



On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War

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What does narrative look like when the possibility of an expansive future has been called into question? This query is the driving force behind Daniel Grausam's *On Endings*, which seeks to show how the core texts of American postmodernism are a response to the geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War and especially to the new potential for total nuclear conflict. Postwar American fiction needs to be rethought, he argues, by highlighting postmodern experimentation as a mode of profound historical consciousness.

In Grausam's view, previous studies of fiction mimetically concerned with nuclear conflict neither engage the problems that total war might pose to narration nor take seriously the paradox of a war that narrative can never actually describe. Those few critical works that do take seriously such problems do not offer a broad account of American postmodernism. And recent work on postmodernism has offered no comprehensive historical account of the part played by nuclear weapons in the emergence of new forms of temporal and historical experience. *On Endings* significantly extends the project of historicizing postmodernism while returning the nuclear to a central place in the study of the Cold War.

On Endings: American Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War Details

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E. C. Koch says

Engaging with postmodernism means engaging with time. Whether you take your lead from Lyotard's claim that postmodernism is defined by its incredulity to the metanarratives controlling history (and science and basically all knowledge production), or from Jameson who theorized the postmodern as an inability to think historically, locked as it is in a perpetual present, the argument that postmodernism, the dominant postwar experimental literature, is defined in relation to history and futurity isn't really an argument anymore. The work now is seeing, by analyzing the period's literature, what it was that led to this period's altered relationship to time. Grausam's answer, simply enough, is the bomb. Drawing (implicitly) from Jameson's work, Grausam explains how postmodernism's inherent inability to imagine a future from which to reflect (and historicize) the past is a direct result of the cognitive impasse presented by the possibility of total nuclear war (or, as Grausam has it, World War III). Like Derrida says, World War III would not be an event, could never attain event status, for such an occurrence would be total and could not enter history. WWII, then, is a very real unreal future that cannot, to borrow from Jameson, be cognitively mapped. Here, then, the literature of the perpetual now is one conditioned by the Cold War's apocalyptic potential. The work Grausam examines - *The Crying of Lot 49*, *The Floating Opera*, *Giles Goat-Boy*, *The Public Burning*, Barthelme's "Game," *End Zone*, *Prisoner's Dilemma* - is all shown to be conditioned by an anticipatory fear of, and fascination by, an inconceivable future. From here we see how meta-fictional self-reflexivity is less the effect of post-structuralism than it is of the necessity to narrate from a level removed from the representational, which level is traditionally the purview of realism. I was surprised that Grausam didn't look at *Cat's Cradle* or *Pale Fire* (two novels I thought would fit into his schema) and even more surprised that he didn't even give a passing mention of neo-liberalism since the latter is often written of in reference to the transition from late-postmodernism to the contemporary (New Sincerity) and conceived of as a radical collapsing of distance (both epistemological and temporal). But then also you can't write about everything. Reading this against Saint-Amour's "Perpetual Interwar," and given the recent sense of Cold War animosities between America and Russia, I wonder (thinking about the idea of the postmodern transitioning into something else (which was in the subtext of G.'s chapter on *Prisoner's Dilemma*)) whether the foreclosed future of postmodernism (due to our awareness that total nuclear war is possible) has gone away. Toward the end, Grausam states that story-telling can't prevent war, but also that not-story-telling can make war more possible, leading to the claim that "certain forms of seemingly antirealist and fabulatory escapism are a direct result of a commitment to the real, and to the possibility of reality lasting just a bit longer." This sounds to me like a suggestion that a return to realism (à la Leypoldt's "new-neorealism") could be the emerging literary aesthetic and could rescue us from our self-destructive tendencies. Alas, we'll see (or so one hopes).
