

**METAHISTORICAL NARRATIVES AND SCIENTIFIC METAFICTIONS:  
A CRITICAL INSIGHT INTO THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETICS**

Giuseppe Episcopo, ed.

Cronopio: Napoli, 2015.

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With *Metahistorical Narratives and Scientific Metafictions: A Critical Insight into the Twentieth-Century Poetics* Giuseppe Episcopo has edited an inspiring collection of essays which succeeds in engaging the reader in a thought-provoking discussion on issues currently at the core of literary debates about contemporary fiction and its roots in other fields of knowledge. The volume represents an illuminating study of classic notions pertaining to the metahistorical nature of contemporary narratives but here refreshed with metafictional approaches to scientific discourse.

Despite Episcopo's title for his foreword —“an untimely beginning”—, *Metahistorical Narratives and Scientific Metafictions* is a timely book for two main reasons. On the one hand, the collection evidences the present importance of the postmodern cultural turn in the understanding of history and problematization of historiography (White 1981). However, the different papers extend their historiographic focus on the literary production of the late twentieth century, also dealing with issues concerning the categories of time and space, and exploring their implications for historical structures and their representability. Thus, Episcopo's volume underscores the fact that contemporary writers' evolving engagement with the past demands from us a similar movement forward with regard to the critical tools provided by postmodern literary theory. The essays follow the lead of Linda Hutcheon (1988) and others in their quest to find a new critical vocabulary to interpret increasingly complex contemporary engagements

with the constructs of time and space. On the other hand, the collection accounts for an evolving attitude towards science in contemporary fiction, which has moved from the genre of classical science fiction and even cyberpunk to increasingly self-conscious engagements with scientific metaphors as well as with the philosophy and the history of science (Moraru 2011).

The volume is prefaced by Episcopo's own provocative Foreword, which provides an informative overview of the main issues that are dealt with in the course of the collection and highlights the main aspects that arise in the argumentative line of the book. In this foreword, the editor interestingly states the book's aim as proposing a critical theory while submitting a number of literary texts to critical analysis. The foreword ends with a number of open questions that the following chapters collectively attempt to answer, providing the collection with a high degree of cohesion despite the lack of a formal division of chapters into broader thematic parts.

The main body of *Metahistorical Narratives and Scientific Metafictions* consists of ten essays, one of them written by Episcopo himself, with Thomas Pynchon's fiction occupying a prominent place in several chapters, for obvious thematic and stylistic reasons. The first chapter, by Susan Strehle, surveys contemporary historical fiction to make the valid point that much of it is metahistorical, since it "summons, fractures, and re-invents history" (15). After establishing a number of key common features for contemporary metahistorical novels, she moves on to question two approaches used in the analysis of these features by contemporary criticism: postmodern criticism and trauma theory, providing relatively insightful arguments to this effect. A similar questioning of postmodernism is central to Simon de Bourcier's chapter. In his paper, de Bourcier explores Neal Stephenson's attitude toward postmodernism in two of his novels, specifically with regard to their stance towards the liberal humanist subject through the scientific metaphor of the Turing test. Despite the novels' postmodern and cyberpunk elements, de Bourcier aptly shows that the vision of the subject as 'embodied' is precisely a key part of Stephenson's repudiation of postmodernism. The third chapter, by Sherryl Vine, also focuses on Neal Stephenson's literary production, more specifically on his *Baroque Cycle*, which as she claims charts the emergence of modernity by "confusing" the genres of historical novel and science fiction. Throughout the different sections of the paper, Vine lucidly focuses on the scientific, economic, and political revolutions that the cycle charts, concluding that these various elements "are also con-fused: melted away from their fixed, rigid forms and mingled together to produce something new" (74). This is, no doubt, also the aim of this collection as a whole in matters of reaching a contemporary understanding of notions of history, science, fiction, and textuality.

Chapter four, written by Loveday Kempthorne, focuses on Romanian author Ion Barbu, the algebra and geometry professor and also poet who attempted to develop a theory of poetics that might unify poetry with mathematics. This chapter might be seen as the odd one out in this otherwise brilliantly researched and skillfully written collection. The fifth chapter, by Martin Paul Eve, usefully foregrounds a movement from historiography to taxonomography in the novels of some contemporary authors. The first part of the essay explores the self-conscious construction of genre and its “socio-transgressive potential” (102) from a theoretical perspective. Eve then moves on to discuss a number of novels by Thomas Pynchon in order to trace the shift towards taxonomographic metafiction and its critical and ethical function, insightfully concluding that taxonomographic metafiction target our own reading practices. Nina Engelhardt’s paper focuses on another relevant metafictional mode which she claims has recently emerged: scientific metafiction. Indeed, chapter six brilliantly develops this concept, which is defined in the context of historiographic metafiction and in relation to two novels, Daniel Kehlmann’s *Measuring the World* and Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*. These two texts, as happens in the case of other scientific metafiction, “link the questionings of the truth claims of history and science, depicting both as constructs whose ‘facts’ derive not alone from how the world ‘really is’ but that are subject to cultural and social factors as well as to narrativization and fictionalization” (144). The following chapter, written by Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, also deals with history and science, providing a comprehensive and relevant analysis of Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* with the tools provided by historiographic metafiction and the cultural metaphors of classical science and post-Newtonian physics. Collado-Rodríguez’s conclusion that the novel subverts traditional paradigms of history, science, and religion seems apt for most of the fictions analyzed in the volume, thus proving the collection’s success in furthering a critical theory of contemporary narrative while developing the practice of critical analysis.

The eighth paper in the book, by Terry Reilly, returns again to Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* in order to explore different temporalities and the representation of time. These, as he illuminatingly concludes, shape the novel’s magical realist quality. Temporality in the narrative of Thomas Pynchon is also the main focus of Chapter nine, written by the volume’s editor himself. In his paper, Episcopo skillfully maps the space-time nature of the locus where part three of *Gravity’s Rainbow* takes place, arguing that this is precisely the source of the uncanny feeling that results from entrance into this “Zone”. His conclusion that the “Zone” is a space where the repressed returns brilliantly encourages a consideration of the construct of time and its association to space—as many of the essays in this collection do. The last chapter, by Amy J. Elias, skillfully leads readers to consider the proliferation of subgenres of cyberpunk from the 1980s and 1990s, mapping

their connection to the genre of the metahistorical romance and the technological sublime. In order to support her claims, Elias also turns to the literary production of Thomas Pynchon, more specifically to *Against the Day*, a novel that she analyzes as a steampunk text which “historicizes and metahistoricizes the technological sublime, at the same time rearticulating the sublime desires of metahistorical romance” (217).

Even though the attempt to satisfactorily map contemporary evolving representations of the past and at the same time propose a critical theory of it seems far from easy, the book represents a masterful compilation of studies which shed valuable light on emerging literary modes and their relationship with the notions of time, history, and science. However, it is my belief that this excellent collection of essays would have benefitted had it been completed by a concluding chapter. Indeed, the multiplicity of ideas and concepts about contemporary fiction introduced through the different chapters might have been usefully recapitulated, particularly given the book’s declared purpose to propose a critical theory through the practice of critical analysis. Nevertheless, *Metahistorical Narratives and Scientific Metafiction* is a valuable book for the study of late twentieth-century poetics, contemporary fiction, and its relation to scientific discourse. It competently introduces and puts into practice groundwork notions about contemporary modes of writing that will invite much critical discussion for years to come, opening up some fascinating paths for the analysis of narrative in our transgressive times.

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## Works Cited

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