

## Historicizing the Present through the Lens of Literary and Filmic Genre

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### Abstract:

This interrogation into the challenges and politics involved in specifying ‘the contemporary’ demonstrates that the plight of ‘naming the now’ is highly complex, never complete, and nonetheless well worth our while. Through close analyses of five literary and filmic genres, Theodore Martin proposes an innovative approach to historicizing the present through the lens of genre and generic change. This proposed path to understanding the present is particularly relevant for literary and film studies students and scholars interested in genre theory and contemporary cultural artifacts. However, anyone employing the term ‘contemporary’ without further reflection will find compelling reasons and inspiration in *Contemporary Drift* for adopting more nuanced approaches.

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Martin, Theodore: *Contemporary Drift. Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. 264 pages, 60 USD. ISBN: 978-0231181921.

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What do we mean when we label something ‘contemporary,’ or refer to ‘the contemporary’? These are central questions underlying Theodore Martin’s compelling meditation on “the meanings and implications of the contemporary as a critical category” (p. 1). The notion of ‘the contemporary’ is often employed in a taken-for-granted manner. Martin’s thoughtful interrogation into the politics of specifying this diffuse term demonstrates that the plight of ‘naming the now’ is indeed complex, never complete, and nonetheless well worth our while. Through close analyses of five literary and filmic genres – namely, realist novels of manners, film noir, detective fiction, filmic Westerns, and post-apocalyptic fiction – Martin proposes an innovative approach to historicizing the present through the lens of genre and generic change. His contention is that “[g]enre’s blend of change and continuity, of drift and drag, makes it a privileged site for exploring the process of becoming contemporary” (p. 13). This path to understanding the present is thus particularly relevant for literary and film studies students and scholars interested in genre theory and contemporary cultural artifacts.

However, anyone employing the term ‘contemporary’ in their work without further reflection will find compelling reasons and inspiration in this book for adopting a more nuanced approach.

Each literary and filmic genre introduced through the course of the book is tied to a specific aesthetic involved in historicizing the present. Martin does not simply identify generic innovations as evidence of ‘contemporariness,’ but he also suggests that the literary and filmic texts analyzed are themselves formally and thematically engaged with the effort to understand the present, often in self-reflexive manners. In chapter one, entitled “DECADE: Period Pieces,” he observes a trend in contemporary realist fiction since the 1980s: the tendency for stories to be structured around the historical unit of the decade. Using Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* for exemplary analyses, Martin discusses how such realist novels of manners are attempts to characterize specific decades according to cultural tendencies, norms, brands, trends and general structures of feeling. What these novels show us, Martin argues, is that the arbitrary timeframe of the decade “becomes an imprecise yet strangely effective way to structure the expectation of historical change” (p. 55). The decade-structured novel isolates a segment of historical flux and thereby induces reflection of the impossibility and artificiality of fixing any moment in time. Chapter two, “REVIVAL: Situating Noir,” shifts our focus to a comparative analysis of 1940-50s films noir produced in the 21st century. Martin focuses particularly on the conventional employment of voice-over in film noir, and interrogates the means by which such a disembodied voice generates awareness of different temporalities. Revivals from the past – be it the narrating voice of a deceased character or the reemergence of noir style itself – are understood here in part as cultural ways in which we generate distance from immediate circumstances in attempts to understand them.

Another lens through which to achieve lucidity about the present, as Martin suggests in chapter three, entitled “WAITING: Mysterious Circumstance,” is provided by the genre of detective fiction. Rather than employing narrative constructions of distance and revival as in noir, contemporary mystery novels – exemplified in Martin’s work by Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games* and China Miéville’s *The City and the City* – employ strategies of “reimagining waiting as a form of knowing. The long wait in the detective novel [...] discloses the temporal mediation of meaning: the ways that reading and knowing are subject to time” (p. 101). Martin finds that waiting is most pronounced in contemporary detective fiction as a means of foregrounding temporal dimensions of knowing. Engaging recent literary-studies discussions surrounding modes and methods of reading, this chapter, like all others, fluidly combines current theoretical debates and frameworks with careful and convincing textual analysis. A thought-provoking claim and approach to the genre of the filmic Western is laid out in chapter four, “WEATHER: Western Climes,” in which Martin understands “the contemporary persistence of the Western by rereading the genre in terms of ecological rather than

political history” (p. 131). By tracing the prominence of inclement weather conditions in various contemporary Westerns, Martin discusses how such imagery compels reflection on “climate change’s unthinkable timescales” and their potential impact on how we think about the present (p. 160).

Climate change is just one of many key concerns of the present that Martin addresses. In the fifth chapter, “SURVIVAL: Work and Plague,” he persuasively situates literary narrative about post-apocalyptic survival within discourses surrounding precarious labor. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, for instance, in its detailed chronicling of everyday survival, “picture[s] the end of the world as the eradication of alienated labor” while it also is the story of constant precarity (p. 165). A detailed discussion of *The Road* and other post-apocalyptic novels in light of the end of capitalism transitions to a discussion of several contemporary office fictions that depicts protagonists “[c]aught between the dreadful routines of [their] jobs and the deeper dread of losing them” (p. 194). Here, the present is characterized as a precarious tight-rope-walk in which the struggle to survive generates a vivid, yet also dreadful, mode of mindfulness.

By approaching the contemporary through the lens of literary and filmic genre, *Contemporary Drift* offers a novel strategy for homing in on “an unfinished and undistanced category of historical experience” (p. 197). Yes, Martin admits, the inherent lack of boundaries and distance of what we call ‘the contemporary’ make every attempt to characterize it incomplete. But this should not dissuade our attempts to do so. As his elegantly written and clearly argued study shows, literary and filmic genres have always already been doing this work for us. By paying attention to their stability and fluctuation over time, as well as their own formal and thematic grappling with the present, we are offered conjectures and thought experiments regarding “the historical coherence of the contemporary world” and “we learn to practice historicism by other means” (p. 197).

**German Abstract:**

**Historisierung der Gegenwart durch die Perspektive literarischer und filmischer Gattungen**

Diese Untersuchung der Politiken der Spezifizierung des ‚Zeitgenössischen‘ zeigt, dass der Versuch ‚das Jetzt‘ zu benennen komplex, niemals vollständig und dennoch unsere Zeit wert ist. Durch die sorgfältige Analyse von fünf literarischen und filmischen Genres schlägt Theodore Martin einen innovativen Ansatz vor, um die Gegenwart durch Genre und generischen Wandel zu historisieren. Dieser vorgeschlagene Weg, das Jetzt zu benennen, ist besonders für Studierende und Wissenschaftler\_innen der Literatur- und Filmwissenschaft aufschlussreich, die sich für Genre-Theorie und zeitgenössische kulturelle Artefakte interessieren. So werden alle, die den Begriff ‚zeitgenössisch‘ bisher ohne weitere Überlegungen verwenden, in *Contemporary Drift* zwingende Gründe und Inspiration finden, einen differenzierteren Ansatz zu verfolgen.

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