

MEMORY, IMAGINATION AND DESIRE IN CONTEMPORARY ANGLO-AMERICAN LITERATURE AND FILM

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The main interest of this recently published compilation of articles is its opening of critical dialogues of undeniable relevance in the contemporary scene by a fruitful combination of unity and diversity. Incorporating both a broad approach and a solid background of research, the collection takes a close, innovative look at the connections between memory, imagination and desire, an inclusive way of dealing with time and its narrative articulations into past, present and future. The cultural implications of linear time and its privileging of cause-effect relations are revised, but by no means completely discarded, in the postmodern atmosphere of fragmentation, disruption and circularity, a significant emphasis being the inescapable relation of repetition with a difference, or the dialogue between subversion and reinscription. Accurate and direct, the editors' introduction openly anticipates the main critical viewpoints in the contributions, all within the focus on contemporary Anglo-American literature and film, although—and this points to the difficulty of easy categorization as it becomes one of the strengths of the collection—many articles will inevitably move beyond this specific time and space, stressing relations of revision and a diversity of dialogues with other periods and traditions. All in all, the most desirable answer to the impossibility of true interpretations is the emphasis on multiplicity, an idea that becomes one of the book's strongest points.

Of special relevance in the collection is an emphasis on genre and its relation to time. As the editors state, “[w]hether we inscribe genre history within an organic

evolutionary model, or whether we follow a formalist paradigm, based on ruptures and discontinuities, the truth is that in generic products past and present converge” (14). Significantly, many articles deal with the social and cultural function and effects of genre, and with the texts’ relation to audience and readership. Two basic impulses can be identified here, namely, the emphasis on the re/vision of narratives of and from the past, and the imagining of future worlds in relation to technological developments. Any wish to retain a simplistic, one-to-one association of the former with the past, and of the latter with the future is discarded, though, for constant dialogues are emphasized throughout: we are reminded of the way science fiction resorts to myth, or of how traditional narratives can anticipate the future.

Both the introduction and a good number of the articles appropriately stress the need to attend to the present as the filter through which we interpret past and future. This is the postmodern context from which we perceive and write time, and it should be constantly acknowledged but by no means taken as a privileged standpoint in relation to other times, other places. In the editors’ words, “we should avoid denying the specificity and difference of the past and the openness of the future, believing that the present offers the only authoritative source of meaning in an arrogant gesture that would unreasonably assume the superiority of our own time” (10). Although the individual authors, all well trained in the tenets of postmodern thought and critical discourse, will surely agree with this in theory, the truth is that some still sustain an underlying narrative of evolution, according to which today is perceived as better than yesterday—but not necessarily worse than tomorrow, as the prevalence of dystopic views of the future suggests—and our present-day eyes show the greatest capacity for understanding what happened earlier, and to anticipate what is to come. This could be considered an inconsistency were it not a clear reflection of an open debate in the contemporary critical scene: the question of privilege and authority in relation to time, among other narrative and cultural conceptions, although productively questioned and subject to subversion and re/vision, is one of the many issues that remain unresolved, in the sense of not being a closed case that requires no further attention. Surely enough, the recognition of unanswered questions encourages creative thinking, and this the collection certainly does.

As might be expected from the format, the book includes articles of varying depth and relevance, and the literary and filmic texts dealt with also attest to this diversity. The aim is to devise a theoretical background that accounts for the conception of time in the contemporary world as it calls our attention to the need to attend to individual differences, locations, and viewpoints. Whereas some of the essays are mainly specific in scope and center on particular aspects of particular authors or works, most of them provide critical stances that are illustrative of the fundamental

theoretical trends current at the moment, and will thus be of interest to the general student or researcher of postmodern fiction and film.

In the first section, entitled “Maps of the Postmodern”, Daniela Carpi’s article traces past origins and future uncertainties around the city, a central location and trope in postmodern literary and filmic texts. Carpi’s contention is that the city, directly linked to literature and literacy and representative of contemporary people’s relation to the surrounding world, represents postmodern displacement, alienation, and order vs. forces of chaos, which is why postmodern narrative, repeating and simultaneously denying the past, becomes a logical site of images of historical and mythic cities, as well as future utopias and dystopias in urban environments. Authors like Ackroyd, Amis, McEwan, Moorcock and films like *Blade Runner* are used as examples of this particularly creative relation of postmodern time and space. The next essay somewhat changes the critical focus to concentrate on the direct relation of literature to the market, a dynamic force that exemplifies the extent to which the rapidly changing nature of the present should be dealt with carefully. In her analysis of Bret Easton Ellis as a typical case of a celebrity writer, Sonia Baelo’s analysis underlines the good and bad side of contemporary authors’ relation to commercial culture, and calls our attention to the pressing need to take into account the marketing side of literature, without which the more strictly academic one would be incomplete. Heinz Antor’s study of Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* cleverly incorporates most of the fundamental themes that apply in the treatment of time in postmodern narrative. He offers a profound reflection on the role of imagination in our approaches to the past, the constructed nature of texts, the inescapability of subjectivity and positionality in any representation of truth, history or memory, and the strategies of fictional writing that go into any attempt at tracking the truth, including the illustrative quilting metaphor of creation and the need to admit a multiplicity of voices in any reconstruction of history. In one of the most clearly dialogic contributions to the collection, Susana Onega undertakes an analysis of Jeanette Winterson’s *World of Art*, which “engulfs the literary, pictorial and musical production of all writers and artists in Western culture from 600 BC until the year 2000” (79), by establishing a remarkably rich series of connections with writers and artists, both contemporary and past. Besides the illuminating intertextual dialogue that she offers, showing the way that art defeats time, the idea of the process of rewriting as being mutually transforming for both the writers and their precursors is of special interest here. In contrastive dialogue with the postmodern denial of the ultimate accessibility of truth and history through memory—an inescapable act of reconstruction—stressed in previous papers, Beatriz Penas shows how Nabokov elaborates in his autobiography a narrative of a lost past and thus constructs a consistent identity for himself through memory, understood as a solid bridge between the real world and art. The

possibility of giving shape and continuity to life “means that we should be able to interpret and integrate in the pattern of a more or less grand narrative what otherwise would be monadic sound and fury signifying nothing” (92), which is at the base of Nabokov’s conception of the purpose of autobiography. Of special significance in this first section taken as a whole is the suggestion that the conception of memory as a narrative construction engine can give place to two different and contrasted emphases which require contextualization: depending on each author’s needs and desires, the consistency and even validity of the resulting identity can be either vindicated or radically deconstructed. In this sense, the beginning of the book very appropriately maps the main lines of dialogic, often contested, thought in postmodernism that follow in the rest of the collection.

Two of the four articles in the second section, “The Postcolonial Experience”, deal with the case of Ireland in filmic representation. Rosa González analyses a series of new Northern Ireland films that resort to humor, which is “fully compatible with insightful commentary on sorrowful circumstances” (101), cliché breaking and conducive to a search for common goals for the people of the region. This is particularly significant at a time when the omnipresence of the past proves problematic and traumatic, for it has sustained and fueled violence in the region through its emphasis on trouble and opposition. As it offers the possibility of a different future, this refreshing new look at Northern Ireland highlights “the undesirability of looking backward, of retrieving the past” (101) in this particular context. The contiguity of Maite Padrós’ essay, however, proves that this is by no means a generalised possibility: the success of *Circle of Friends*, Padrós shows, is an example of how repetition can be successful, at least in commercial terms. Based on previous, stereotypical images of Ireland and on Hollywood cinematic conventions, this movie becomes another stereotyped version of the country with no critical engagement with the historical period that it represents, the 1950s. The author justifies her criticism by outlining the differences with the original novel, which becomes the authoritative source to which the movie does not adequately respond.

As the book takes us to the other side of the globe, the past remains decisive for approaches and encounters between East and West in the present time in Rüdiger Ahrens’ paper on Yasmine Gooneratne. Proving the persistence of colonization in the postcolonial world, and the fact that no fixed ways of understanding the world are acceptable in our intercultural encounters, this international writer, born in Sri Lanka but established in Australia, represents an opening of new and necessary viewpoints and horizons, for she shows that, just as language and loyalty spill over national boundaries, so the past, transplanted, configures a dynamic, complex and not categorizable kind of identity. Dora Sales’ essay on Manju Kapur’s novel *Difficult Daughters* stresses that the articulation of a future for Indian women, who

suffer from a double marginalization, necessarily has to start from a discovery of the past. The novel offers a postmodern problematizing of history by means of historiographic metafiction that needs to be contextualized in terms of time and space. For Indian women, choice has usually been opposed to tradition, which is basically patriarchal and colonial, but as this novel shows, there is also a tradition of choice to be uncovered. The search for connection through a mother's story transforms colonial and patriarchal disconnection, fragmentation and silences into a new beginning for Indian women in the context of family and politics.

The main focus of the third section, "Stories Revisited", is the contemporary rewriting of myths or texts from the past. John Stotesbury studies the persistence and transformation of the Grendel myth as a reflection of the modern and postmodern desire to explore the ancient cultural trope of the demonic. The main conclusion reached by looking at several examples of the appearances of this opponent to the hero figure in literature and film is that this trope, resuscitated and reinvigorated every time it occurs, mainly functions "as an instance of resistance to the monologic cultural desire to reduce narratives to the familiar. . . . [E]ach new Grendel disturbs tradition, suggests alternative social formations, and renders the demonic both less and, at the same time, also more familiar" (143). Chantal Cornut-Gentile accurately stresses the significance of the cinema in its function as memory, which makes it an invaluable source of knowledge and "an important conveyor of historical messages, simulating as it does the sight and sounds of the past" (145). Besides offering a well-documented study of three filmic adaptations of novels by Dickens in their socio-cultural context that accounts for much of twentieth-century British history, this article is one that illustrates the dialogue between past, present and future most productively and originally: each of these movies represents a historical moment and they simultaneously reflect contemporary artistic trends and ideology, proving that "cultural memory was/is refashioned [...] to serve the needs and aspirations of the moment" (153). Hilaria Loyo's paper outlines the more specific dialogue of Arthur Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle* and Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*, studying the translation of turn-of-the-century Vienna atmosphere of political crisis, feeling of impotence and anxiety into modern New York end-of-millennium cynicism and new narcissism. The underlying narrative linking both times and spaces is an exploration of desire, mainly articulated in the filmic use of the gaze as an element of communication on and off the screen and as an indicator of the complex relation of appearances and reality.

Of the five articles that compose the "Popular Narrative Genres" section, four deal with television and cinema, and one with postmodern detective fiction. Anthony David Barker's close look at the 1950s in popular culture through television and cinema reaches two basic conclusions: "that those 1950s did not exactly happen

in the historical 1950s, and secondly, that they may not have happened at all” (175), that is, that the reductive view of that particular historical moment as a blessed and contented period is a televised construction determined by the particular needs of the conservative context which articulated it. Celestino Deleyto examines the teenpic as another genre besides science fiction which concentrates on the relation between present and future. The teenpic resorts to well-known narrative conventions to illustrate the passing rites from adolescence to maturity, especially as far as individuality and autonomy are concerned, and it does so from the point of view of the future adults the teenagers are expected to become. The significance of *Clueless*, the example that Deleyto deals with in greatest detail, is that, while it sustains creative dialogues of past, present and future in its participation in the teenpic genre and the Jane Austen adaptation tradition, it ultimately parodies the genre’s adult slant and its recurrent concern with the future, celebrating the uniqueness of adolescence and the present tense instead. Reynold Humphries offers an original reading of David Cronenberg’s horror film *Shivers* and the parasites who liberate the Starline Tower residents “from all social restraints and [open] up the possibility of satisfying extreme, anti-social but highly agreeable forms of sexuality” (202) as a utopian vision of an alternative future that responds to postmodern desire in its rebellion against capitalistic, objectifying and power-stricken culture. María del Mar Azcona studies the evolution of slasher films and their persistent success among adolescents as a result of commercial strategies and the cultural context in which they are located. The basic pleasure slasher films offer, she contends, has to do with predictability by systematic repetition of filmic conventions, which gives these movies a ritualistic quality that, by stressing the weight of a tradition, articulates necessary rites of passage for teenagers. María Jesús Martínez moves on to fiction writing and studies the metaphysical detective story as a typically postmodern genre that is characterized by the recasting of old conventions in new forms, or by dialogic repetition with a difference. Postmodern writers of metaphysical detective stories, of which Martínez provides a well-documented series of illustrative examples, show an awareness of the conventions of traditional detective fiction, and they simultaneously break their rules by posing epistemological questions that are never answered or that subvert the process of detection leading to them, emphasizing plurality and qualifying the postmodern world in their dramatization of epistemological and ontological voids.

The last section of the book, “Views of the Future”, offers four examples of science fiction in literature and film. Andreas Kitzmann undertakes a re/vision of transcendence in his challenging analysis of “the faith that Western culture has placed in technology to not only address physical or material needs but also those of morality, ethics, philosophy and spirituality” (238). This, which he calls “the digital divine project” (238) in multimedia communications, opens up creative

dialogues between culture and technology that allow for the expression of cultural diversity as it reinforces pre-existing social patterns. Ignacio Domingo's paper centers on science fiction films that deal with time travel and analyses the possibilities and links to postmodern culture of the three-dimensional conception of time that they offer. Their combination of a physical body temporality that the characters follow plus the temporary loops that they experience not only articulates postmodern escape from time linearity; it also illustrates the collision and dialogue of the different temporalities that participate in the experience of watching a movie. José Ángel García explores the connections between two science fiction works, Olaf Stapledon's 1937 novel *Star Maker*, a utopian dream of the universe becoming an organism with perfect communication, and *The Matrix* (1999), a dystopia about a future robotic takeover. Besides their parallel lines of vision and philosophical bases, García notes how "[i]t is perhaps a relevant coincidence that both narratives of a communicational apocalypse, *Star Maker* and *The Matrix*, use the phenomenal structure of their medium (the book and the film screen) as a metafictional formal device that provides for the reader/spectator an analogue of the virtual reality experienced by the protagonists" (264). Katrina Mann takes a gender approach to the treatment of time in Hollywood postmodern films *Gattaca*, *The Matrix* and *Fight Club* which, she argues, posit a world free of categories but only superficially so, for they ultimately "revitalise, through postmodern attitudes and aesthetics and through the eventual subjection of women and/or minorities, the near-end modern subject" (269), becoming complicit with historical structures of white and male privilege and recuperating modern ideals in the process.

The fact is often pointed out that any selection and ordering is a process of emplotment whereby a story is constructed, and this is true both of this brief account of the main lines of thought offered in this book, and of the content of the articles themselves. The great diversity of these twenty-one essays, whose interconnections are difficult to contain in a fixed pattern, makes the editing task a far from simple mission, and the story could have come out differently, with an alternative ordering of story lines or section titles. As it is, the form reflects content and intention by staying open both to an orderly sequential reading of the whole and to more specific, partial involvement. There is, undoubtedly, an actual dialogue between many different trends of thought taking place around the issue of time and its narrative articulations, and the book's main asset is the successful way in which it reflects a substantial part of this dynamic, ongoing conversation.