

# What Can Contemporary Cultural Pluralism Learn from Modern Historicism?: Erich Auerbach's Concept of *Figura* and Its Context of Modern Intellectual History

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With regard to a conundrum of how a historical event should be realistically represented over the chasm between the bare fact and the purely fictional account, Hayden White, a contemporary American critic of culture, sees a possibility in his concept of “figural realism.” In elaborating on his own idea, White heavily depends upon the concept of *figura*, originally described by Erich Auerbach, a Romance philologist and scholar of comparative literature, in *Mimesis* (1952) and other works.

Figural realism seems to provide some promising insights into the discussions of contemporary cultural pluralism. However, at present, the alliance between the two intellectual positions is weak. With the aim of activating this dormant alliance, we will return to Auerbach's concept of *figura*, the main source of White's figural realism.

In *Mimesis*, Auerbach discusses the concept of *figura* exclusively along the lines of the historical development of Western literature from ancient times to the Middle Ages. However, we argue that *figura* should be examined in the context of modernity as well; it can be interpreted as Auerbach's response to what is called “the crisis of German historicism.” We also argue that Auerbach's solution to the crisis is essentially twofold. Firstly, the concept of *figura* is within the sphere of Friedrich Meinecke's historicism of “perpendicularity,” which emphasizes unique, distinctive individuality in history. Secondly, *figura* resonates with Giambattista Vico's absolute historicism, which stresses the “universality of human nature.”

The trouble is that Auerbach seems to be incognizant of the difference between two types of philosophy of history—individuality and universality—and consequently, of

the problematic nature inherent in his concept of *figura*. Further, the problem with Auerbach's formulation of *figura* is carried over to White's figural realism. However, we surmise that the shortcoming shared by the two contemporary critics of culture could possibly translate into an advantage. We conclude our argument by glimpsing in their problem a potentiality, or suggestion, for the future direction of cultural pluralism.