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## History... in pieces

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### Abstract

This article examines the fragmentation of history in popular storytelling media, arguing that such fragmentation reveals more about contemporary narrative trends than about history itself. Drawing on narratological theory and the author's experience as a TV producer, it positions fragmentation as an inevitable aspect of historical storytelling rather than a consequence of modern media. The analysis explores three dimensions: the theoretical necessity of narrative fragmentation (White, Fludernik), debates between advocates of democratized access versus critics concerned with oversimplification of traumatic events, and a heuristic perspective revealing how sensationalized fragments can be co-opted into politically motivated narratives. While acknowledging benefits of increased accessibility and representation of marginalized voices, the article highlights risks including the proliferation of ahistorical content serving extremist ideologies. The author concludes by advocating for an interdisciplinary, sociologically-informed approach to discourse analysis that examines the social forces driving contemporary reconstructions of the past.

**Key words:** fragmentation, narratology, discourse, historiography

**Parole chiave:** frammentazione, narratologia, discorso, storiografia

When we tell stories about the past, we inevitably break history into pieces. We divide the historical record into elements based on their perceived importance to our narrative. Certain facts or episodes are sidelined or downplayed, others are re-arranged to create a stronger narrative flow, and still others are retold so frequently that they become embedded in collective memory.

I was an active agent in this process when I worked as a TV producer, making historical documentaries. When preparing research materials for a director in my very first TV job, I was told to include more stories with “sex, death and murder” (Selby 2023: 48). I went on to produce several series about historical periods that US, UK and international commissioners knew would capture their viewing public’s attention and imagination: the British royal family, the Roman Empire, Viking conquests, the Second World War. History was broken up into discrete, entertaining fragments that were caricatured to highlight periods of dramatic social upheaval, or episodes of extreme violence. This narrative engineering takes place across all storytelling mediums that include historical programming: books, TV dramas, musicals, podcasts, radio shows, videogames, and social media.

Historians, in their analysis of this fragmentation process and its effects on popular discourse, have tended to focus on the relative benefits and dangers, but I would like to offer an alternative characterization of the phenomenon, based on my own heuristic perspective as an active participant in the process: an observer, consumer and shaper of historical discourse. I believe that there is an important sociological aspect to the flow of these fragments in popular storytelling that reveals more about current narrative trends than it does about history itself, and I advocate for an interdisciplinary approach to fully understand the dynamics of this discourse.

My methodological approach is founded in narratological theory. Monika Fludernik (2009) and Hayden White (1987) assert that the fragmentation of history is not an unfortunate consequence of modern media production techniques, but rather a necessary aspect of historiography. To render history into a form that can be consumed, understood and distributed, it must follow a narrative process (White 1987: 268), and that narrative process is a discourse between the narrator and their story (Fludernik 2009: 13), in which elements of the historical record are highlighted, brought together, and structured into a form to which audiences respond effectively. Dilthey (2002), furthermore, advocates for an understanding of history that takes into account actions, analogy and the context of lived experience. Narrative, therefore, is an essential process of historiography, and fragmentation is a necessary aspect of narrative. Engagement with those narrative fragments by audiences creates a discursive response of its own, following Ricoeur’s hermeneutic approach, which seeks to mediate the tension between time and narrative in the construction of history (1984).

Recent literature on the engagement with fragmented history in popular culture features a strong contingent of advocates for the facilitation of greater accessibility to history through storytelling media, but critics are particularly concerned by the oversimplification of deeply traumatic historical events. For example, in 2014, Alabama teen Breanna Mitchell faced significant backlash on social media when she tweeted a smiling selfie in front of Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp (Gunter 2017), sparking a conversation around what engagement was and was not appropriate at such sites of collective tragedy. In 2017, Shahak Shapira's art project, *Yolocaust.de*, highlighted the inappropriate nature of some photographs taken at the Holocaust memorial in Berlin by juxtaposing them against photographs from concentration camps (Gunter 2017). In 2020, the #HolocaustChallenge on TikTok encouraged creators to dress up as Holocaust victims and talk about these victims' lives (Jones 2020). This engagement had a variety of motivations behind it, with some creators attempting to relate to victims or share stories of their family history, but the 'challenge' was widely condemned as disrespectful. Jo Guldi and David Armitage anticipated this requirement for balance in their seminal 2014 manifesto, which advised setting academic rigour, media literacy, and authoritative historical education as core foundations for fostering critical engagement.

Apologists for historical fragmentation and storytelling through popular media, on the other hand, celebrate the increased accessibility and subsequent democratization and decolonization of history. Jerome de Groot, for example, has argued that historical novels, TV documentaries and dramas create a new kind of experiential engagement with history that enfranchises the public as participants in the discourse (2009, 2010, 2012). Equally, Thomas Cauvin notes that the democratization of information has led to a decolonization of history (2024), and this has led to a clear change in how history is portrayed in popular culture, creating a platform and representation for groups that have been "under-represented in the archival tradition" (Madison 2017: 53). The hit musical *Hamilton*, for example, tells the tale of a white male through the voices and performances of women and racial minorities. The show's creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda, said that this was "a story about America then, told by America now" (Herrera 2018: 229). For Claire Bond Potter, the innovative reinterpretation of history by the musical, as well as the interactive response that it has prompted among its fan base, has translated the intellectual language of a different era into a more modern, more relatable, more entertaining parlance (2018: 328–329). In the UK, meanwhile, the musical *SIX* retells the Tudor history lesson learned by every British schoolchild (that King Henry VIII had six wives and that all but one met an unpleasant end), but from a modernized, feminist perspective. A poem used to remember each wife's fate: "divorced, beheaded, died / divorced, beheaded, survived," is set to music as the overture of the show, followed by the line, "and just for you tonight / we're divorced, beheaded, LIVE!"

The show even brings the participatory culture of social media into the theatre: during the finale, audience members are encouraged to get their phones out, film the performance, and sing along. These modern fragmentations of history, made accessible and entertaining, have allowed historically silenced voices – those of racial minorities and women – to take centre stage, adding depth, nuance and perspective to the traditional canon.

A heuristic perspective offers a third, sociological dimension to the discussion. I have noticed that the fragmentation of history in the pursuit of narrative storytelling can result in an imbalance of historical knowledge. Facts or episodic events are prioritized or popularized because of their sensationalism, their modern resonance, or their shareability. In one of the episodes of my ancient history podcast, *Against the Lore*, the three historical experts (one specializing in ancient Greece, another an expert on the ancient Near East, and myself, a Roman history specialist), came together to share our “pet peeves” around historical events or factoids that we felt had an overblown status in the popular imagination. The perception of Queen Cleopatra VII of Egypt as a promiscuous *bonne vivante*, for example, is a character assassination that was deliberately manufactured by Octavian, who, in his pursuit of sole power in Roman politics, was attempting to discredit her and by extension, her ally (and Octavian’s political rival), Mark Antony (Wyke 2007: 213–214). Yet despite a distinct lack of evidence supporting her alleged promiscuity and alcoholism, and a generous body of evidence supporting her skills in diplomacy and statecraft, the association between Cleopatra and seductiveness not only pervades, but has contributed to a continuation of orientalist and sexist tropes levelled against powerful women throughout history (Hall 1989: 95). Another historical episode that has captured the public imagination is a cuneiform complaints tablet, acquired from the site of the ancient city of Ur by the British Museum (British Museum 131236). It holds the status of being the oldest known complaints tablet in history and was found in the house of a merchant named Ea-Nasir (Guinness World Records 2025). The house contained several such tablets, all complaining of defective deliveries of copper. The language of this particular tablet, written by a disappointed customer called Nanni, resonates strongly with modern complaints letters, creating a moment of intimacy “when time collapses” between a historical figure and a modern reader (Hughes 2025). Despite this letter being one of many found at the site, and despite several other examples of complaints letters throughout antiquity, it is Nanni’s letter, more than any other, that has captured the public imagination through memeification, giving it an elevated status in the historical record.

*Against the Lore’s* podcast episode on “pet peeves” was so well-received that we launched a poll on the social media platform then known as Twitter (now X) to ask our followers what their greatest frustrations around historical misconceptions were. This revealed a darker side to the fragmentation process: a coopting of

decontextualized historical fragments into narratives with a broader political agenda, such as far-right, neo-Nazi and white supremacist perspectives. Our followers were deeply concerned by an idea, pervasive on Twitter and in popular depictions of antiquity, that the Romans and Greeks were northern European white. The inaccuracy of this fallacy is obvious (not least the geographical positions of Greece and Italy as distinctly southern European, rather than in northern Europe; furthermore, the wider reaches of both empires clearly encompass portions of Asia), yet despite the widespread availability of maps, the perception still pervades. Naoise Mac Sweeney has expertly traced the evolution of this narrative, in which Greco-Roman culture was coopted into a story of Western cultural hegemony (2023), and Jerry Toner (2013) complements this exposure of the narrative with additional nuance in his book charting the way 19th and 20th century Western travellers explored the Middle East using classical texts as their guides, creating a discourse between antiquity and modernity. However, our podcast's followers' concerns point to a trend in which the narrative takes on a life of its own, running beyond – even counter to the weight of – the historical evidence. Rather than serving as a point of engagement or connection, as de Groot and Cauvin advocate, carefully selected and isolated historical fragments become an exclusionary framework to feed a volatile ideology: a manipulation against which Margaret Macmillan presciently warned (2009: 9).

Even the global streaming platform Netflix, chasing after the popularity of historical narratives that support a certain political agenda, commissioned a series presented by pseudoscientist Graham Hancock, who used his airtime to pursue his theory that an Ice Age (read: northern European white) civilization predated those of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt (*Ancient Apocalypse* 2022; Azizi 2024). The growing prominence of such ahistorical, politically motivated narratives, peppered with mis- and disinformation, has muddied the range of reliable resources available to a curious public and developed an ambiguity of information: an ambiguity on which alternative narratives are quick to capitalize.

This phenomenon suggests that historiographical analysis alone is insufficient. While Guldi and Armitage's intervention offered valuable insights, it has not adequately addressed the underlying dynamics at play. The question is not simply how to improve the teaching of history, but rather to understand the sociological mechanisms driving its contemporary reconstruction. Narratological theory confirms that the selective appropriation of historical fragments is inevitable. Storytelling is at the core of history as a discipline. Audiences continue to share and consume history "in pieces," through the storytelling mediums with which they are most familiar. Our narratives about the past serve as a reflection of our contemporary societal values and identities, fuelling the enduring interest in understanding the historical figures and events that contributed to our current state of being. But this leaves

unanswered more pressing questions concerning motivation and purpose. Why does this teleological restructuring of historical fragmentation occur, and to what ends? The analysis presented here has been necessarily synoptic, offering an overview rather than an exhaustive examination. My aim has been to identify and characterize this problem rather than to resolve it. I conclude by advocating for a sociological approach to discourse analysis in popular history – one that embraces interdisciplinary methodologies to examine the social forces shaping our engagement with the past. This article serves as a call for such further inquiry.

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## Abstrakt

### Historia... w odcinkach

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje proces fragmentacji „dyskursu historii” w popularnych mediach – pokazując, że mówi on więcej o współczesnych trendach narracyjnych niż o samej historii. Wykorzystując zdobycze teorii narratologicznej i odwołując się do doświadczeń autorki jako producentki telewizyjnej, artykuł ujmuje fragmentację jako

nieunikniony aspekt narracji historycznej, a nie konsekwencję działania współczesnych mediów. Autorka bada trzy wymiary: teoretyczną konieczność fragmentacji narracji (White, Fludernik), debaty między zwolennikami zdemokratyzowanego dostępu a krytykami zaniepokojonymi nadmiernym uproszczeniem traumatycznych wydarzeń z przeszłości oraz perspektywę heurystyczną, ujawniającą jak sensacyjne fragmenty mogą być tym, co skłania do „włączenia się” w narracje motywowane politycznie. Doceniając korzyści płynące ze zwiększonej dostępności i reprezentacji głosów marginalizowanych, artykuł podkreśla zagrożenia, w tym proliferację ahistorycznych treści służących ideologiom ekstremistycznym. Autorka kończy artykuł, opowiadając się za interdyscyplinarnym, socjologicznie uzasadnionym podejściem do analizy dyskursu, które bada siły społeczne „napędzające” współczesne rekonstrukcje przeszłości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** fragmentacja, narratologia, dyskurs, historiografia