

**Method and Evidence in *The Egalitarian Sublime: From Microhistory to Microcritique*
(following Carlo Ginzburg)**

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Microhistory

The problem of method in the search for an egalitarian sublime is a problem of historiography, or of the 'writing of history'.¹ George Iggers extends this dictionary definition of the term in two ways: '(1) to refer to the study of the history of historical writing as distinct from the writing of history; and (2) to refer to the concern with theoretical and methodological questions that relate to historical writing'.² The second definition matters most for the problem of the sublime, where historiography is about problems of method and theory.

Even after this narrowing down of definitions, historiography remains a vast field. Iggers' remarks come from his Foreword to Susan Kinnell's annotated bibliography of the term; her research stretches to 8,772 entries across two volumes (in 1987). I don't propose to cover this daunting topic in full. Instead, I will follow one group of historians, mainly through a single member, Carlo Ginzburg, well known for his book on heresy, *The Cheese and the Worms*. It will become apparent, over the course of this essay, that this close focus reflects what I have adopted from Ginzburg. The plan is not to judge his work as history, but to learn from it as a model for philosophical method as it applies to the sublime.

I admire Ernst Breisach's view on clear-cut judgements about historiography: 'once the link between history writing and the human condition is grasped in all its complexity, simple solutions vanish'.³ Like philosophy, historiography is the product of deeply felt

consideration of the human condition, whereas definite judgements are a trade-off between the desire to have settled decisions, preferably ones that benefit ourselves, and the resistance of subjects and conditions to distinct categories, such as 'responsible' and 'innocent'. Who is fully innocent and who is guilty without mitigation, if our worlds are complex products of communal activity and shared evolution?

For my work on the sublime, the primary task of method is not judgement but learning as a ground for action; where to learn without judgement is the best way to maintain a cautious relation to the past. It is about reflection on the disputes of historiography, as debates connecting problems of method to ethical and political engagement. An example of this interaction of method and practice can be taken from the German *Historikerstreit*. Beginning in the mid-1980s, this was a series of historical, political and philosophical arguments about whether the Nazi past should be maintained as part of German identity in the present and, if so, how best to remember that past for Germany's future.

The *Historikerstreit* was a problem of method as well as a moral debate, since if history detects an entanglement of culture and politics, rather than simply recording the acts of a particular set of politicians and soldiers, then Nazi violence could be seen to remain latent in contemporary and future thought. Forms of cultural memory could then be as important as historical records for future remembrance.⁴ There are many examples of such cultural testimony in post-war German art and literature; for instance, in Anselm Kiefer's re-inscriptions of Germany's Jewish past and memories of the Holocaust:

A Jewish mystical and intellectual past and tradition emerge out of the shadowy chambers of the cellar space, introducing into the visual, linguistic and acoustic landscape of postwar Germany the absent other, the Jew, signified in the foreign

sounds of the Hebrew language – the word *Merkaba* – and in the remote and esoteric traditions of Jewish mysticism – Kabbalah.⁵

In a penetrating discussion, dedicated to Kiefer, Peter Sloterdijk studies the tension between historical redundancy and the duty of memory through different definitions of the sublime. For Sloterdijk, the classical sublime ‘has no future and will only survive in those omnipresent famous caricatures fit for mass culture as horror, tension and distortion’.⁶ The classical sublime of awe, immensity and grandeur, often associated with gods, has no place in modernity, other than in the cultural simplifications of horrifying events such as war, violence and ecological disaster rendered as forms of mysterious power worthy of awe and terror. This recent mock-classical sublime is a twofold distortion, hiding the complex nature of events and turning us away from their sources in human actions, ideas and natural causes. When simplified and half-forgotten in this way, the classical sublime becomes politically repressive.

There is an intriguing resonance between the works in the collection Sloterdijk is contributing to and the themes of the invisibility of battles and of the contradictory aims of founding and warning against nations. Both turn out to be important for Ginzburg’s argument. In his series of woodcuts about the Battle of Hermann, Kiefer connects the defeat of Roman legions in the Teutoburg forest in 9CE to Nazi propaganda around German myths and historical figures. The Battle of Hermann only becomes visible, and only partly, when its mythical effects are brought into modern culture and violence.⁷ Not only are great battles impossible to see in full, they also only come into view when serving new conflicts and interests, above all those of propaganda.

For Sloterdijk, there is another sublime retaining contemporary significance: 'the second residue of the sublime, the sense of the Higher per se that should remain as indefinite as long as possible in order to avoid the instantly religious never gets completely submerged for all the profanities and de-sublimations'.⁸ Independent of any given sublime power or object, there is also a feel for higher values as ways beyond a world devoid of superior causes or reasons, left with only base interests and neutral forces. This sublime must resist religious and natural representations, while preserving a sense for higher purpose and value.

In the search for an egalitarian sublime, Sloterdijk is taking risks in attaching the new sublime to 'the Higher'. Ideas of height, exceptional standing and collective assent, indicated by the capital letter and definite article, are already on the way to divisiveness, exclusivity and hierarchy, and hence also to their mundane distortions. Against *the* Higher, the egalitarian sublime seeks difference rather than division, democracy rather than exclusivity, and multiplicity rather than hierarchy. Nevertheless, Sloterdijk's analysis touches on a methodological problem that is persistent for the sublime. How can we be both against and for the sublime? It also identifies the critique required for ideas borrowed from a tainted past. How can we carry the past forward guardedly?

In answering these questions, my aim is to learn from the method Ginzburg and others have described as microhistory. Despite its name, the method should not be understood as simply working on limited objects, details or minutiae. On the contrary, as defined and practised by Ginzburg, through techniques contrasting micro and macro views, microhistory responds to the difficulty of writing about periods and topics defying a single overview. The object of study is resistant to homogeneous representation because it is constituted by heterogeneous elements. This heterogeneity is a challenge to microhistory,

as an attempt to encompass fragments and their sum, a problem inherited from the old but persistent philosophical puzzles of mereology.⁹ The challenge corresponds to the problem facing an account of the full sweep of works on the sublime, since a general theory fails to do justice to the components making up the complete topic. A different approach is required, and that's what microhistory can help us with.

In his essay 'Microhistory: Two or Three Things that I Know about It', Ginzburg gives an astute description of the difficulties calling for microhistory.¹⁰ He begins with a remark about the impossibility of gaining a single view of a battle. The whole conflict remains invisible, except in great visionary works, such as Altdorfer's Renaissance painting *The Battle of Alexander at Issus*.¹¹ Altdorfer combines highly detailed fractions of the battle, painterly qualities such as the symbolic use of colour, focus and texture, overstated contrasts between scales and topics, mythical and religious themes, and natural and imaginary landscapes into an overall vision. Visibility emerges through the artistic composition of heterogeneous local and large-scale fragments.

Describing the painting, Christopher Wood follows the complexity and originality of Altdorfer's techniques for rendering the battle: 'The upper half of the *Battle of Alexander* expands with unreal rapidity into an arcing panorama comprehending vast coiling tracts of globe and sky.'¹² The panorama is the large-scale battle, but it is only captured through interactions between different dimensions: 'It is as if the momentous collision of armies exploded outwards into three dimensions, and was only then projected back onto the planar surface.'¹³ This to-and-fro between different scales, dimensions and realms is the narrative basis for microhistory.

The past is retold through difficult compositions, rather than single images. These compositions cohere thanks to abstract diagrams and imagination: 'Only an abstract

diagram or a visionary imagination such as Altdorfer's can convey a global image of [the battle].¹⁴ The most important point is that, without settling on a single dimension, the diagrams work dynamically, that is, through unresolved backward and forward, and inwards and outwards, movements: 'A close-up look permits us to grasp what eludes a comprehensive viewing, and vice versa.'¹⁵ Though Ginzburg contrasts the abstraction of the diagram with the visionary quality of the artist's imagination, both compositions must be seen as artistic, in the sense of creative and experimental. They are series of different and incomplete essays at history, instead of increasingly accurate versions on the way to an ideal representation. The aim is to communicate with the past rather than reproduce it.

Wood's remark on the unreality of movement in Altdorfer's painting is challenging for Ginzburg's adoption of it as a model for history. If the painting makes a real battle unreal, how can it stand as a model for a discipline that ought to come as close to past reality as possible? There is a clue in the idea of possibility. If it isn't possible to bring back the real past, except by appealing to techniques departing from reality, then the problem isn't about mimicking any supposed form of the real, but rather about how best to work with the past in creative ways. If that's the case, then retaining a supposedly homogeneous and well-ordered form for reality might be exactly the wrong way to return to the past. Copying according to a strict formal representation of the real might in fact introduce greater distortions than diagrammatic narratives and painterly techniques.

Altdorfer's art and Ginzburg's microhistory break with linear time and regular space to achieve a better retelling of the relation between the whole and its heterogeneous parts. For Wood, the painting of the battle expresses much more than a set of objective facts understood as changes in the occupation of space-time locations such as 'Alexander was here' and 'Darius was there'. It narrates historical turning points, forces, clashes and

changes in direction: 'For the picture represents an historical pivot, the expulsion of a force from the East, a muscular resistance to the left-to-right flow of history.'¹⁶ These effects are a translation of the battle's complex unfolding and many-layered quality; not only a meeting of two armies, but the wider destiny of empires and the narrower fate of particular actors: *the movement from East to West turned on these clashing events around these individuals.*

The motivations of Altdorfer's narrative are contemporary as well as historical. In referring back to the earlier defeat of Persian forces, during the later Siege of Vienna in 1529, Altdorfer is providing hope to his contemporaries for relief from the threat of Suleiman the Magnificent's Ottoman rule. This interdependence of narration, contemporary relevance, evidence and truth is a constant concern in Ginzburg's work. When making his initial remark about the invisibility of battles, he alludes to two themes important for his research and for the problem of history, yet always treated in a discrete and often tangential manner in his books and essays. This obliqueness should not be confused with disinterest. The subject matter is at the heart of his historical commitments, but it must be studied through secondary manifestations.

The first theme is propaganda and its relation to evidence. The invisibility of battles allows for deceitful manipulation. Ginzburg gives the First Gulf War as an example of the creation of the battle through propaganda and media control: 'A battle, strictly speaking, is invisible, as we have been reminded (and not only thanks to military censorship) by the images televised during the Gulf War.'¹⁷ The war was presented through live video images from US bombers and virtual reconstructions that gave the impression of conflict without ever showing the full ground battle or wider aspects of the war, such as the sabotaging of control systems and the grounding of Iraqi planes, or the earlier US military and financial

support for Iraq in its war with Iran, which had helped Iraq become a dangerous regional power.¹⁸

Ginzburg has a distinctive reading of the potential for propaganda in the invisibility of battles and history more widely. He turns down familiar but caricatured responses to the invisibility of history and its potential for falsification. He is a critic of the postmodern abandonment of truth and reality, but he also rejects the positivist insistence on objective reality, exclusively accessible through scientific methods. These positions are caricatures because, on both sides, every sophisticated reflection on the problem involves recognition of some role for objectivity and some risk of distortion in any narrative or presentation of facts. This means opponents tend towards a middle ground, when we cut away from the posturing of general debates and look at practice. Pure absence of truth and pure objectivity are abstractions, substituting misleading problems about absolutes for the pragmatic problem of how best to blend truthfulness and invention in order to connect past, present and future.

However, the surprising aspect of Ginzburg's position is his resistance to the middle ground between strong relativism and positivism. He searches for an apparently contradictory combination of strong obligations to evidence and to narrative invention. Instead of drifting towards the middle ground, microhistory connects rigorous commitment to the extremes. This merger of deep obligation to evidential proof and yet abandonment of brute objective reality in favour of speculation makes microhistory different and notable, since it involves a joint transformation and intensification of what other approaches view as incompatible approaches.

Narrative has as an ambiguous relation to propaganda and to its violent consequences. For Ginzburg, narrative is necessary, because it is the way to relate the whole

and its fragments. It is also a tool of propaganda since it allows events to be manipulated. The solution to this contradiction can be found in how the historian employs evidence. Ginzburg reflects on this in his meditation on proof and rhetoric, *History, Rhetoric and Proof: The Menahem Stern Jerusalem Lectures*. His central point is that sources are neither simple positive facts nor hopelessly opaque misrepresentations: 'Sources are neither open windows, as the positivists believe, nor fences obstructing vision, as the skeptics hold: if anything we could compare them to distorting mirrors.'¹⁹ These mirrors call for a constructive combination of narrative and evidence: 'The analysis of the specific distortion of every specific source already implies a constructive element.'²⁰

In Ginzburg's histories, there are many examples of how to achieve this combination of evidence and constructive narration in critical work against propaganda. His analysis of the role of the arrival of the relics of St Stephen on Minorca demonstrates how the passage from the veneration of the Maccabees to the veneration of Stephen was the condition for religious violence against the Jews.²¹ The careful disentanglement of Maurice Joly from guilt in the writing of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* shows how a modest and speculative tracing of textual connections can still arrive at significant conclusions: 'Imagining an omnipotent individual who models society in accordance with his own wishes, Joly involuntarily made possible the deplorable, posthumous fortune of the *Dialogue aux Enfers*. The compilers of the *Protocols* poured the materials from Joly's work into a pre-existing mould, the delusional Jewish conspiracy.'²² The mark of Ginzburg's narrative is in the idea of 'making possible'. It is a speculative connection required for the telling of uncertain connections among many texts and authors. The effect of evidence in Ginzburg's critical analysis is in the judgement on Joly ('involuntarily') that counters accusations making him an author of the *Protocols*. This is the kind of judgement we learn from, rather than rest with.

Ginzburg turns down the attraction of positivist and relativist extremes in his study of Natalie Zemon Davis's *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Reviewing this influential work of microhistory, he draws attention to the compatibility of narration and evidence-based knowledge: 'a greater awareness of the narrative dimension does not imply a weakening of the cognitive possibilities of historiography, but rather, to the contrary, their intensification'.²³ His argument depends on a sense of narrative invention as a careful threading of evidence and speculation based on possibility, where to invent does not mean to create freely: 'The term "invention" is deliberately provocative, but somewhat deceiving.'²⁴ To invent is to speculate on the possible on the basis of evidence.

Davis acknowledges Ginzburg and another important microhistorian, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, at the beginning of her book.²⁵ In an evocative metaphor, she goes on to explain how her research combines creative narration and evidence from the past: 'What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past.'²⁶ According to Ginzburg, Davis's history 'is not based on the juxtaposition between "true" and "invented," but on the integration, always scrupulously noted, of "reality" and "possibility"'.²⁷ This appeal to possibility alongside certainty puts Ginzburg's interpretation of Davis at odds with the thesis set out by Sigurður Gilfi Magnússon and István M. Szigártó that 'Microhistory is therefore, according to Levi or Davis, first and foremost a tool to discard deterministic history.'²⁸ This principled negation is contrary to microhistory, if it is understood as tentative speculation shaped by evidence, including evidence for causal relations.

For Ginzburg, the point is to combine determination and potential difference, rather than oppose individual or micro indeterminacy to large-scale determinism. Here, reality should be understood as historical evidence and speculation about possibilities. Narration

connects threads in ways that are consistent with each piece of evidence, yet also dependent on surmising what might have happened. The challenge for a philosophy of the sublime, inspired by this version of microhistory, is how to interpret evidence and possibility for a concept-based study, rather than a history of acts and events.

The reference to the invisibility of the First Gulf War calls to mind a notorious instance of so-called postmodern excess from Jean Baudrillard's newspaper articles and essays collected as *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. In his introduction to the collection, Paul Patton refutes the easy conclusion that Baudrillard is absurdly denying the reality of the war. On the contrary, he is arguing for an augmented kind of reality that takes account of the role of manufactured images and virtual realities in constituting our experiences of events: 'we live in a hyperreality which results from the fusion of the virtual and the real into a third order of reality'.²⁹ Patton is arguing against Christopher Norris and his failure to distinguish between arguing for the role of virtual images in the constitution of reality and arguing for the negation of 'all distinctions between truth and falsehood'.³⁰ One does not follow from the other and there is plenty of evidence that Baudrillard makes truth claims, including when he is arguing for hyperreality.

The idea of the hyperreal is a challenge to theories based on a concrete and material reality, since it adds a virtual component to it. Definitions of the sublime are also challenged by the hyperreal. The sublime has often been defined in relation to natural events and landscapes, but in the hyperreal it is associated with virtual techniques and effects. The shock and awe warfare of the First Gulf War is described as sublime and as inducing a sublime experience for the television viewer, because it combines terror and attraction at a safe distance from causes. This is at odds with claims that the sublime should involve real threat, but consistent with Kant's definition, where terror is not fear but rather an imaginary

projection – a ‘What-if?’ reflection rather than an overwhelming and direct ‘Run away!’ In following Ginzburg’s method, the aim of my study of the sublime is to combine evidence from different theories of the sublime with new diagrams of their relations and the potential for an egalitarian sublime.

It is important to separate the idea of a sublime safe distance from destruction from the notion that there is no destruction. Baudrillard is not claiming the latter and should not be taken as supporting the idea of a clean or surgical war. When Tanine Allison says that Baudrillard’s ‘description neglects the massive destruction on the ground’ it is a misrepresentation of his argument.³¹ Baudrillard is describing the television images and the armchair experience of modern warfare, not the horror on the ground. In fact, when Baudrillard claims the war did not take place he is supporting Allison’s critique of the dangerously detached sublime of Second World War video games and films. The points he is drawing our attention to are: who it did not take place for, how it did not take place, and why.

In discussing Baudrillard, Norris speaks of an ‘out-and-out sceptical mistrust of truth claims’ but then contradicts this claim in admitting that Baudrillard frequently uses the constative register, dependent on truth claims.³² It is perfectly consistent to make truth claims while criticising other false claims to truth and speculating about what kind of reality these commit us to. Scepticism is not a denial of truth. It is a means to investigate how truth can be manipulated. This is important for the search for an egalitarian sublime, since the control and manufacture of sublime falsehoods has been and will continue to be a way of maintaining power thanks to the opportunities of war and conflict.

Once we dismiss one-dimensional readings of Baudrillard, it is possible to see points of contact with Ginzburg. Baudrillard’s concluding remarks about the war are theories about

its real aims: 'The crucial stake, the decisive stake in this whole affair is the consensual reduction of Islam to the global order.'³³ There is a wider plan underlying the stated aims of defeating Saddam Hussein after his invasion of Kuwait: to create a general consensus around the reduction of Islam within Western democracy and economic order. Whether we think this is true or not, the idea of an ultimate stake of the war, to be connected to the evidence of how it was prosecuted and presented, is in the realm of matters of possibility that Ginzburg adds to matters of evidence.

The kind of speculative argument put forward by Baudrillard is a thesis that could be examined and perhaps strengthened, if we adopt interactions between large and small-scale perspectives, allied to careful evidence gathering. The deeper lesson I want to retain isn't in the exact correspondence between the two thinkers. It lies in the potential of methods from microhistory to bridge between evidence and speculation using narrative and diagrammatical techniques, dynamic mappings of the effects of definitions of the sublime.

The reference to the Gulf War is also a clue to the second background theme to Ginzburg's microhistory: historiography cannot and should not seek to escape engagement with contemporary problems. This can be understood as a concern to learn the lessons of history, but also to be aware of the contemporary commitments carried by any historical study. Consciously and unconsciously, history struggles with contemporary aims and presuppositions. In that sense, we should value, but also remain wary of, history as political, both in its conduct towards the past and in its efforts to change the present.

This critical awareness goes in two directions: outwards to the historical object and inwards to the writing of history. In relation to historical analysis, every study inevitably brings a series of concerns and commitments that must be minimised for a true representation to emerge. Yet these presuppositions can never be fully avoided and the

object will remain shrouded in them. Objectivity is the aim; it is also impossible. This paradox means that history is caught in a conflict due to its motivations and techniques. How can they be made to disappear to allow the object to come forth as untouched as possible?

In relation to the writing of history, every study has overt and hidden motivations about contemporary aims. These explain why the study matters and how it can contribute to its world. They answer the question 'Why have we bothered?' These motivations can be as personal as a search for individual meaning, or as universal as the quest for eternal truths. They can be as apparently insignificant as the justification of a matter of taste, or as important as lessons for or against revolution. By definition, the effect of the historical writing on these aims should be maximised, while staying true to the evidence. Enquiry is in part justified by attaining political aims. It would be perverse not to seek to satisfy them. When writing about an egalitarian sublime this problem of commitment is intensified; first, because the sublime is a vehicle for our highest values, or their collapse; second, since egalitarianism and opposition to it are among our most persistent political problems, from the earliest debates about democracy to the cycles of extreme inequality and resistance to it characterising the capitalist age.

This means that there is tension between the principle of objectivity and the aims of history. It implies that neither can be taken alone and hence fully obeyed. A first stab at summarising this socially engaged aspect of Ginzburg's work is that history must balance ethical and political responsibilities: accuracy about the past and commitment to the future. Yet, shouldn't the aim of history be strict objectivity, not in the sense of objectivity as an aim in itself, but where truth becomes the proper aim and purpose for history in its role of having positive effects on the present?

To understand why there can be no perfect balance between accuracy and political commitment, especially in pure objectivity, we have to return to Ginzburg's account of historical vision and its dependence on movement between the micro and macro. The dialectic between close-in history and overall vision is a response to heterogeneity. There is 'a constant back and forth between micro- and macro-history, between close-ups and extreme long-shots, so as to continually thrust back into discussion the comprehensive vision of the historical process through apparent exceptions and cases of brief duration'.³⁴ The key terms here are 'continually thrust back' and 'exception'. They indicate how the overall vision, including any supposedly objective large-scale representation, should be continually brought into question. However, this does not prove those visions are necessarily insufficient.

Ginzburg's arguments for that insufficiency stem from the failures of three assumptions: about the kind of onlooker, about the nature of historical vision, and about the form of the field of enquiry. In common sense, as shown for example in popular imagery, an event is viewed from the perspective of a single person or point of view: a general overlooking the battlefield, a detective considering all the clues. There may be many people seeing the event, but they either see it as one, or one vision is the only true one, or we flit from single vision to single vision. Furthermore, each viewing involves a passive set of eyes or mind, receptively absorbing a unified field, like the view of a mountain range as we stare tiredly out of the window of a train. If we follow Ginzburg, three features of this representation are false, and this explains why battles must remain invisible: the field is not unified, the vision is not passive, and there is never a single set of eyes.

To explain why the field is not unified, Ginzburg appeals to an ontological claim according to which 'reality is fundamentally discontinuous and heterogeneous'.³⁵ Borrowing

from the film theorist Siegfried Kracauer's law of levels, he concludes that discontinuity implies that 'no conclusion attained apropos a determinate sphere can be transferred automatically to a more general sphere'.³⁶ This is because the general vision and the thing viewed close-up are of different kinds. The close-up is complex, detailed and fragmentary in ways contradicting the homogeneity of the overall view. It is like the track of our vision as we move from feature to feature across a lover's body. Against this, the overview is a general definition, functioning like a text-book illustration as it reduces differences to a simplified image. It always fails to capture the fragmentary detail of the individuals it should apply to.

The problem can be explained through the difference between your concerned gaze and the cursory glance of a guard – or the equivalent checks of a machine over a closed-circuit television image. Where one is sensitive to minute and individual variations, the other only recognises generic contrasts. The level of your individual look, the close-up of microhistory, and the level of the guard's inspection or the machine's algorithms cannot be reconciled without doing violence to intricate and yet fragmentary events at the micro level. You are sensitive to the multiple aspects of eyes, creases around the mouth, texture and shades of skin, twitches and tiny inflections, in ways the skimming overview or machine-learned tests never reach. The guard might well pronounce an image healthy according to brute features, where you feel the oncoming of distress and collapse.

The difference between levels is based on the anomalous status of the micro. Once the historian turns to the detail of a small portion of history, it is seen to depart from the normal and normative assumptions of any overview. Ginzburg discovered exactly that when he studied legal documents in Venice at the start of his career. The close-up view uncovers unexpected richness in 'the more improbable sort of documents' such as testimonies before

ecclesiastical and lay courts.³⁷ Furthermore, the social fabric observed by microhistory turns out to be composed of many different actions and individuals rather than the repetition of similar acts by interchangeable agents: 'any social structure is the result of interaction and of numerous individual strategies, a fabric that can only be reconstituted from close observation'.³⁸ Taken as a whole a fabric might seem to be uniform and fit normal assumptions, but this evenness emerges from multiple differences.

In his essay on microhistory, Ginzburg touches only briefly on the consequences of this mismatch between macro and micro, but his remarks are far-reaching. Firstly, the problem of how to reconnect heterogeneous scales generates the need for narrative and connecting diagrams. The speculative hypothesis seeks to reconcile the richness and diversity of different micro observations with a more tentative and experimental consideration of shared possibilities: 'the relationship between this microscopic dimension and the larger contextual dimension became in both cases (though so diverse) the organizing principle in the narration'.³⁹ Secondly, since this accommodation of micro and macro must not eliminate their heterogeneity, while still putting them in contact with one another, new techniques are drawn into the writing of history to maintain a difficult rather than smooth relation.

Here, we can see Ginzburg's determination to keep two extremes together, rather than fall into endless subdivision, or return to reductive overviews that amount to distortions from the point of view of a vision sensitive to complex details and fabrics, or seek some impossible fusion in the middle ground. His fundamental lesson is that 'the results obtained in a microscopic sphere cannot be automatically transferred to a macroscopic sphere (and vice versa)'.⁴⁰ His critical claim is that 'this heterogeneity, the implications of which we are just beginning to perceive, constitutes both the greatest difficulty and the

greatest potential benefit of microhistory'.⁴¹ We must create methods preserving heterogeneity yet also speculating about the whole.

Method and the problem of exclusion

The split in the historical field between micro observation and macro generalisation calls for a new method where differences between levels are not obliterated. This means no general thesis or speculative claim should ever be left as a satisfactory account, unchallenged by complex and anomalous evidence. There are two main reasons why this is particularly hard. First, methods are in danger of reintroducing homogeneity through their own presuppositions and techniques, irrespective of particular theories about specific topics. There is a general and pernicious gravitation back to homogeneity when a vision is unified in its subject or object. For instance, if a narrative is from a single perspective, or if a set of different objects is assessed according to a single frame of reference, or if the same vocabulary is applied to different entities, then fragments are in danger of omission or distortion.

Second, it is difficult for methodology to acquire the techniques necessary for fragmentary vision, because the history of method has been dominated by procedures designed to achieve synthesis, unity and simplification. Synthesis draws individuals together. Unity makes them as one. Simplification refines this unity, so it can be easily reproduced and maintained. Where are we to find techniques that don't rely on generalisation, overall theories, elimination of anomalies, smoothing out of statistical outliers, tendency towards a mean, and the search for essential features and shared qualities?

The answer is already present in Ginzburg's terminology, whether it is taken from painting, film, literature or technical models. Painting gives him the idea of the fragmentary

or difficult whole. The motif of close-ups and broad vision is taken from film. Literature provides the examples of dialectics between careful appeals to evidence and speculative narrative. Technical models, from history and other subjects, suggest the importance of diagrams. This range of sources is striking and testament to the breadth of Ginzburg's interests. However, the number of forms of inspiration is less important than the fact that they are brought together to complement and contrast with each other.

The list of methods sensitive to difference and fragmentation suggests another problem for microhistory. Methodology is not alone in favouring homogeneity and simplification over obtuseness and complexity. General communication and popular narratives avoid difficult forms such as space-time dislocation and lack of human figures, representations and scale. These are often reserved for high, rare and elite art forms. Narratives lacking a beginning, middle and end are frustrating. Arguments without clear premises and conclusions seem pointless. Images and works free of recognisable human characters can be too demanding. They often require training and habituation before they become accessible. Irrespective of aesthetic criteria, this problem is about practical exclusion. Should a new methodology and philosophy be exclusive, out of reach for large numbers of willing readers?

Though the question of exclusion might present a persistent challenge to many art forms, microhistory has a good answer to it. This is because dislocation in microhistorical narratives takes place between micro and macro levels rather than in them. Within micro observations, we are given intricate accounts of individuals. Sources are used to recount actions, beliefs and events around particular lives in an easily understandable form. The human comes out more distinctly rather than disappearing. This method can be described as humanist, because it collects recognisably human pieces.

Communication on this micro level invites sympathy and empathy; it helps us to learn from others as different. This is the reason Ginzburg is frequently inspired by nineteenth-century novels and why he believes history has much to learn from them, even in questions of documentary evidence: 'narrative processes act like magnetic fields: they provoke questions and potentially attract documents ... a procedure such as free direct discourse, which came into being to respond, on the terrain of fiction, to a number of historical questions, may be considered as an indirect challenge to historians'.⁴² Importantly, sympathy through the novel should not be seen as communication with closed and unified individuals, a kind of recognition between closed selves. It is rather a sensation and understanding of diversity even within the self: 'For Stendhal, the "I" is synonymous with multiplicity.'⁴³

At a more general level, the speculations of microhistory can be put in accessible ways as hypotheses about connections between individual lives and broader historical causes, effects, events and outcomes. The more difficult breakdown of common sense occurs after this scene setting and speculation, in two cautious ways. First, in speculation itself, confidence and theoretical solidity are replaced by more tentative and multiple suppositions. Second, a gap is opened between these suppositions and the micro-level evidence by the resistance of individual lives to general overviews.

Instead of a difficult initial perception, as caused by an abstract or fragmentary work of art, in microhistory we encounter absorbable observations and hypotheses, mediated by a more difficult tension between individual detail and general narrative. It doesn't become harder to see and understand. It becomes harder to connect what we see to what we understand. Individually, the pieces make sense. As suppositions, the hypotheses make

sense. Yet the whole doesn't cohere, because it isn't allowed to settle due to the mismatch between evidence and speculation.

This resistance of individual lives to historical generalisation and to attempts to bend them to abstract and often cruel rules is the mark of Ginzburg's humanism, whether it applies to his sympathetic portrayal of the heretic miller Menocchio, or to the unfortunate Venetian Bertuccio Isarello. In tracing back to Isarello from Stendhal and Byron, Ginzburg gives his trademark caution about the difficult relation between narration and evidence: 'Our journey backward from library to archives, from Julien Sorel to the conspiracy of Marin Falier, has been highly discontinuous. Between Israël Bertuccio and Bertuccio Isarello there is more than the divide separating fiction from historical reality. In the continuous variation of the contexts, everything – from names to social status – dissolves.'⁴⁴ The lesson is also familiar in the care taken to explain this discontinuity through individuals, both those writing and those written about. We might have expected an elite form, but we find a popular one: 'Ginzburg arrived at Menocchio's case from the study of popular culture, and his own implicit preferences prompted him to point to a pre-Christian, oral, popular culture as the inspirer of the miller's ideas, instead of understanding these from Menocchio's life.'⁴⁵

Where others might worry about the difficulty of clashes of levels and perspectives, Ginzburg finds humane and humbling lessons. Once again, there is a combination of historical evidence and narrative invention: 'with a sudden shift in perspective [Montaigne] looked at us, through the eyes of the Brazilian natives who had been brought to Rouen, where they stood before the king of France'.⁴⁶ This blend of the literary and historical creates a shock in one world with a delayed warning for another: 'What they saw, and what he saw through their eyes, made no sense at all ... his words are still painful to read: "They found it strange that these poverty-stricken halves should suffer such injustice, and that

they did not take the others by the throat or set fire to their houses.” For Ginzburg, multiple perspectives foster sympathy for others and understanding of their reasons, environment, feelings and thoughts. The lessons can be described as egalitarian, if we take this as an equality of individuality: all humans are complex and different in ways deserving of sympathy, care and protection.

Though Ginzburg’s humanism avoids the problem of exclusivity and leads to a version of egalitarianism, I do not intend to follow its lead. There is a downside to its attention to the human individual and to its accessible historical accounts of a life. It limits the kind of speculation and possibilities we can draw around existence, since these must start with something widely recognisable as an individual human life. It also limits the type of challenge those speculations can mount against generalisations and against the erasure of differences, because these are limited to the opposition drawn between violent oppression and individuality. Finally, against his trust in the humanistic arts to approach evidence as proof, his humanism might also give a false representation of that evidence, tainting it with the expectation of finding the human individual. In developing a critical distance from Ginzburg, it will be important to be aware of how this rejection allows for a return of the negative point about exclusivity and, perhaps more importantly, a questioning of the wisdom of a potential departure from humanist principles.

Towards the end of his reflections on microhistory, in opposition to idea of a single perspective, Ginzburg returns to painting and to the work of Boccioni for a succinct but evocative description of the thesis that the historian or onlooker is always many. There is no historian with a settled and unique identity. Instead, the fragments and different levels of the outside world lead into and give rise to the self: ‘If this is a self-portrait, then its model is

Boccioni's paintings in which the street leads into the house, the landscape into the face, and the exterior invades the interior, the "I" is porous.'⁴⁷

This concern for the multiplicity and connectivity of identities is important for the idea of the sublime as multiple. The sublime has many ways to affect us and, when it does so, it is not as individuals but rather as fragile and manifold processes connected through shared histories taken differently. An Italian futurist painter and sculptor, Boccioni (1882–1916) painted *The Street Enters the House* in 1911, in the same year that he painted *Simultaneous Visions*, where house, streets, trees and materials enter into two mirrored and connected faces. This creates a cohering yet also clashing series of influences and visions.

A year later he painted his greatest work, *Materia*, where his mother's portrait dissolves into shards of matter, cityscapes and objects, only then to be reconstituted with them: 'urban background, home interior, and especially the potential eclipse of the distinction between inside and outside, a fusional movement achieved simultaneously with irradiation'.⁴⁸ Boccioni's art is one of multiple flows, leading from many different and separate sources, often depicted expressively and at speed, into more settled and familiar settings. The boundaries of the self or the house are broken by impulses from the outside such that everything interior is generated by obscure and manifold external influences: 'Every verification with the outside world must end up in the created work.'⁴⁹

There is a dissonant aspect to Ginzburg's admiration for Boccioni to consider. After Boccioni's death, falling from a horse while serving in the Italian army in the First World War, futurism was to become one of the main sources of official fascist imagery. As Jews and left-wing anti-fascists, Ginzburg's parents, Leone and Natalia Ginzburg, were persecuted by the fascists. His father was tortured and murdered by Nazis after his arrest by the Italian

police in 1944. Ginzburg's history is resolutely on the side of victims of persecution and discrimination.

Part of the answer to this shocking juxtaposition is that the connection of futurism to fascism is incomplete and uncertain. Commenting on Boccioni's masterpiece of futurist sculpture, John Golding reminds us that it is 'a revolutionary work which carries within it the seeds of a reaction'.⁵⁰ So the link should not be taken straightforwardly as grounds for dismissal of futurism and of the idea that it could be progressive. It is certainly reason to be wary. Ginzburg conveys this caution through his commitment to evidence against falsehoods and propaganda.

For Ginzburg, when interpreting Boccioni, the porosity of the self is of a special kind. We could think of it as conscious, in the sense of an awareness of our roots and influences. As such, the subject of that awareness could be a more deeply unified and reflective self-identity, providing a single intellectual perspective. Contradicting this supposition, Ginzburg describes it as a necessarily unconscious invasion from the outside. This unconscious aspect to the self will be a central theme for the later sublime. Perhaps the sense of an external disruption explains his enthusiasm for Boccioni's paintings. With a debt to cubism, they spin from the outside to a churned and shattered inside.

Ginzburg's explanation of an absence of consciousness rests on two justifications, one apparently more plausible than the other, though both rely on hindsight, experienced not as some kind of serene awareness but rather as a shocking revelation. When reviewing the pattern of his work and life, he reports how 'both the boundaries of the group to which I belonged and my own boundaries of self seemed retrospectively shifting and uncertain'.⁵¹ In the middle of plans and activities, we might well think that there is a clear line and identity for the self: who we are, what we want, where we are going. However, looking back at the

most significant aspect of his vocation as a historian, the pattern of Ginzburg's research and the writing of his books unfold in uncommon and surprising ways: 'To my surprise I discovered how important to me were, unknowingly, books I had never read, events and persons I did not know had existed.'⁵²

Separating these remarks from personal anecdote, the easier argument for the unconscious porosity of the self is its vulnerability to uncertainty and to the unexpected. It doesn't matter how hard we prepare and plan, there will always be novel events and gaps in understanding making ourselves and the objects we study open to changes and variations. In turn, these diversions from identity call for reconstruction: the inventive work of speculative narrative. The self is therefore open to change in ways it cannot control. It is also dependent on narrative for recreating relative cohesion.

The harder argument is more unusual, yet also more robust. Our knowledge is not only limited by future unexpected and unknown events. It is also vulnerable to false confidence about its past and present: the influence of 'events and persons I did not know had existed'. This latter argument falls under the paradox of knowledge. How can you be guided by what you do not know? Ginzburg's solution depends on the role of hindsight in detecting unknown stimulus. When looking back we can see effects we once did not know. When we see it in this way we can connect the known to the unknown and understand more clearly how they interact. A blind hunch turns out to be the premonition of an important causal connection. A book we never read brings dimly lit ideas into focus, showing more clearly how they were working on other thoughts.

One of the books Ginzburg had not read and yet was being guided by was Siegfried Kracauer's posthumous *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, where he discusses the difference between macro and micro history, earlier than the Italian historians Ginzburg

worked with. Kracauer teaches two laws governing the relation of micro to macro: the law of perspective, whereby some part of the micro evidence must be ignored from the beginning; and the law of levels, according to which the micro level conveys possibilities missed in the macro-level account of the identical event. These twin necessities dictate that 'part of the evidence drops out automatically' and the 'available evidence reaches its destination in an incomplete state'. This means history is always a 'nonhomogeneous structure' comprising 'fields of varying density ... rippled by unaccountable eddies'.⁵³ The challenge for microhistory, and for the microcritique of the sublime I wish to defend, is how to construct a method suited to these restraints on history and freedoms for philosophy.

Patterns of fragments

Instead of fully adopting the methods of microhistory, my definition of the egalitarian sublime connects to other ideas of the sublime through a variation of the methods I'll call microcritique. The change in name indicates a difference in topic alongside continuities in techniques. Where microhistory is anchored by historical evidence and given impetus through speculative narratives, microcritique employs many of the same procedures, but on conceptual material and problems.

Narrative is too linear for the ideas of the sublime; it is still too close to the model of storytelling about human lives. Conceptual problems do not have the same restriction to life and death, to growth and decay. Their passage through time doesn't have to be linear or limited to organic development. I will therefore turn to diagrams as more abstract and flexible ways of giving structure to relations.

The ground was prepared for this shift from narration in my critical remarks on Ginzburg's humanism. However, it would be wrong to assume that this transfer to diagrams

is easy. There's a challenging counter to the turn from the human, in pointing out how concepts require human minds and human environments. When I say concepts have a different way through time, I invite the objection that concepts can only move through time in line with human minds and physical causality. Is there any sense of giving diagrams for concepts shorn of human actors or independent of physical causes?

Since the mid-nineteenth century the sublime has become associated with technology and with the experience of a technological sublime. This electrical sublime is now familiar to us; for instance, in the awe we feel when first arriving in Shanghai or Hong Kong at night:

Spectacular lighting made possible the awe-inspiring manipulation of both nature and the man-made. As electrical lighting transformed the appearance of streets, bridges, skyscrapers, public monuments, the Natural Bridge, and Niagara Falls, it became not only the double of technology but also a powerful medium of cultural expression that could highlight both natural and technological objects and heighten their sublimity.⁵⁴

The sublime contradictory feelings of distance and closeness – of repulsion and attraction – are conveyed by our identification with each set of lights as a sign of humans just like us, and by uneasiness at the realisation that all of us are but small illuminations among many, not special individuals, but replaceable units, on a scale that mocks our particular loves, desires and self-regard.

We have seen how microhistory follows the example of film in moving from large-scale vistas, like the view from a plane, to close-ups, such as the anguished faces of actors caught in a traffic jam as they flee the city. Films frequently use this juxtaposition, particularly in scene-setting such as at the beginning of Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993),

where we cut between views from helicopters, spraying against flies, to lives on the ground. The aim is to preserve detailed fragments from the dehumanising effect of the overview without denying it. The story is individual in the depth and complexity of its micro detail and yet partly unified by the macro level ideas and lines, binding individuals into the mass, its mechanisms and its logic. The humanist lesson is in how each life is an anomalous resistance to the conclusion that the overview is sufficient.

The difference between microcritique and humanist microhistory can be understood through Ginzburg's claim about the self. The anomalous nature of the micro level depends on the multiplicity and intricate extension of the self. Each human self is a paradox for the general view. This is because the self is porous, making humans a point of complexity and resistance to generality and to overviews. You never get the human you expect to find and it is incumbent on you to do justice to the individuality you do find, hence the value and importance of microhistory as a political and ethical method.

The metaphor of porosity implies a prior self, open to later transformations from the outside, like a sponge absorbing different liquids. Social historians such as Ginzburg and Davis are interested in this porosity partly because it retains individuality, yet situates individuals within a social sphere with strong effects upon them. My study of the sublime depends on a different assumption. The self doesn't come prior to outside effects; it is constituted by them. This is important because it replaces the idea of the independent value of the human, as multiple and as open to infinite variations, with the value of multiple and open processes that can subsequently, but not necessarily, be identified as particular human selves. It is not a matter of porosity to the outside, but of ongoing construction by it.

This alternative view is the basis for a response to the claims that we should think of ideas and concepts as dependent on human narratives and time. The opposite is the case.

We should think of humans as dependent on other processes, to the point where it becomes a mistake to address problems through a human framework. Instead, each problem becomes a matter of selecting and working through the processes involved in bringing it about. Some of these will be associated with the construction of human beliefs, actions, identity, time and narratives, but others will not.

There is a straightforward way of illustrating the reversal taking place when we move from microhistory to microcritique. It is a similar shift to the change from ascribing human qualities and actions to a physical system, such as the weather, and seeking to explain those systems through many other non-human processes. When we transfer from microhistory to microcritique, we are making a similar change to when we stop talking about a vengeful winter and instead look at patterns of winds, pressures and temperatures.

This analogy breaks down, though, if we assume microcritique is about deterministic physical explanations. On the contrary, because explanations are responses to problems coming out of paradoxes generated by a multiplicity of processes, in tension with one another and with general theories, deterministic approaches are unsatisfactory and microcritique is not limited by their laws.

None of this means we must abandon any of the techniques of microhistory. On the contrary, nearly all retain their most important functions. First, the movement between different dimensions keeps macro-level generalisation and speculation in check, thanks to heterogeneity and multiplicity at the micro levels. This micro is no longer about individual lives and external effects upon them, but about micro-level processes. These are the causes and influences participating in the more general ideas and concepts. They can be images, physical causes and natural environments, forms of writing and difference of vocabulary,

shared and individual human experiences and sensations (though these are no longer given priority over other factors).

In microcritique, processes of construction take the place of evidence in Ginzburg's account of the role of proof in narration. Speculative diagrams, defined as charts of the relations between processes and between macro and micro levels, replace human-centred narratives. The political impetus remains, but becomes more broad, going beyond what's determined to be important for humans, to anything considered as problematic in the sense of involving tensions and contradictions causing difficulties for future development. Thus there can be problems for animals, machines, systems and even worlds.

I have swapped 'critique' for 'history' in the name for the method in order to mark how upper-level speculations are criticised thanks to their fragmentation at the micro level. Instead of a homogeneous reference for macro ideas, structures, processes and concepts, they encounter resistance in anomalous and discontinuous phenomena in micro processes. This resistance cannot be ignored or set aside because it takes place through forms of emergence and kinds of influence involved in the creation of the macro level. There is a genetic link between the two. It is not only a speculation failing to apply, but an idea or concept proving to be incoherent or contradictory.

Microcritique guides the idea of the egalitarian sublime between general definitions of sublimity and detailed accounts of the sublime in a particular sign. As a frequently used sign indicating value, the sublime becomes a series of fragments impossible to identify with one another. However, in my method, these fragments are brought together through definitions, diagrams of their effects, and critical consideration of their implications for an egalitarian sublime. Each definition participates in this coming together, but it also keeps it in suspension, in the sense of keeping it in question, in relation to individual cases and

experiences of the sublime. Furthermore, other general definitions of the sublime are included on the diagram, but subjected to similar critical inspection. We are then left with a new definition within a network of historical ones, and this novel pattern remains problematic through its difficult relation to singular instances.

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, Oxford: Clarendon, 1989.

² Iggers, 'Foreword', p. vii.

³ Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval & Modern*, p. 4.

⁴ Halverson, *Historiography and Fiction*, pp. 1–10.

⁵ Saltzman, 'Reading Anselm Kiefer's Book *Die Himmelspaläste: Merkaba*', p. 18.

⁶ Sloterdijk 'Works and Nights: On Art after Modernism', p. 48.

⁷ Hoerschelmann, 'Ways of Worldly Wisdom: The Battle of Hermann', pp. 73–4.

⁸ Sloterdijk, 'Works and Nights: On Art after Modernism', p. 48.

⁹ See Chatzantonis, *Deleuze and Mereology: Multiplicity Structure and Composition*.

¹⁰ Ginzburg, 'Microhistory', pp. 10–35.

¹¹ *Die Alexanderschlacht* (1529). Altdorfer painted the Battle of Issus in 1529, when Ottoman armies besieged Vienna, thereby providing historical resonances with the 333 BCE battle between Alexander and Darius III. Krichbaum, *Albrecht Altdorfer*, pp. 143–50.

¹² Wood, *Albrecht Altforfer and the Origins of Landscape*, p. 22.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ginzburg, 'Microhistory', p. 26.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Wood, *Albrecht Altforfer and the Origins of Landscape*, p. 22. Like stage left and stage right, the left to right flow should be understood from the perspective of the painting looking out, rather than the viewer looking in. Wood is therefore referring to a thwarted movement from East to West.

¹⁷ Ginzburg, 'Microhistory', p. 26.

¹⁸ By 'the mid-1980s, the US and other Western countries were openly siding with Iraq and providing economic and military aid'. Dannreuther, 'The Gulf Conflict,' p. 164. See also Gordon, 'The Last War Syndrome', p. 118.

¹⁹ Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric and Proof*, p. 25.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ginzburg, 'The Conversion of the Jews of Minorca (A.D. 417–418)', in *Threads and Traces*, pp. 25–33.

²² Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces*, p. 164.

²³ Ibid., p. 67.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

²⁵ Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, p. 3.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁷ Ginzburg, *Threads and Traces*, p. 57.

²⁸ Magnússon and Szijártó, *What is Microhistory?*, p. 15.

²⁹ Patton, 'Introduction', in Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, p. 11. Patton is arguing against Christopher Norris and his inability to distinguish between arguing for the role of virtual images in the constitution of reality and arguing for the negation of 'all distinctions between truth and falsehood'. (Norris, *The Truth about Postmodernism*, p. 6.)

One does not follow from the other and there is plenty of evidence that Baudrillard makes truth claims, including when he is arguing for hyperreality.

³⁰ Norris, *The Truth about Postmodernism*, p. 6.

³¹ Allison, *Destructive Sublime*, p. 187.

³² Norris, *Reclaiming Truth*, p. 183.

³³ Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, p. 85.

³⁴ "Ginzburg, 'Microhistory', p. 27.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ "Ginzburg, 'Microhistory', p. 33.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ginzburg, 'The Bitter Truth: Stendhal's Challenge to Historians', in *Threads and Traces*, p. 150.

⁴³ Ibid., "p. 146.

⁴⁴ Ginzburg, 'Following in the Tracks of Israël Bertuccio', in *Threads and Traces*, pp. 135–6.

⁴⁵ Magnússon and Szijártó, *What is Microhistory?*, p. 4.

⁴⁶ Ginzburg, 'Montaigne, Cannibals and Grottoes', in *Threads and Traces*, p. 52.

⁴⁷ "Ginzburg, 'Microhistory', p. 34.

⁴⁸ Petrella, 'Mater Materia Prima', p. 58; Golding, *Boccioni*, p. 27.

⁴⁹ Boccioni, 'Futurist Painting', p. 238.

⁵⁰ Golding, *Boccioni*, p. 27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, pp. 124–7.

⁵⁴ Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, pp. 171–2.