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Introduction

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Volume 26, numéro 2, 2015

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1037217ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1037217ar>

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Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Holler, J. (2015). Mark Salber Phillips's *On Historical Distance*: A Panel Discussion: Introduction. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 26(2), 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1037217ar>

Mark Salber Phillips's *On Historical Distance*: A Panel Discussion

Introduction

The winner of the 2014 Ferguson Prize was Mark Phillips' *On Historical Distance*, a work that sets itself the task of examining what historians usually take for granted: historical distance, conventionally conceived, in Phillips' words, as "a position of detached observation made possible by the passage of time."¹ Phillips reimagines historical distance as enacted in multiple dimensions of representation. The work, then, is an investigation of the unseen architecture of historical understanding. Of undeniable importance no matter one's field of investigation, the book is also an intensely pleasurable journey of discovery, inviting reflection, engagement, and elaboration.

Those processes began at the 2015 meeting of the CHA, when Phillips and four² scholars working in History, English, and Comparative Literature gathered to discuss *On Historical Distance* in a panel organized by the co-editors of the JCHA. It was my privilege to chair the session, and to hear the polished, varied, and insightful presentations that became the papers here presented.

Mark Phillips presents a close summary of the work that should enable readers to grasp its main themes and, I hope, the richness promised to those who read the book in its entirety. Kenneth Dewar begins his reading of *On Historical Distance* by historicizing it: that is, by situating Phillips' work within its own historiographical context. Dewar's genealogy traces a movement from "reconstructive" notions of history to a conception of history as fundamentally literary. Barbara Leckie focuses on one of the four dimensions of representation studied by Phillips: form, or genre. Marcie Frank focuses instead on visual media, beginning with a discussion of history painting and ending with the application of Phillips' "distance rubric" to Mike Leigh's recent film *Mr. Turner*. Throughout the essays, all of which pay homage

to the singular fertility and excellence of the work, questions are raised: about commodification, the category of affect so central to the work, and about how best to understand the genres of history (from literary history to the modernist historical essay). The breadth and elegance of these commentaries is a measure of the many contributions the book makes — and its implications for scholarly understanding and praxis.

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