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Alternative times: temporalities in the alternative histories of Philip Roth, Martin Amis, and Quentin Tarantino

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ABSTRACT

The publication of alternative history fiction increased greatly after World War II, the war itself having become one of the mode's most popular subjects. In recent years several acclaimed authors and filmmakers have constructed their own World War II alternative histories, thus providing the mode with increased academic attention. This study focuses on Philip Roth's fictional memoir *The Plot Against America*, Martin Amis's novel *Time's Arrow*, and Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglourious Basterds*. These texts are also read against more typical instantiations of the mode to demonstrate how they may or may not deviate from an assumed norm. This will be done with particular focus on formulations of temporality as it is represented within alternative history. That time, among other matters, is among this study's central concerns is reflected in this project's structure. In the Introduction existing definitions of the mode are critiqued, and new definitions offered. Thereafter, the study is divided into four parts, with parts one (Pasts), two (Presents), and three (Futures) offering discussions on how these conventional temporal demarcations are portrayed in the primary texts. "Part 1: Pasts" discusses the texts' subversive representations of World War II. This section interrogates whether such subversions of history may open the primary texts to accusations of Holocaust denial and historical relativism. "Part 2: Presents" demonstrates how understandings of the past come to influence understandings of the present. This section is also concerned with how a traumatic past both constructs characters' present identity and may alter their perception of the past from the vantage point of their present. And "Part 3: Futures" discusses how certain characters' ability to rethink the past, or narrate alternative histories, may inform their ability to imagine future possibilities. Before offering a conclusion, "Part 4: Pasts, Presents, Futures" proposes that the primary texts, and alternative histories more generally, destabilise the common temporal nodes as they may be understood within the context of causality. Also, using Paul Ricoeur's theories of narrative time, particularly mimesis$_1$, mimesis$_2$, and mimesis$_3$, this section argues that past, present, and future proliferate within the context of alternative histories. This is particularly true when understanding the readers' time as read against the time of the text, and also demonstrates how alternative histories may offer ways of thinking about alternative temporalities.