

HISTORY IS DEAD, LONG LIVE HISTORY!
POSTMODERNISM AND HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

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We tell ourselves stories to make sense of our existence. We tell ourselves stories to prove that we once lived. When we look at the past, we do it through a lens that seeks to explain the present, an attempt to imbue history with clear and defined meaning. We want order and explanations. We want to believe in cause and effect. But in life, as in history (and so too in literature), the most commonly accepted narratives are not those that represent the truth, but rather those that *narrativize* the past in a way that provides meaning to our current epoch.

It is impossible to pinpoint the exact beginning of a zeitgeist as vast and abstract as literary postmodernism. Its predecessor, literary modernism, was a response to the brutal realities of World War One, an attempt to make sense of the complicated realities of modern warfare and nation states. While the modernists sought to deconstruct the *specific* grand narratives of religion, empire, and Enlightenment-era optimism (amongst other ideas), they deconstructed old narratives in the hope of using new “isms” to define the modern world. While the expressionists sought to explain the world through myriad subjectivities, the cubists looked at ideas and objects from multiple perspectives; and while the surrealists questioned humanity’s preconceived notions about present reality, the futurists looked to modern technology to imbue the future with meaning. Common to all of these modernist ways of thinking about the world, however, was the idea a new “ism” might still explain modernity via a clearly defined narrative.

If WWI forced writers to make sense of the modern, brutal nature of reality, the crucibles of Hiroshima and Auschwitz destroyed the very idea of understanding the world through an “ism.” In a word, post-modernism is a “post-ism”, a worldview that asks whether it is useful, let alone possible, to put words and meaning to the impenetrable nature of existence. Albert Camus suggested the only way forward was via the Absurd, a self-conscious acknowledgement that any attempt to view the world through an “ism” logically

ends in absurdity. If the modernists sought to replace the old grand narratives with new and improved lenses, the post-modernists suggested that the very idea of being able to *see* the world, let alone through a specific lens, is a hopeless, futile task because existence defies narrative.

The grand modernist narratives of progress, heterogeneous nation states, and “good versus evil” only further eroded during the Cold War. While the United States of America emerged from World War Two with its good-guy meta-narrative intact (if the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan (twice), it was only to save the lives of all of those who would die during a land invasion), American Exceptionalism soon faltered when the USA entered a pointless, “forgotten war” that resulted in millions of Korean dead and the rejection of American capitalism at the 38th parallel. Communism, the supposed antidote to American capitalism and imperialism, led to a new generation of despotic oligarchs and millions of deaths in the name of communal solidarity. Indeed, both sides of the Cold War only further revealed the tendency for politicians, historians, and average citizens alike to fabricate self-serving narratives with a selective (and subjective) reading of history. As the two world ideologies continued to jostle for position in the 1960s in Vietnam, post-modernists found their voice in the streets of places like Paris, Berkeley and Berlin. “Fighting the good fight” was no longer synonymous with blindly supporting one’s government or national ethos; in fact, it was quite the contrary: to be a true patriot in the post-modern world is to dissent.

To sum it up in an oft-misattributed quote by the French philosopher André Gide, post-modernism is to, “Believe those who seek truth, doubt those who find it.” Similarly, in her seminal essay, “The White Album,” Joan Didion speaks to the post-modern epoch in America, during which many of its well-oiled grand narratives—freedom, democracy, benevolent imperialism, and even free love—were being beaten down in the streets of Chicago and Montgomery; were being firebombed in the forests of Vietnam; were being

hacked to pieces by psychotic hippies in Beverly Hills:

We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the “ideas” with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience. Or at least we do for a while. I am talking here about *a time when I began to doubt the premises of all the stories I had ever told myself, a common condition but one I found troubling.*¹

On the surface, the choice for the title of Joan Didion’s essay seems obvious, a reference to one of the most groundbreaking rock albums in history. A closer reading, however, reveals the intertextual necessity that post-modernism requires if we hope to understand our own histories and cultural narratives. Many historians argue that academic research is different from intertextuality, but in truth the study of history is by definition intertextual. In the words of Foucault, any book, historical or otherwise, is “caught up in a system of reference to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network.”² In this sense, all historians interpret the works of *other* historians. As Michel de Montaigne wrote long before postmodernism came about, “We make more of a fuss interpreting interpretations than interpreting things, and there are more books about books than on any other subject: we do nothing but comment upon one another.”³ To this end, Didion’s “The White Album” is both an interpretation of The Beatles’ album and its importance to the cultural moment, as well as a reference to Charles Manson’s psychotic ideology, which was *itself* an interpretation of *The White Album*, specifically the song “Helter Skelter.” With such an amalgam of various stories needed to define the turbulence of the ‘60s, at the end of the essay Didion is no closer to finding meaning, because perhaps there isn’t any clear meaning to be found; “In other words,” she concludes, “It was another story without a narrative.”⁴

¹ Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 11.

² Linda Hutcheon, “Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History,” in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Ed. O’Donnell, P., and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Didion, *The White Album*, 47.

Enter the quintessentially postmodern genre known as historiographic metafiction. The literary genre, first defined by Linda Hutcheon in 1988, suggests that as with literature, history is subjective, caught up in a system of references to other histories, subjectivities, and self-serving meta-narratives. Broadly speaking, historiographic metafiction challenges the notion that history can be objectively documented, and hence known. Instead, historical writing is a conversation, a means to an end that by definition can never be reached. “It is a contemporary critical truism,” Hutcheon writes, “that the representation of the real is not the same as the real itself,”⁵ and yet another contemporary truism—“the more we know, the less we know”—is a truth that historians and historical fiction writers are often loath to admit.

The goal of all historians is to write a more comprehensive or “definitive” story about the past. Epistemology and historiography prove that all historians, to varying degrees, fail in this endeavor. To illustrate this point with an important and controversial example within Holocaust studies, the history of the Jewish Councils in Nazi-occupied Poland was initially based on diaries and testimonies written by ghetto inhabitants who were highly critical of the councils. Consequently, when Hannah Arendt published *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963, she reached the damning conclusion that the Jewish Councils were partially guilty of genocide. Two years later, the historian Jacob Robinson wrote a rebuttal to Arendt, categorically absolving the Jewish Councils of any wrongdoing in his book *And The Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*.

Further debates within Holocaust studies between the “intentionalist” and “functionalist” schools of thought argued for categorically opposed interpretations of Nazi history. The “intentionalist” school of thought argued that Auschwitz was inevitable (i.e. that Hitler intended to kill all of Europe’s Jews from the outset), and that therefore the Jewish Councils “should have known” that they would be implicated in their own destruction. The

⁵ Ibid, 6.

“functionalist” school, on the other hand, suggested that the Holocaust was the result of a series of escalating policies and circumstances, making it impossible for Jewish council members to know of the Germans’ intentions in 1939 and 1940. In the 1980s, the *Historikerstreit* (Historians’ Debate) caused further furor amongst those who disagreed about how best to confront Germany’s past, engendering questions of uniquely “German” behavior and responsibility that echoed critiques of “Jewish behavior” in previous decades. In short, even when looking at the exact same information about the most well researched (and documented) war in human history, the world’s foremost historians could not agree on which texts were most important to tell which story, which is in part why the history of the Jewish Councils remains a taboo subject to this day.

As the above example demonstrates, the more knowledge we have of an ever-expanding narrative, the less we can be sure of any concrete conclusions. And whereas traditional historical writing attempts to provide an approximation of the “truth” about the past, historiographic metafiction acknowledges that this is impossible. In Hutcheon’s mind, this is where historiographic metafiction fills a vacuum: while historians (and historical fiction writers especially) masquerade as truth tellers, writers of historiographic metafiction openly acknowledge the post-modern condition: there is no such thing as universal truth, because the *writing of history* is nothing more than a question of compiling subjective narratives.

Historical fiction as a genre exploded after World War Two, in part because of the attempts to comprehend the incomprehensible through novel perspectives. And while historical fiction does shorten the gap between historical “truth” and subjective experience, it, too, is limited by its own constraints. By inventing fictional characters to illustrate what the writer believes to be “true” about people who once really did exist, the historical fiction writer pretends to write “serious” fiction about history, when in fact she is simply

narrativizing her own subjective understanding of the past.

Writers of historiographic metafiction, on the other hand, confront this challenge from the outset. As scholar Verita Sriratana writes, “Readers [of historiographic metafiction] are not only made consciously aware of the historical fiction genre’s devices and limitations, but [are] also invited to question their own concepts and conceptualization of history.”⁶ As post-modernist historian Hayden White has argued for decades, this “questioning of history” further invites readers to re-imagine historical writing not as the *representation* but rather the *narrativization* of history.

Post-colonialist theory must be mentioned here, for as a subgenre of postmodernism, it is essential to historiographic metafiction. With the realization that Euro-centrism has dominated the study of human history, from the 1960s onward academics began to scrutinize just how valid any single historical narrative is. As post-colonialist theory teaches us, oppressed cultures, and especially non-Western cultures, often become subaltern to the grand narratives peddled by history’s “victors,” i.e. imperialistic and oppressive nation states.

History is a fiction first written by the aggressors, only to be obfuscated, revised, and rewritten by the victors. In the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty,

For generations now, philosophers and thinkers who shape the nature of social science have produced theories that embrace the entirety of humanity. As we well know, these statements have been produced in relative, and sometimes absolute, ignorance of the majority of humankind—that is, those living in non-Western cultures.⁷

Unlike historians or historical fiction writers, the historiographic metafiction writer either implicitly⁸ or explicitly⁹ acknowledges this tendency to silence the subaltern. To take this idea one step further, historiographic metafiction asks whether or not any *individual* narrative,

⁶ Verita Sriratana, ““But That Is Perhaps ...”, in *Dissent! Refracted: Histories, Aesthetics and Cultures of Dissent*, edited by Dorfman Ben (Frankfurt Am Main: Peter Lang AG, 2016), 171.

⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000), 29.

⁸ As we will see in Laurent Binet’s novel, *HHhH*

⁹ As we will see in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*.

post-colonialist or otherwise, is capable of accurately *representing* the myriad aspects that have led to this specific point in history.

To return to Chakrabarty, such an understanding of history calls for all writers—and especially western *historians*—to recognize that historical writing is a narrativization of the past and not its representation: “I ask for a history that deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices, the part it plays in collusion [...] so that the world may once again be imagined as radically heterogeneous.”¹⁰ By accepting that what is traditionally understood as “history” is often a story that historians, politicians, and entire nations manipulate to fit their own self-serving narratives, historiographic metafiction allows the writer to do away with the pre post-colonialist myth of history as somehow being “definitive.” This does not mean that we cannot learn from the past, only that the past forever remains inconclusive, regardless of the length of a bibliographic reference.

In James E. Young’s words, through historiographic metafiction there is liberation:

Which might be regarded the more ‘normal form’? That which assumes its ability to let facts speak for themselves...? Or that which makes the facts as clear as possible while still acknowledging the role of historian and narrator in bringing us these facts?¹¹

Enter Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, one of the first examples of historiographic metafiction wherein the book’s self-conscious narrator both acknowledges India’s colonialist past (and its effect on the narrator’s own individual story) while also questioning whether or not it is possible to ever see the historical forest for the trees.

¹⁰ Ibid, 45-46.

¹¹ Christine Berberich, ““I think I’m beginning to understand ...” *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* (May 21, 2018), 3.