

## Book Review

How to Read a Moment: The American Novel and the Crisis of the Present, by Mathias Nilges, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2021, 242 pp., \$34.95, ISBN 978-0-810-14342-5

For more than a decade, a mural on an exposed wall of the Kunsthaus Tacheles broadcast a question—or perhaps an existential sigh—over the streets of Berlin. ‘How Long is Now’ read the wall of the iconic art squat, which closed in 2012. The question is one that Mathias Nilges’ *How to Read a Moment* asks and answers through its study of the contemporary American *Zeitroman*, or time novel. The inciting problem, Nilges claims, is that under late capitalism, ‘now’ seems to stretch into an interminable, instantaneous blur, so that ‘the present no longer functions as a productive boundary that creates the temporality of both past and future but instead expands into an absolute limit that constrains our ability to imagine the future as difference’ (p. 12). But Nilges does not echo the common refrain that the *Zeit* in which we live has exhausted itself and ‘the future may have ended’ (p.10). Instead he argues that the contemporary American time novel imagines new conceptions of time altogether and in doing so pushes us beyond the limits of crisis-driven nihilism. Nilges is careful to point out the contemporary novel’s continuities with its precursors: like the modernist novels of Thomas Mann and Robert Musil, the contemporary, formalist time novel ‘treats time as a matter of point of view’ (p. 94). In doing so, recent novels, like those by Don DeLillo, Jennifer Egan, William Gibson, Ben Lerner, Colson Whitehead and Charles Yu, present different temporal horizons. They not only thematise time, but ‘forge a link between time and history’, giving readers ‘nothing less than a new theory of time’ (p. 19).

That new theory holds that time itself can become the object of inquiry within the novel, which slows and stretches moments so that they become differently legible. As a result, the novel’s treatment of time throws sand in the gears of the instantaneous now, since ‘the time of global capital, immediate and omnipresent, demands to be experienced rather than read and interpreted’ (p. 23). Though most of the novels that Nilges considers are about time in the thematic sense, he is less interested in their discussions of time than in the devices they use to depict it. *How to Read a Moment* is thus driven by a formalist claim: that ‘the time novel enlists form in the effort to engage with time, and it does so by dispensing with the focus on experience and instead conceiving of time itself as form’ (p. 21). Nilges shows readers that the pauses in Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, the compression of time and space in DeLillo’s *Zero K*, and the movement between narrative times and tenses in Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* all create new perspectives from which we may better see the temporal regimes of the present. While many critics, for instance, have juxtaposed

Lerner's treatment of art in *10:04* to his treatment of commodities, Nilges illustrates that the novel presents both as objects that can be approached meaningfully; his reading of the narrator's revelation upon gazing at a jar of instant coffee astutely demonstrates this point.

Although novels like Lerner's *10:04* and DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* are by now canonical fare for scholars of contemporary literature, Nilges' attention to the contours and textures of time illuminates these texts anew. In this sense, his formalist readings highlight and dilate what he claims is true of all novelistic reading, which 'is connected to a discontinuous, nonlinear, and plural form of temporality that is dictated not by the medium as technology but instead by the pace of interpretation itself and as such stands opposed to the incessant flow and immediacy of the time of capital' (p. 55). Although the lay reader may arguably read much faster and with less attention to detail than the professional critic, it is certainly true that novel reading is far from instantaneous. For Nilges the novel is a privileged medium for imagining new structures of time since it must be experienced through the temporally dilated act of reading. Reading is slow, and interpretation even slower—as Nilges summarises, 'reading a moment is different than experiencing it' (p. 62). This insight, of course, is one familiar from narrative theory, which has long held that narrative has two temporalities: one belonging to the history in which events take place and one in which those same events are retold in a particular plot. The Russian formalists maintained that narrative disorganises chronology to force an awareness of these two times on readers, which they thought could in turn induce reflections on the peculiar nature of 'real' time.

More generally, from Tzvetan Todorov and Gérard Genette to J. Hillis Miller and Peter Brooks, narrative's temporal dualism has been considered a formal feature of novels as well as a dynamic process inherent in acts of reading. Nilges draws upon Mikhail Bakhtin and György Lukács in particular to highlight how the novel makes 'time knowable to us' by eschewing immediacy (p. 39). In her 1999 book, *The Present Lasts a Long Time*, Francis Mulhern makes an argument with which one imagines Nilges would agree: 'Marxism', she writes, 'resists progress and custom alike, in the name of a liberating uncertainty. The modern, with its self-consuming future, is the enemy of the contemporary, which is all we ever really have'.<sup>1</sup> Like Mulhern, and more recently Nicholas Brown in his book *Autonomy*, Nilges is interested in the ways that novels seem to resist the relentless march of time under capitalism.<sup>2</sup> It must be said though, that this capacity of novels is hardly new, and thus chafes against Nilges' claims that recent novels accomplish this in a singular and recognisably different fashion than earlier texts.

In fact, one of the most compelling arguments Nilges makes is in the book's final chapter, 'Periodizing the Contemporary', in which he argues not for contemporary fiction's newness, but for its continuities across periods that critics have tended to de-emphasise. His central, thought- and critic-provoking claim in this chapter is that postmodernism is not a thing of the past but rather something that has become so dominant it is no longer visible. 'Postmodernism', he insists, 'disappears from literature once it becomes the new structural reality of our present' (p. 193). Drawing such a historical arc does not put him at odds with

the many scholars who have periodized the present—among them Timothy Bewes, Rachel Greenwald-Smith, Andrew Hoborek, Amy Hungerford, Emily Hyde, Theodore Martin, Timothy Melley, Jeffrey Nealon, and myself—but it reminds us that movements don't only end; sometimes instead they reach 'full implementation and instrumentalization' (p. 196).<sup>3</sup> If the contemporary time novel reveals just how discontinuous time is, then periodizing should, Nilges asserts, take this into account.

It is fitting that Nilges ends his book with a chapter not on newness, but on the longer relays and reverberations critics would do well to keep in mind. Throughout *How to Read a Moment*, Nilges draws on a familiar and expansive array of theoretical traditions. Ranging from Frankfurt school (Adorno, Benjamin) to political philosophy (Agamben, Rancière) and Marxism (Bloch, Lefebvre) to the titans of postmodernism (Harvey, Jameson), the book touches on many of the 'big names' of theory from the twentieth century to today. Admittedly, this can be daunting at times and disjointed at others. But it is also evidence of the book's ambition, of the desire to find in the contemporary novel the means for a better present and more hopeful future. Nilges wants to spur us to find possibilities and new futures amidst our present of perpetual crisis; he also wants to reassure and remind us of the novel's worth—the way it nourishes our imagination so that we may see around the corner of apocalypse. In crossing broad theoretical terrain, Nilges collects the utopian, revolutionary, and radical ideas for a better future and attempts to distil them into an uncruel optimism.

In many ways, Nilges's book bucks academic trends: it is theoretical in the traditional sense of the word, it is formalist, it offers a narrative theory of mostly canonical novels. Ultimately, this approach, which we might call conventional, supports the book's argument that imagining and inhabiting new futures requires slowing down and resisting the pressure or temptation to chase the new and immediate. Trend, after all, with its incessant, rapid cycles, is a hallmark of the late capitalist temporality that Nilges wishes to critique. *How to Read a Moment* demonstrates the value in pushing against the grain of endless innovation and revels instead in the beauty of a close reading well done, a dense idea unfurled, a clock paused in the name of interpretation. So, we may ask again, even as crises unfold around us: how long is now? Long enough to read a moment, but also—thankfully and urgently, long enough to read a novel.

## Notes

1. Francis Mulhern, *The Present Lasts a Long Time: Essays in Cultural Politics* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1999), p. 28.
2. Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
3. See Timothy Bewes, 'Recent Experiments in American Fiction.' *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 50.3 (2017), pp. 351-358; Rachel Greenwald-Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Andrew Hoborek, 'Introduction: After Postmodernism.' *Twentieth Century Literature* 53.3 (2007), pp. 233-247; Amy Hungerford, 'On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary.' *American*

*Literary History* 20.1-2 (2008), pp. 410–419; Emily Hyde and Sarah Wasserman ‘The Contemporary.’ *Literature Compass* 14.9 (2017): pp. 1-19; Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017); Timothy Melley, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); and Jeffrey Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

Sarah Wasserman  
University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware, USA  
✉ [swasser@udel.edu](mailto:swasser@udel.edu)

© 2021 Sarah Wasserman  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1986941>