Michael North, *What Is the Present?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 209 pp.

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Despite the seemingly straightforward explanatory question that serves as its title, Michael North's new book is not simply an inquiry into what the present is. It is also, more provocatively, a survey of the great number of philosophers, theorists, and literary critics who, in North's view, have gotten the answer wrong. "For all the time we have had to study this subject, which is never unavailable to us," he wryly notes, "it would seem we should have made more progress" (17). *What Is the Present?* thus presents itself both as an addition to the current surge of scholarly interest in the question of the present and as a corrective to the intellectual confusions that North believes continue to cloud the subject. One quite welcome aim of North's informative and rigorous book is to urge us to think harder about what we mean when we talk about the present. Its other, more controversial, aim is to press us to consider seriously the possibility that there might not be anything real there to talk about.

For North, the long history of misbegotten attempts to define the present indicates that the concept may be less an abiding philosophical mystery than a logical mistake. How else to explain, say, the tendency of contemporary critics to complain that the present has somehow gotten both longer and shorter? The reason it has been possible to make such contradictory diagnoses of the present state of the present, North argues, is that there is really no such thing as the present at all. "*Now*, it seems, is one of the words that fools us into believing it represents something real," he writes. "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" (17). It is only once we "step outside the conceptual boundaries" imposed by traditional ways of thinking about the present that we come to the truth of the matter: the present is "fundamentally metaphorical," a set of figures and conventions that we use to pin down the otherwise unrepresentable passage of time (18, 17).

North's effort to dissolve our preconceptions about the present is divided into two parts. The first half of *What Is the Present?* traces the difficulties and logical contradictions that have, since Aristotle, inhered in philosophical attempts to define the present. North identifies three primary ways that philosophers have tried to do so: as a point in time, as a moment of experience, and as a period in history. Each of these traditions of critical thought, North shows with characteristic meticulousness, has been plagued by errors. The problem with the present as point—whether theorized by Aristotle, Augustine, Kierkegaard, or Benjamin—is that this kind of durationless instant is unavoidably

abstract and ideal, and thus ultimately detached from the reality of present time as it is experienced.

Attempts to focus on the experiential dimension of the present were hardly more successful. While thinkers like William James and Edmund Husserl sought to isolate the psychophysiological reality of the present, they failed to grasp what recent research in neurobiology has demonstrated, that the present is "not a datum of experience to be investigated" in its own right (64); it is only a metaphor for the way experiences and perceptions end up contingently grouped together in time. And the problems posed by the experiential present are only compounded when it comes to the experience of the socially or historically shared present. Against what he views as the thin claims of theorists of modernity like Reinhart Koselleck and Peter Osborne, North argues that the problem with the modern present "may not have to do with its being too long or too short, too disconnected from past or future, or with any other quality, but precisely with its lack of qualities" (81). We mistakenly assume that we live in a historically meaningful present, when what we call the present is merely an empty convention handed down to us by modern thought without our "having any particular need or use for it" (82).

The chapter on the historical present did raise some questions for me. One could quibble, for instance, that North roundly dismisses Koselleck only to arrive at a conclusion—that both the historical category of the present and the idea of history as temporally divided into past, present, and future arrived "sometime in the early modern period"—that sounds remarkably similar to Koselleck's (80). The bigger issue is that North's scrupulous analysis sometimes leaves him caught up in minor, even semantic questions (Is it more accurate to say premodern societies lived in a perpetual present or in no present at all? Is the modern present disconnected from or coordinated with past and future? Is the historical present historical in the sense of containing history or historical in the sense that it is now a thing of the past?). These questions aren't clearly connected to the central one of how and why we think of the present as a shared historical period. North's eventual answer—that we imagine the present as a period simply because, for the last century or two, we have been in the meaningless habit of doing so—is not terribly persuasive, nor is his justification for it: "if the contemporary were such a present [i.e. a historically distinctive and definable one], then there wouldn't be so much anxiety about how to characterize it" (84-85). Indeed, there is a better way to explain the persistent anxiety about how to characterize the present, which is more usefully understood as a result of the natural tension between the present and that other hallmark of modern historical thought: periodization. North has written quite brilliantly about periodization before (his 2001 *MLQ* essay "Virtual Histories: The Year as Literary Period" is one of my favorites on the subject), which makes its absence from his consideration of the historical present here all the more surprising. Without thinking about periodization and its

presumed requirement of critical distance, it is hard to explain either why we are anxious about the idea of historicizing the present or why such an idea might nevertheless continue to have some "particular need or use" for us.

The second half of the book turns to the arts in order to show how aesthetic works "have tended to question the assumptions on which the traditional notion of the present has been based" (85). For North, painting and photography are not records of some actual present moment but ways of producing an idea of the present in the first place, while the films of D. W. Griffith and Christopher Nolan use complex cross-cutting across various plot lines to challenge the notion of a single, stable present and replace it with an "eternal present . . . within which all times are simultaneous and equally available" (164). Similarly, although narrative theorists have struggled to explain how the present factors into narrative development, narratively complex novels like those of David Mitchell depict a present that is "the perspective from which we observe the whole of time" (134). Thus, in ways unique to their medium, visual art, fiction, and film all "expos[e] the artificiality of the present" (99).

The dual structure of North's book is ingenious and compelling, and his readings of artworks as doubly enmeshed in the philosophical history of the present and in the history of theories of their particular medium (theories that are, North persuasively shows, no less preoccupied with the present) are genuinely illuminating. At times, he seems closer to suggesting that art not only exposes the illusion of the present but actually articulates a more accurate version of it. This slight adjustment to the book's stated framework raises a few questions since *What Is the Present?* treats art objects and philosophical texts in very different ways (only the latter are relentlessly tested for logical coherence). Overall, though, he advances the eye-opening, potentially field-shifting claim that the difference between the realm of the philosophical and the realm of the aesthetic may be best understood as a difference in what each supposes the present to be: a vexing and elusive reality on one hand; a dense, useful fiction on the other.

There is, finally, the matter of the big question *What Is the Present?* elects not to answer. "Clearly," North admits at the close, "the present is necessary in some way, or it would not have persisted as one of the longest-running puzzles of human thought" (167). What *does* make the present necessary? Why do we persist in trying to explain it? For all the sincere curiosity of his acknowledgment that the present is "necessary in some way," North more often seems frustrated by the irrationality of this necessity; I don't think he is necessarily convinced that we actually do need it. This makes sense: *What Is the Present?* is an erudite, exacting, and unsentimental work of philosophy, so naturally it views the present as primarily a logical and philosophical problem. North thus leaves it to others to consider how the necessity of the present as a habit of thought may not be a

philosophical question at all, but a political one. Less elegant than the title to North's important book, that no-less-important question would be: What is it that we gain by imagining, as we are so obviously if implausibly inclined to do, that we share a time with others?