

Author's response to Eugen Zeleňák's review of *Frank Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause*

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I am grateful to Eugen Zeleňák for belatedly focusing attention on and thus perhaps renewing wider interest in my book, *Frank Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause* (see Icke 2012) through his eight page review of it recently published in this journal (see Zeleňák 2014). Nevertheless, I remain somewhat bothered by and more than a little perplexed by his style of argumentation which alights everywhere on the book's relatively minor points while skipping over, or omitting entirely, the vital points about which its central argument turns. That is to say, to be more specific about Zeleňák's omissions, that in his review he characterises my primary argument(s) – those marshalled against Ankersmit's proposal(s) for a direct, unmediated form of engagement with the past through (sublime) historical experience – as 'shallow and not illuminating at all' (p. 261), 'just too shallow to explain anything' (p. 264) and again, lest the charge of *shallowness* be somehow missed, he finds that my writings constitute 'a very shallow type of explanation' (p. 267). Yet nowhere in his review does he even begin to address those primary arguments. In fact, I wonder if he has grasped them at all. Indeed, had he done so, his review might have included some kind of useful and instructive challenge to, or perhaps even agreement with, those crucial elements of my comprehensively argued "contra-Ankersmit" position.

To illustrate and underline the point that I am making here I shall now turn briefly to just two of those 'crucial elements'. First, then, it surely cannot be overlooked that I have reasoned variously throughout my text

that experience is always *mediated*, thus questioning Ankersmit's insistence that it is actually possible to have the sort of direct, *unmediated* experiential relationship with the past that he claims is possible and on which his theories of 'Historical Experience (HE)' and 'Sublime Historical Experience (SHE)' depend and, consequently, without which they fail. One might argue for an unmediated sensation but it seems to me, as I have explored in some considerable detail in the book, that experience is always contextualised within a language bound framework of understanding or "realisation" and that it therefore cannot be pure as required by Ankersmit's theory. I wonder what Zelenák makes of that? And, second, there's the problem of decontextualisation which, according to Ankersmit, is required of both the subject and the object of experience as enabling conditions for the actual transmission and reception of experience. But how is the subject of experience to decontextualize? That is, shed his/her identity, enculturation, etc., and thus be reduced to a vacant state of being or a blank slate, so to speak. And, having decontextualized, if such an astonishing human feat is to be deemed possible, how is that decontextualized, hollowed-out "subject" going to be able to grasp an experience or, for that matter, anything at all? What's at issue here is that these and the many other potentially damaging arguments which I have laid out in my book and which together help constitute the core and primary substance of my challenge to Ankersmit's theories of HE and SHE are not mentioned at all in Zelenák's review.

I have to add to this that where Zelenák himself engages in argumentation he doesn't appear to fully grasp the implications of what he is saying. For instance, to give just one such example, he argues sensibly (p. 265) that no author is 'original', yet on the following page he contradicts himself when he states that 'Ankersmit (with his notion of the narrative substance, his distinction between narration and individual statement or representation and description, etc.) is an original Philosopher'. Now, let's be clear, while Ankersmit's early and for me engaging, often complex *mode* of exposition/argumentation and his particular appropriation of signifying terms might be taken as original, there is nothing in its substantive subject matter that hasn't already been variously expressed by theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard, Roland Barthes, Hayden White and many others before them. Or, in short, one could say that the distinction struck by Ankersmit between *narrative statement* and *narrative form* (between *fact* and *value* or *quantity* and *quality*) is innovatively presented but not in its substance original.

So, to sum-up, it's Zelenák's narrow focus on and his preoccupation with secondary matters that disappoints me and, perhaps more to the point, arguably diminishes his critique of my book. Nevertheless, this is a review of sorts and, who knows, it might in the end have the effect of again drawing attention to and emphasizing the hopelessness of Ankersmit's extraordinary "experiential" proposals.

References

- ICKE, P. P. (2012): *Frank Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause: A Journey from Language to Experience*. New York: Routledge.
- ZELEŇÁK, E. (2014): Review of "Peter P. Icke: *Frank Ankersmit's Lost Historical Cause: A Journey from Language to Experience*. New York: Routledge, 198 pages", *Organon F* 2, No. 2, 261-279.