally Frisch: 'The goal [of digital history] is [...] to broaden the participation in a dialogic process of engagement, questioning, and reflection on answers'. I hope to have explained what Frisch might have meant and why it is important. ◀

Chiel van den Akker (1974) is a post-doctoral researcher and lecturer of the Theory of History at the vu University Amsterdam. His research concerns the way in which the emergence of modern reproduction techniques influences the understanding and representation of the past. He is also a member of the interdisciplinary research group Agora that is concerned with the development of methods and techniques to improve the interpretation of online museum collections. His research is financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research as part of the *cATCH* (Continual Access to Cultural Heritage) programme. Recent publications: Chiel van den Akker, 'The Exemplification Theory of History: Narrativist Philosophy and the Autonomy of History', *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6:2 (2012) 236-257; Chiel van den Akker et al., 'Digital Hermeneutics: Agora and the Online Understanding of Cultural Heritage', *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Web Science (WebSci'11)* (Koblenz 2011); Chiel van den Akker, 'Historische representatie en de betekenis van het verleden', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 123:3 (2010) 430-440. Email: c.m.vanden.akker@vu.nl.