

## The Concept of the Contemporary

THEODORE MARTIN, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* (New York: Columbia UP, 2017), pp. 264, cloth, \$60.00.

The contemporary is a category on the minds of many literary scholars, and Theodore Martin's impressive new book tells us why. More than a catchall term for the cultural archive of the present, *the contemporary* functions as veritable shorthand for the puzzle of doing literary history without the benefit of hindsight. For Martin, a literary history of the present is inherently paradoxical since it demands that scholars take stock of a time period that is never properly over and so never technically a period. Contemporary literature is moreover a field with no real consensus about its temporal origins (1945, 1960, 1989, and 2000 are all potential beginnings). Surely, the same claim could be made of other field monikers from realism to modernism to postcolonialism and postmodernism; yet the difference the contemporary makes lies in the word itself. "Tempor," the Latin root for "time," is its etymological core. Indeed, the inexorability of time's passing is what inspires and centers Martin's theorization of the contemporary. More diffuse than the before-and-after logic of the post- and more self-conscious about ephemerality than the modern, the concept of the contemporary is oriented above all to the elusiveness of the present. The field of contemporary literature is consequently born embattled by its very mission: to turn an elusive present into an institutionalized object of study.

The field's constitutive burden, however, is also its gift. Martin contends that in thoroughly conceptualizing the contemporary, scholars position themselves to recognize literary-historical objects and methods as continuous with the larger sociocultural dimensions of modernity. He observes that the "parallel emergence" of the field of contemporary literature and the "canon of self-reflexive critical theory" (think Frankfurt School and French theory) is symptomatic of the shift from industrial modernity to what Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens call reflexive modernity (Martin 18). Under a reflexive modernity, critics and theorists, akin to managers and workers, watch ourselves. Reporting on our practices becomes as central to our process of study as looking outward to cultural artifacts. The concept of the contemporary thus brokers dueling impulses to define the present positively and to retreat from the positivism of definition. Perhaps this is why Martin's most systematic attempt to define the contemporary takes the form of four negative theses reproduced here:

"The contemporary is not a period."

"The contemporary is not contemporary."

"The contemporary is not historical."

"The contemporary is not mere presentness." (2–4)

Each of these declarations opens out to a larger distillation of how problems of method connect to matters of the present. The contemporary cannot be periodized because the present is unbounded—a form of drift rather than delimitation. The contemporary is not contemporary, because the term itself has an institutional legacy reaching back to 1946, yet this legacy only serves to remind us of the gap between previous generations' sense of the present and our own. Hence the two subsequent claims explain that the contemporary is

neither historical nor mere presentness. Rather, and most importantly, the contemporary mediates between historicity and presentness to reimagine the present as a dyad of absorption in experience and reflection upon it. This more-than-mere present is, for Martin, “unthinkable outside the context of capital,” but that is not to say that the fascination with theorizing the contemporary is only symptomatic of capitalism’s reflexive phase (19). The contemporary as critical concept is also a resource for understanding how capitalist processes of 24-7 work, sped-up production cycles, and nanosecond financial trading have infiltrated and transformed our basic sense of present time.

Lest readers fear that Martin’s theory of the contemporary takes precedence over his analyses of actual works, let me say that *Contemporary Drift* is keenly attentive to the formal particularities of the novels and films it treats. Martin is a scrupulous and surprising close reader who distinguishes his approach to contemporary fiction via a robust theory of genre. Metaphorically speaking, genre confers historical drag on the contemporary’s drift. Methodologically speaking, Martin uses genre to develop “an alternative model for practicing historicism” built on testing received ideas of historical context rather than reproducing them (7). His thinking about genre builds on Lauren Berlant’s insight that generic conventions lend historical experiences a collectively shared affective form. Genre returns the present to us via the crucial work of mediation; it lends perspective on that present via its sedimentation of formal change (echoes of Fredric Jameson). Genres assume the duties of historicism by differentiating the present from the past with respect to the life of aesthetic and cultural forms; however, they defy the type of historicism that would relegate the arts to byproducts of external social forces.

Given the importance of recognizable convention to Martin’s argument, his approach quickly narrows to genre fiction. The very familiarity, even predictability, of such fiction is what allows for historicism: “Think of it [genre] as a controlled experiment in historical emergence. By holding certain features steady . . . genres first draw our attention to what changes; then they compel us to ask why” (13). Each of Martin’s body chapters poses a version of this question through five distinct forms of genre fiction: the novel of manners, the noir film, the detective novel, the Western film, and postapocalyptic novels. Works by Bret Easton Ellis, Zadie Smith, Vikram Chandra, Michael Chabon, China Miéville, Colson Whitehead, and Cormac McCarthy, among others, populate the novel chapters, while films directed by Billy Wilder, Robert Rodriguez, Steven Soderbergh, John Ford, Kelly Reichardt, and Takashi Miike, among others, populate the film chapters.

It is occasionally jarring to see references to film pop up in Martin’s introduction, given that literary scholars are so clearly his target audience. His initial framing of his chosen films is steeped in the history and debates of the discipline of English, as opposed to film studies, where genre is more commonly discussed as a studio or industry category. However, the chapters on noir and the Western more than make up for the introduction’s relative neglect of film scholarship. In these chapters, Martin offers deep engagement with film history, the particularities of film versus digital, and the demands of production schedules, which is to say that he is attentive to filmmaking as a unique art and a commercial process. The chapters on film also fit well within the overall composition of the book when one remembers Martin’s emphasis on the affordances of genre fiction—a multimedia category that overlaps with but is ultimately nonidentical to the field of contemporary literature.

Although the alternating strategy of *Contemporary Drift*—a chapter on novels followed by a chapter on film—brought the specificity of both narrative forms into welcome relief, one

wonders how Martin's theory of genre would accommodate cinematic adaptations of novels or the mixing of print and visual mediums within a single generic category. At least two films in his noir archive, *Double Indemnity* and *Sin City*, are adaptations that cross media. While it is certainly not Martin's stated aim to study the relationship between media and genre, film adaptation would add an exciting variable to the historicist focus on continuity, situation, and change. It would also productively complicate Martin's current use of *adaptation* as an exclusively evolutionary term to describe how recent works of fiction adjust their generic codes to match new historical conditions. In his chapter on the "decade novel," for example, he is especially attuned to how the novel of manners, which dates back to the nineteenth century, adapts to the paradox of periodizing an impermanent present. The decade novel qualifies as a novel of manners because it turns its contemporary moment into a "milieu of social class" (30). By cleverly reminding us that Ellis's *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* and Smith's *White Teeth* are, above all, period pieces of the 1980s and 1990s, Martin uses the decade novel not only to historicize the novels in question but to argue that these works produce their own "discourse of historicity" (31). This discourse derives from recording clothing brands, gadgets, and trends and formally demonstrating how such ephemera contribute to reified notions of time. Anyone who has ever watched VH1's *I Love the '80s* will know what Martin means.

While Martin's first three chapters focus on conceptual aspects of the contemporary and broach methodological issues related to historiography, the last two chapters turn to actually defining the contemporary as a period. The Western and postapocalyptic novels, respectively, exemplify the crises of climate change and nonstop work as outgrowths of global capitalism. Martin offers a tour de force reading of the Western, touching on at least ten films from across US, Italian, and Japanese traditions. The globalization of the Western corresponds to its ecological turn as contemporary films like *Meek's Cutoff*, *The Revenant*, and *Sukiyaki Western Django* thematize the severe weather that so often formed the backdrop of classic films like *The Searchers* and *The Great Silence*. Throughout this chapter, the representation of weather as an imperfect indicator of climate change becomes key to periodizing the contemporary moment. Martin distinguishes the "climatological present" (160) as one self-conscious of the relationship between micro and macro timescales (e.g., the narrowness of the rainy day versus the vastness of geologic eras) and anecdotal versus statistical modes of understanding atmospheric conditions.

Finally, in wonderfully counterintuitive readings of Whitehead's *Zone One* and Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet*, Martin retrieves the postapocalyptic novel from survivalist fantasies of self-reliance and renders it an allegory of constant work. Forging an "occupational aesthetic," this genre portrays work not as a "mode of self-expression but as a temporal regime—the time-consuming, non-narrative grind of work" (164). Rather than treat work as a vocation or as entwined with moral character and self-fulfillment, Martin's readings accentuate work's regulation of time and culminate in an ideological critique of postindustrial promises of meaningful and creative jobs. In his estimation, Whitehead's and Marcus's novels use monotony and menial tasks—"smallwork," in Marcus's words (170)—to reveal all forms of postindustrial work as alienated labor (173).

While Martin is right to emphasize the conversion of the worker's time into money under capitalism, his argument overlooks a middle stage that points to an even more pressingly contemporary phenomenon: the conversion of time into information and information into money. Marcus's protagonist is a data collector, and his "smallwork" begs to be understood

in light of the 24-7 recordings of digital technologies, which place consumers into the odd position of being users, products, and monetizable bundles of data all at once. I would have loved to see Martin address the infrastructural foundations of nonstop work and historicize emergent forms of postindustrial labor via network technologies. How, for example, might we relate the postapocalyptic novel's forms of smallwork to real-world practices of microwork? Microwork divides large projects into small tasks to be completed by workers isolated from one another but connected to the internet. This usually contract-based labor turns individuals into human computers and human intelligence into a service for improving automated systems. Amazon Mechanical Turk is the most infamous example of a microwork platform, but the model is prevalent in a host of crowdsourcing platforms that rely on a volunteer labor pool (think citizen science projects). Such styles of work, which seem to blur and stretch the definition of the worker beyond recognition, exemplify the dependence of postindustrial transformation upon the manipulation of data.

All of this is to say that thinking with *Contemporary Drift* is a pleasure. This book does not just take up residence in the already crowded field of contemporary literature; it gives the contemporary an architecture and makes it available to history. In his conclusion, Martin launches a full-throated defense of historicism for the determinations it provides in an otherwise indeterminate present. Martin's study of genre fiction as "historicism by other means" ultimately rests its case by reasserting what historicism does best: it assigns causality, refuses uncertainty, and "produces positive knowledge" (196–97). Those sympathetic to such endeavors and invested in the epistemological powers of literary and cinematic form will delight in *Contemporary Drift*. Those who would grant historicism a less ringing endorsement will find Martin's metacritical work on the making of historical concepts invaluable as well.

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### Work Cited

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