

Introduction

FOR MUCH OF the summer of 2014, a long stretch of Sunset Boulevard was lined with banners bearing the slogan “New.Art.Now” punched out in screaming red letters. These banners were advertising the second Biennial of the Hammer Museum, the actual title of which was the much less arresting phrase “Made in L.A.” In fact, the punchy three-word come-on appearing so prominently on the banners was relatively absent from the catalog and other promotional materials surrounding the Biennial, as if the museum was a little embarrassed by its own boldness. But it is not hard to see why these three words would have appealed in the first place as the slogan for an exhibition of recent art. For “New Art Now” distills into three cheeky syllables what seems to be the easiest and most natural definition of contemporary art. *New* and *now* seem to be virtual synonyms, so closely are novelty and the present associated in any modern conception of time, and together they serve as a double synonym for the contemporary. All the art in any museum might be said to exist in the present, but only contemporary art is new right now.

However, the slogan is so obvious, its presentation so exaggerated, that it begins to seem less like a description and more like an ironic comment. For the word *now* has become so ubiquitous in the titles and slogans of recent art exhibitions that it threatens to displace the contemporary itself. Also in the summer of 2014, Prospect New Orleans, another contemporary biennial, chose for its third iteration the title *Notes for Now*; the Art Now Fair in Miami Beach announced its new season; and Galerie Perrotin in Paris showed the works of Daniel Arsham under the title *The Future Is Always Now*. Toward the end of the year, the Museum of Modern Art opened a new exhibition of contemporary painting under the title *The Forever Now*. In fact, such exhibitions have become so ubiquitous that Helen Molesworth has given them the general

title “the ‘what’s new now’ show.”¹ Perhaps the Hammer Museum was hoping to wield its slogan as an ironic talisman against such criticism.

In any case, these exhibitions are vivid examples of a development Richard Meyer recently decried as “the rise of what might be called now-ism in art history.”² Meyer is not just worried about titles or even exhibitions but about a general temporal myopia in the art world at large, what Pamela Lee has called, with similar anxiety, “creeping presentism.”³ The term *presentism* as Lee uses it no longer has its former technical meaning of judging the past by standards formed in the present, because it seems the past is not considered at all. According to Meyer, Lee, and many others, the contemporary, until fairly recently ignored by serious scholars of art, has grown in influence until it threatens to displace interest in all previous periods. Academic concentration on contemporary art is such that students planning dissertations no longer look very far even into the 20th century for their topics.⁴

Art critics and scholars are hardly alone in this anxious sense of a certain temporal narcissism. For quite some time now, it has been an article of faith that modern society in general is far too concentrated on the particular moment it happens to occupy. Modernity, by any definition, values the present over the past, and modernism is often taken to stand for “the autonomy of the present from the past and future.”⁵ Thus it is a commonplace that modern writers and thinkers, and perhaps modern people in general, have a concern for the immediate, for the now, that is different in kind from the version of that concern that may have prevailed in earlier times. It has also been suggested that in addition to thinking differently about the present, perhaps as a result of thinking about it so much, modern people have actually come to experience it in a new way. Beginning with Stephen Kern, who argues that there was a kind of “thickened present” prevalent at the turn of the 20th century, critics and scholars of modernism have identified in it a protracted or intensified version of the moment happening now.⁶

This same concentration on the present has been consistently identified as one of the hallmarks of the postmodern, despite its other differences from the period before. According to David Harvey, the postmodern lies at the end of a long process of acceleration and compression that has continued until “the present is all there is.”⁷ For Fredric Jameson as well, one of the classic features of the postmodern is “a dramatic and alarming shrinkage of existential time and the reduction to a present that hardly qualifies as such any longer.”⁸ For Jameson, the present defined by modernity still had a measure of value because it retained a certain content, but the present characteristic

of the postmodern period no longer qualifies as such because it is empty and anonymous.

Whether the postmodern period is over or not, this version of the present still seems to subsist, for more recent criticism continues to echo these claims. Paul Virilio says almost exactly the same thing as Harvey, only twenty years later: “Past, present, and future contract in the omnipresent instant, just as the expanse of the terrestrial globe does these days in the excessive speed of the constant acceleration of our travels and our telecommunications.”⁹ Or, as Bernard Stiegler puts it, there is now “a permanent *present* at the core of the temporal flux.”¹⁰ For Stiegler, as for Virilio, this is a horrific situation, though the political import of a permanent present is not at all clear. Virilio’s position, at least, is frankly reactionary, filled as it is with nostalgia for the *grands recits* of the past, the long lost “depth of time of the past and of long durations.”¹¹ François Hartog also laments the way that “this present daily fabricates the past and future it requires, while privileging the immediate,” and he finds symptoms of this temporal myopia everywhere, from “real time” technologies to the “Californian jogger.”¹² One can only imagine what Hartog might have thought if he had followed one of these joggers down to Sunset Boulevard and found it lined with banners celebrating the now.

The present, by these accounts, is too much with us, and its ubiquity is not limited to the world of contemporary art shows but extends to encompass everything we do, all of it balanced on the head of the same pin. For all these vivid denunciations of the temporal domination of the present over other periods of time, however, it is not clear exactly how the present is supposed to have changed. In the years since Kern’s influential study was published, it has become easy to assume that the present has been “thickened,” which is apparently to say that it has become longer, annexing bits of the past and future around it. This would certainly seem to be the case in literary works like Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, in which a relatively brief moment just before sundown of a particular day turns out to have in it vast tracts of narrated time. But Harvey and Jameson speak in terms of shrinkage and reduction, as if the ubiquity of the present were all the worse because it has become too brief. This is the condition also identified some time ago by Martin Heidegger, who famously complained about the loss of the present that occurs when people are pushed around by the demands of modern life.¹³ In this analysis, the present has shrunk to the vanishing point, so that it seems even shorter than the instant ticked off by the clock. This theory could find abundant support in the literary and artistic awareness of the sudden that has come to be called the shock of the new.¹⁴

Thus the consensus that *something* has happened to the present is complicated by the lack of consensus about the nature of the change. Did the moment get longer and fuller, so that modern minds were seduced into a permanent present, or was it shortened and impoverished, so that people were ultimately banished from the present altogether? In either case, it makes sense to wonder what this new present is being compared to when it is said to have been lengthened or shrunk. Long or short in comparison to *what*? Locke once observed with some sadness that “since no two Portions of Succession can be brought together, it is impossible ever to know their Equality.”¹⁵ Leibniz, in his response to Locke’s *Essay*, added the notion that “our measurement of time would be more accurate if we could keep a past day for comparison with days to come, as we keep measures of space.”¹⁶ Since we can’t keep past presents around for comparison, though, it is hard to see how we might say with any certainty that the present has changed.

Literalizing the issue in this way raises other questions as well. Is the purported change in the present physiological in nature, or is it phenomenological, or perhaps sociological? Is it, as most recent theorists seem to say, a cultural change that comes to have intimately personal effects? For many recent critics, technology and the senses form a kind of feedback loop in which the speed and sensationalism of one excites an increased demand for rapid response in the other.¹⁷ The present acquires a nervous shudder as it rushes past itself. For others, the technological need for speed actually provokes something like the opposite response, an attentive stillness in which the present comes to be fixed in time.¹⁸ And other critics wonder, with some justice, if something like the human sensorium can actually change on such short notice.¹⁹ A purely physiological change seems out of the question due to the disproportion between the time schemes of technological development, the human lifespan, and evolution. But even a general behavioral shift would seem to require more time than is available, unless the beginning of the transformation is dated back to something like the Renaissance.

It would be easier, then, to say, as many seem to do, that the change is really one of attitude, not physiology or phenomenology. People of the present, in this analysis, simply care too much about it, turning away from the past and the future. Some critics, like Richard Meyer, are more concerned that we have forgotten the past, others, like Marc Augé, that we no longer anticipate the future.²⁰ Both would agree, though, with Peter Osborne, who insists that the present has somehow lost its inherently threefold nature, deprived as it now is of past and future.²¹ Arguments of this kind are frankly normative. A

descriptive claim, that people in other times have cared more about the past and/or the future, becomes the normative demand that people in all times should care similarly for those periods of time. Even if the descriptive claim is true, though, it does not justify the normative demand, which does seem in some cases like an automatic conservatism.

In any case, the descriptive claim is not necessarily true. Recent discussions of the present seem to have forgotten the advice of Marcus Aurelius, perhaps the best-selling self-help author of all time, which is to “throw everything else aside, and hold on to these few things only and keep in mind that each of us only lives in the present, this brief moment of time.”²² This advice is echoed by fellow Stoics such as Seneca, who maintained that “the sage enjoys the present without depending on the future.”²³ It might be fair to say, in fact, that this purposeful ignorance of past and future has been far more consistently influential than the threefold present that is sometimes assumed to be essential to human experience. The classic attitude itself, the calm self-sufficiency that the modern world found so intriguing in the ancient, is nothing more than this Stoic belief in the sufficiency of the moment. For Goethe, in fact, the sickness of modernity began when it lost “that splendid feeling of the present.”²⁴ That feeling of happiness and freedom is achieved when the present is liberated from past and future and experience becomes unified in the moment. By many accounts, including that of Georg Lukács, loss of this unity is the tragic fate of a modern world cut off from its ancient happiness.

Often, though, when the current concentration on the present is discussed, the term is used in a more expansive sense to mean something more than the present moment, something like the present year or the general period of time in which we now live. When people are said to care too much about the present, their attention span is sometimes measured in months, not milliseconds. The time frame under discussion might be called the historical present, no matter how much that might seem a contradiction in terms. But the issues raised at this higher and more general level of time, the historical present, are not really much different from those that occur at the level of the experiential present, for the simple reason that the former is usually understood in terms of the latter. Here Osborne follows a common trajectory, taking the “phenomenological present” as a basic structure that the “historical present generalizes and complicates.”²⁵ In fact, normative judgments about the historical present often rely for their authority on assumptions about human nature and its ostensibly inherent ways of processing time. What Paul Ricoeur has called the “living present” is often used as a standard of judgment at all timescales,

despite Ricoeur's own doubt that it can serve as a model for any more general synchronizations of time.²⁶

In any case, the essential unanswered questions are the same whether the present is measured in nanoseconds or years. What is this period in which we must center our experience and our lives? Does it have some necessary length or an optimal duration? If it is distinct in some inevitable way from the past and the future, how does it then come to be connected to them? In the presentation of its second Biennial, the Hammer Museum came up with some fairly terrifying answers to these questions. The website for the Biennial, for instance, featured a calendar in the form of a time-line. On this, the current date was marked by a fine ruled line as "Now," and everything below that line was designated "The Past," while everything above it was "The Future." Helpful sliding links were provided that allowed the time-traveler to "Scroll Up for the Future" and then quickly jump "Back to Now." According to this somewhat satirical device, the present is infinitely small, as fine as a geometric line, but also as long as a day. It is connected to past and future, but also ruled off from them by its very nature as a division in time. "Now" always means the same thing, but also always means something different, as those who tried to go back to the website later found out, when the now of the second Hammer Biennial had become the past.

Arguments about the present may therefore have had good reason to skip the fundamental step in which the term under discussion is defined, for it is not by any means easy to nail it down, and some of the very longest and most sophisticated analyses, including those of Edmund Husserl and Paul Ricoeur, have ended in deep skepticism. The most frequently quoted of all statements on time is also one of the oldest, Saint Augustine's hand-wringing confession that "I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me," and this also turns out to be true of his long, fraught attempt to determine the nature of the present.²⁷ At the far end of history and in the opposite corner in intellectual sophistication is the insight of Mason Evans Jr., who decides after smoking dope at the end of Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*: "It's, like, it's always right now." And yet this simple stoned revelation is really no less mysterious or puzzling than Augustine's long disquisition. Critical commentary on the issues surrounding the present is inevitably hampered by the fact that experts from Augustine on have been far more impressed by the elusiveness of the term than by any of the definitions available.

It is tempting at this point to appeal to the sciences. Unfortunately, post-Newtonian physics has tended to undermine the very notion of a specially

privileged slice of time called the present. Even before Einstein, Henri Poincaré had noted the apparent absurdity that occurs when an observer on Earth registers a burst of light from a distant star that had flamed into being many centuries before. Does it make sense, he wondered, to think of these two events, the birth of the star and the awareness of the observer, as simultaneous?²⁸ Einstein then made it clear that simultaneity, and therefore the present, is relative, so that the present is really a subjective concept, tied to a particular point of view. He once confessed to Rudolf Carnap that “the problem of the Now worried him seriously.”²⁹ In this, he confessed his discomfort at having demolished a concept so fundamental to ordinary common sense. More recent developments in physics, however, have posed even more serious challenges to what seems commonsensical. In the quantum world, according to the physicist John G. Cramer, “the freezing of possibility into reality as the future becomes the present is not a plane at all, but a fractal-like surface that stitches back and forth between past and present, between present and future.”³⁰ A present that is not really present at one point in time but at many, that does not make different points in space simultaneous but rather separates them, hardly deserves the name of present at all.

Even if modern physics has made it harder to rely on the idea of an objective present, it does seem to have left in place the subjective present, at least as the center of experiential time. As far back as Aristotle, the simultaneity of the senses, the fact that we can sense at once that an apple is both red and hard, sweet and fragrant, has been a basic physiological warrant for the integrity of the experiential present. In a way, it is a little too weak to say that the present is the time frame in which this happens, for Aristotle implies that the fact that it happens is our best evidence for the existence of the present itself. The present, in this analysis, is constituted by the synchronizing of our five senses into single experiences.³¹ Aristotle is thus the first to discuss what has become notorious in philosophy and psychology as the “binding problem.” Scientists in many fields would like to know just exactly how milk comes to be both white and sweet simultaneously and without division, though the two kinds of sense data are received by different sensors and carried via different pathways to different parts of the brain. All of this is complicated by the fact that even in the case of purely visual stimulus, different aspects of the input, such as shape and color, are processed at different rates.³²

In fact, the convergence of all this data on a single point in time seems so fantastically difficult that a more parsimonious explanation has occurred to many scientists: it does not happen at all. Thus the editors of a recent collection

of articles on this issue sum up the findings of several of their contributors by saying, “Just as there is no one place where ‘it all comes together,’ there is no one time where cotemporal events are simultaneously represented.”³³ The present, in other words, is not the effect of a basic sensory simultaneity but just an experiential assumption by which we compensate for the essential asynchronicity of our sense data. So much of the phenomenological research on temporal experience depends on the idea that sense data do come to be synchronized that doubts about this basic fact of experience might threaten the whole project. As Ian Phillips puts it, “extant theories of temporal consciousness take the principle of simultaneous awareness as their point of departure. If we discard it, it is unclear why we need a philosophical theory of time consciousness at all.”³⁴ By the same token, if simultaneous awareness is not a basic principle of human consciousness, it is hard to see how to sustain our commonsensical belief in the present as an inevitable subjective state.

The scientific evidence suggests, then, that “the present” is not a physical or physiological datum, to which our explanations and descriptions will become progressively more adequate as our investigations progress, but rather that it is a convention, imposed on a physical and physiological reality that is far more fluid. Kant maintains that the various parts of time, presumably including the present, are not empirical concepts derived from experience. Time itself is the precondition of experience, not something we think about but something we think with. This would explain why it is so hard to think about time, since doing so would be a little like trying to drive a nail with another nail. Therefore, when we try to think about time, Kant says, we inevitably resort to analogies.³⁵ The time-line is his example, and this would also suggest that the points on that line, the various presents it implies, are also analogies. Time is not a line, and it is not composed of points, but the inevitable limitations of empirical thought require that it rely on some such approximation.

Whether time is or is not an a priori condition of experience, Kant’s sense that our thinking about time is inevitably analogical certainly seems to be borne out by the history of philosophy. The whole lifework of Henri Bergson was based on a conviction similar to Kant’s, that whenever we try to think about time, we inevitably end up thinking in terms of space. More recently, the analytic philosopher David Cockburn has lamented the fact that whenever anyone tries to say anything serious about time, they end up “suggesting that it is really, at bottom, something else.”³⁶ As far apart as they are in time and philosophical orientation, Bergson and Cockburn agree that this resort to “something else” is a mistake that prevents us from appreciating time as such.

If modern physics and biology are to be believed, however, there may be no “as such” about it, at least where the present is concerned. The present, that is to say, may just *be* an analogy, a figure by which we focus our understanding on the otherwise amorphous stuff of time.

At least this would help to explain why the history of thinking about the present is so liberally studded with vivid metaphors. One of the most famous of these comes from Husserl, who says there is “a comet’s tail that attaches itself to the perception of the moment.”³⁷ This is a powerfully subtle metaphor, insofar as the comet’s literal tail seems to resemble the visual afterimage of a moving light source. Husserl thus uses the metaphor to argue that experience of the present spreads out in time, incorporating parts of the past and the future. William James’s metaphor for the same phenomenon was the halo or fringe. The present, in other words, is imagined in visual terms, with a “vaguely vanishing backward and forward fringe.”³⁸ James also had a jaunty Western metaphor for the same interdependence of past, present, and future: “a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions into time.”³⁹ This last may be a merely illustrative metaphor, but the comet and the glowing spark are much more, since the visual afterimage, which is itself a physiological phenomenon, serves as an example of a psychological process of retention otherwise buried too deep in the brain for direct inspection.

For the same reason, works of art have always had a privileged role in discussions of the present. This tradition starts with Augustine, when he puzzles over the psalm “Deus Creator omnium.” Though he understands that some of the syllables of the psalm are long and some are short, he cannot fully understand how he can compare them if only one syllable can ever occur at any one time.⁴⁰ Thus the psalm exemplifies one of the basic problems posed by the very notion of the present: if moments come to us one by one, then how do we understand as wholes such things as musical phrases or sentences? Surely we feel that we sense these things *as wholes*, though they must inevitably stretch well beyond the bounds of any particular present. More recently, this issue is explored by means of an analogy between temporal consciousness and film. Cinema, according to Hollis Frampton, embodies “a philosophical fiction . . . that it is possible to view the indivisible flow of time as if it were composed of an infinite succession of discrete and perfectly static instants.” As such, it mimics the “kineses and stases . . . of consciousness,” the moment of perception, distinct from those around it and the larger arc of time always implied by such moments.⁴¹ The fact that we see in film a whole arc of motion as a unit,

despite the fact that it is actually nothing more than a series of individual still frames, serves as a powerful argument for the notion that consciousness does something similar with actual experience.

As Frampton says, though, this is a philosophical fiction, akin to metaphors like Augustine's psalm, Husserl's comet, or James's glowworm spark. As solutions to the puzzles of the present, though, they bear a heavy responsibility, for they may, in fact, exacerbate the very problems they were supposed to solve. These figures are supposed to resolve the basic conundrums of the present: how long is it; how can it be connected to the parts of time around it? Thus they tend to start with the assumption that the present must *be* connected because it is inherently solitary and separate. But if modern physics is correct, there is no real "now" in objective reality, and if current neural science is on the right track, then there may not be any reason to believe in a subjective present. Thus the very arguments that are meant to resolve these issues may keep them in play by offering new and more elaborate metaphors for something that is itself already a metaphor.

Some of the most basic assumptions that underpin current concern about the present—that it is too long or too short; that it must or should be connected to other discrete times around it—are therefore functions of a long history of metaphorical thinking about the nature of time. To find a way through these debates, then, it would first be necessary, before any empirical investigation, to understand the analogies on which the arguments have been modeled. The time-line so fundamental to pre-relativistic science, the three-part experiential present, and the historical period in which disparate events are felt to be simultaneous are all metaphorical structures that have determined what can be thought when the present is under consideration. The arts in particular must play a very important role, since thinkers so frequently call on songs, photographs, or other pictures to guide them through the present. Understanding the frameworks offered or imposed by these models is a first step toward judging where we really stand in relation to the time zone called the present.

Such an understanding would have implications well beyond the problem of "presentism" in art history or even in contemporary society at large. For example, the question of human identity has always depended on the extent to which human experience seems to be continuous. From Augustine on, this issue has been most consistently raised in discussions of memory. Without memory to link disparate experiences together, he is one of the first to argue, there would be no self-consciousness, and therefore mind and memory "are

one and the same.”⁴² British empiricism, continental phenomenology, and contemporary analytic philosophy have largely agreed.⁴³ But it is fairly easy to see that the continuity of human experience depends primarily on the present, on the question that is frequently raised about the way in which we manage to perceive an extended sequence of moments as a single whole. How could we hope to understand the way in which a whole life is unified if we cannot understand the way in which a few moments come to be perceived as one? Whether this process involves memory or not, and what the implications are if it does, are among the most basic questions addressed by theorists of the present.

By the same token, the common post-structuralist argument against identity, based on the idea that the self is never coincident with itself, begins with a dispute about the present. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it, “a thickness of duration already intervenes between myself who has just had this thought and myself who thinks that I have just had this thought, and I can always doubt whether that thought, which has already gone by, was really as I currently see it.”⁴⁴ If experience is always spaced out in this way, then the self is continuously invaded by something else, and the sense of identity is nothing more than a salve against dispersal and confusion. Jacques Derrida based his career as an influential critic and philosopher on a similar conviction, phrased first as a critique of what he saw as Husserl’s residual dependence on a punctual concept of the now. Resisting this version of the present is the first step for Derrida in questioning the crucial myth of the self-identical and with it the rest of western metaphysics: “We cannot raise suspicion about it [the now] without beginning to enucleate consciousness itself from an elsewhere of philosophy which takes away from discourse all possible security and every possible foundation.”⁴⁵ Thus the twin notions of difference and deferral that were to be so influential in the last decades of the 20th century had their own beginnings, insofar as origin can be found for a refutation of the origin, in a philosophical and phenomenological argument about the present.

Because the present often seems so private, there wherever and whenever we are, as all else changes around us, it has a difficult involvement in theories of the social. Belief in what Robin Le Poidevin calls “the essential egocentricity of time” has run deep in the English tradition especially, where the fundamental presence of tenses in language seems to evince a basic human predilection for marking all time in relation to one solitary moment of it.⁴⁶ Fashioning some means of escape from the confines of egocentric time is therefore a major preoccupation of a large part of the contemporary literature on the problem of the present. For some philosophers in the continental tradition, though,

the fundamental noncoincidence of the present with itself forms the basis of the relation with others. If, as Emmanuel Levinas puts it, the present is “a rip in the infinite beginningless and endless fabric of existing,” then it is also, by definition, “departure from the self.”⁴⁷ Displacing and expanding the present is therefore an essential part of Levinas’s attempt to show that “time is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but that it is the very relationship of the subject with the Other.”⁴⁸ Levinas’s ideas have such resonance because they confront a long tradition of empiricist philosophy in which the isolated moment and the isolated consciousness mutually define one another.

Some of the most fundamental ideas in aesthetic theory also depend on assumptions about the present. Well before G. E. Lessing made it formulaic in his essay on the *Laocoön*, the distinction between time arts, such as literature and music, and space arts, such as painting and sculpture, depended on the commonplace idea that any visual representation is confined to an instant. As E. H. Gombrich explained in a classic article first published in 1964, this meant that the entire set of options for understanding the present was rehearsed again within the context of aesthetic theory. Enlightenment art theorists such as James Harris and Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, insisted that painting always had to work within the experiential limit of a punctual instant, so that the clever painter had to exert all his talents to pack as much implication as possible into that unaccommodating sliver of time. But the conviction that, as Gombrich paraphrases it, “static signs . . . can only represent static moments”⁴⁹ leads not just to the endless frustration of painters, but also to logical and experiential absurdities. “As soon as we assume that there is a fraction of time in which there is no movement, movement as such becomes inexplicable.”⁵⁰ This is just another way of registering one of the oldest objections to the mathematical instant, that time sliced into segments that contain no time has lost all its temporal qualities. In fact, Gombrich implies that photography originally came into being because of artistic frustration with the confines of the present, though of course the camera was, in the beginning, even more temporally confined than the eye. Whatever its merits as technological history, Gombrich’s essay makes it clear that the representability of the present is a crucial issue for the traditional arts and their successors.

What is certain, in any case, is that the problems in defining the present are implicated in a great many other puzzles that preoccupy contemporary philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, history, and aesthetic theory. Thus it is necessary, in approaching the present, to take a very broad approach, including as many of the relevant disciplines as possible. The following chapters

therefore touch on philosophy, historiography, the history of science, physiological psychology, aesthetics, narratology, film history, and film theory. There are bound to be gaps and thin spots in a survey so broad, but it is also possible that the interdisciplinary approach will yield results that could not have been achieved otherwise. In any case, one of the central ideas to emerge from this analysis is that theories of the present in science and philosophy have often relied on figurative models rather than empirical facts, so that to ignore the way the present has been imagined in art and literature would leave the story partial and incomplete.

The chapters to follow are grouped in two parts. The first of these considers models of the present as such, arranged by size. Thus the analysis starts in the first chapter with the very basic idea that the present is a point in time. One of the more influential and ubiquitous of all the models of the present, the point seems both intellectually inevitable and deeply counterintuitive. Attempts to define and explain the point-like present thus bring into the finest focus some of the most nagging questions about the present in general. Is it a part of time or a division in time? If it is a part, how much time does it contain? If it is a division, then how can it contain anything, even consciousness? The answers to these questions are surprisingly varied, and their differences are historically significant, since the point occupied by the present expands dramatically in the modern period, but without ceasing to be a point.

The notion that the present might be but a point was vigorously rejected by psychologists and phenomenologists, once these disciplines began to cohere in the 19th century, on the grounds that a dimensionless instant could not accommodate what we think of as temporal experience. The second chapter considers their alternative, which might be called the experiential present, an exceedingly brief stretch of time that coheres within itself while also constantly serving as a bridge between past and future. This version of the present is assumed to be an empirical fact and not just an intellectual idealization, like the point. But scientific attempts to determine the extent of this present ran into difficulties that were both practical and theoretical. Being able to measure it by way of scientific instrumentation seemed to substantiate its existence, and yet the measurements were distressingly variable, and there were serious questions about what exactly was being measured. All of this mattered because the present has always been placed at the center of consciousness in more ways than one. The coherence of different sensations in a particular moment has been the primary instance of the coherence of consciousness in general. To find this center of coherence, at least in temporal terms, was to find the mind

itself, and by the same token, to bring the existence of the experiential present under suspicion was to cast doubt on the mind, at least in its role as general superintendent of sensation. The stakes are thus quite high in the researches that culminate in the theories of James and Husserl, though the explicit issue may only be the exact length of the present.

For many, though, the term *present* means something much longer than the eye-blink or the moment of reaction time, something like the contemporary period, the time zone in which we live. This temporal unit, which is sometimes called the historical present, is the subject of the third chapter. This version of the present is not only the longest but also the most purely normative. The very term implies that a certain version of the present, one including past and future in a historical configuration, has been a historical constant. Though this is also the norm on which so many criticisms of the contemporary present have been based, the actual evidence for it seems to be quite slim. In fact, a look at the history of timekeeping and calendars suggests that the ability of a society of any size to synchronize itself around a common time is a quite recent accomplishment. Perhaps, then, it is not so much changes in the present that provoke contemporary critics but the present itself, which may not be a primordial fact of human existence but a relatively recent development, the precondition for and also one of the self-reinforcing effects of a highly organized society.

If the theoretical basis and empirical evidence for these versions of the present—ideal, experiential, and social—is so questionable, then how has it become solidly lodged in our ideas about time? If the present is more a metaphor than a cosmological or experiential fact, then perhaps the answer is to be found in the arts. That, at any rate, is the starting point for the second part of this study, which is devoted to the role of the present in aesthetic theory and practice. The fourth chapter therefore starts with the idea that the present is actually to be found in pictures, or at least in the language conventionally applied to pictures of a certain kind. History painting, in particular, poses the problem of the present in graphic terms. How to tell a story within the temporal limits of a visual artform? The conventional answer to this question, that moments have in them references to before and after, was put under severe pressure by the invention of photography, especially instantaneous photography, which showed a great many moments that had no such references, that seemed illegible in their brevity. In any case, history painting is not to be thought of as the whole of painting, a more expansive examination of which will show the presence of presents that systematically violate the temporal standards of beauty set up by neoclassical aesthetic theory.

The questions raised by history painting, though, also recur in narrative theory, which is the subject of the fifth chapter. The present is both necessary to narrative, as the causal link between past and future, but also inimical to it, as the stillness that drags narrative to a halt. Thus the present has always been an irritant to narrative theory, and the present tense has been relegated to very specialized duties in narrative itself. Narrative also plays an important role in normative discussions outside literary criticism, since so many disciplines seem to think of human beings as necessarily narrative creatures. But the evidence for this, too, seems to be quite thin, and the testimony of at least some philosophers and linguists suggests that the tenses themselves are *ex post facto* constructions and not basic facts of human experience. Contemporary fiction written in the present thus poses a very complicated threat to narrative. By collapsing the apparently necessary difference between the time of the story and the time of its narration, such fiction exposes the inherently fictive nature of the temporal distinctions on which most narrative theory has been based.

The same issues can be looked at from the other side, as it were, in the case of film narrative, since film advertised itself from the first as taking place in the present. The sixth chapter takes up this claim and considers it in relation to still photography. But it also examines the tension that arises when the power of film to place its audience in the present is modified by the imposition of narrative constructions of the kind pioneered by D. W. Griffith. How is the simple now that Griffith celebrated as the particular tense of film modified when he starts to cut back and forth between different phases of the same action? The practice of cutting between parallel actions seems to send the film on a zig-zag course through time, and the convention that successive actions are to be understood as happening simultaneously sets up an odd form of the present that can stretch and double back on itself. Finally, in films like *Intolerance*, the question of the present is raised in almost cosmic terms, as the film places before its audience a simultaneity that crosses over thousands of years. For Griffith, the basis of this simultaneity is religious, while for Christopher Nolan, whose time-traveling films strongly resemble *Intolerance*, the justification for the dislocations in narrative time finally comes down to the scientific theory of relativity, which now provides the intimations of eternity once found in God.

Though conclusions will be drawn throughout the discussion, a conclusion will also follow the six chapters, not a summary of the arguments but rather a kind of inventory of what remains after the dismissal of so much of what has passed for the present. What remains, in fact, does not seem particularly constrained or impoverished. In several of the preceding chapters, contemporary

examples will have suggested that the present as it is now conceived is not shorter or narrower than it has been but rather much larger and more comprehensive. A brilliant example of this tendency in the present is to be found in Richard McGuire's graphic novel *Here*, which is also about now, the temporal counterpart of here. The present that emerges from McGuire's book is so vast and so intriguing in its complexities that it seems quite sufficient, even if it is the only part of time we have.

Taken together, these chapters might be considered an extensive answer to a question posed toward the end of his life by Michel Foucault. Teaching a course at the Collège de France on Kant's "Answering the Question: What Is Enlightenment?," Foucault began with an idiosyncratic take on this famous essay, rereading it as if it were not so much about autonomy as about the present. The "new question" that Kant introduces, Foucault says, "is the question of the present, of the contemporary moment. What is happening today? What is happening now? And what is this 'now' which we all inhabit, and which defines the moment in which I am writing?"⁵¹ Foucault returned to "the question of the present" in an even later analysis of Kant's essay, one that he did not live to deliver. In both of these pieces, he defines modernity as a certain complex relation to the present. But it is also obvious to him that before that relationship can be understood, the present itself must be defined: "What is my present? What is the meaning of this present? And what am I doing when I speak of this present? Such is, it seems to me, the substance of this new interrogation on modernity."⁵²

On one hand, then, Foucault seems to be asking for something like a history of the present, an account of how attitudes toward it have changed over time, and how those attitudes sharpened in some way around the time of Kant. On the other hand, though, he ends his essay by asking for an "ontology of the present, an ontology of ourselves," and he puts this question at the center of "a form of philosophy which, from Hegel to the Frankfurt School by way of Nietzsche and Max Weber, has founded a form of reflection within which I have tried to work."⁵³ As Vincent Descombes points out, it is not at all clear why Foucault insists on calling this project an ontology, when everything he says about it seems historical in nature.⁵⁴ But the difference between the historical and the properly philosophical seems to be marked for Foucault by the necessarily critical nature of the latter. Talking about the present in a merely descriptive way means accepting what people have had to say about it, while a more fundamental account of the present would have to take a step away to some critical distance from existing ideas about it. And this does imply having

some idea of what the present is, as such, apart from any particular opinion about it.

The book to follow is in some sense a history of the present. It aims to survey as much as possible of what has been said and thought about this particular aspect of time. One of the things this history will establish is that the question of the present is a perennial one and not something that European philosophy woke up and discovered one day. This account in itself must tend to have a critical effect, since so many different things have been thought about the present in the course of human history. For all the time we have had to study this subject, which is never unavailable to us, it would seem we should have made more progress. But the analysis to follow also means to be critical in a sharper sense in that it finds most notions of the present to be fundamentally metaphorical. It ends, then, not as an ontology of the present but rather as the opposite. *Now*, it seems, is one of the words that fools us into believing it represents something real. The puzzles that have accumulated around it over the centuries are, therefore, not problems to be resolved but rather signals that the term itself might be dissolved.

At the same time, though, it is hardly possible to ignore so much history, so many generations in which the present has been taken for granted as the very bedrock of experience. Something must be there when we point with the word *now*. And it does turn out that in a number of unconventional ways, writers and artists have established their own practical ontology of the present. As forms of art, painting, narrative fiction, and film have to contend with the question of the present, since they have to represent it in some way. Thus the arts often make it hard to take the present for granted and in so doing establish a critical relation to it. The second part of this book will be an account of how this happens, how the arts necessarily contend with narrow conventions of the present and, in some cases, replace these with their own working definitions of that term. The second part of the book will therefore have a somewhat uncommon relation to the first part, since the arts will not be called upon to illustrate the ideas proposed by science and philosophy but rather to critique them.

The reason for doing all this has been explained quite effectively by Foucault. The questions he ventriloquized in the 1980s—What is happening today? What is happening now?—are even more insistently asked right now, as the issue of the contemporary comes to dominate conversations about art and politics. However, what might seem the necessary next question—What is this “now”?—does not seem to follow. A recent anthology on the problem of the contemporary promises what it calls “a vocabulary of the present,” but

the vocabulary it offers is almost all modifiers.⁵⁵ The present itself is apparently too fundamental to be included in the lexicon. To be sure, the editors of this collection are certainly right to assert that temporality as we now experience it is multiple and even contradictory. Wouldn't it be useful then to square this assertion with the otherwise unexamined notion that there is something called "the present"? All our conversations about the present seem so constrained because they are caught within the straitjacket of the concept itself. Perhaps the only way to step beyond the contemporary as a historical conundrum is to step outside the conceptual boundaries that convention has erected around the now.