

INTRODUCTION

In Cecil B. deMille's *The Ten Commandments*, the black actor Woody Strode appears in the credits as the Ethiopian king. The king's presence as a guest in the Egyptian court attests early in the film to an alliance Moses has made, bringing Ethiopia into the Egyptian realm of influence. Much later in the film, on the night that the Angel of Death stalks the first-born of Egypt, Moses' adoptive mother seeks shelter in the home of his Hebrew family, where Moses and his relatives have gathered for a proto-Passover seder. She also asks shelter for her four black bearers, the first of whom, prominently shown on the big VistaVision screen, is also played by Woody Strode in an uncredited appearance. Strode, in an interview years later, said that deMille gave him the second role because deMille liked him, but he also cautioned Strode not to tell anyone "that I gave you two roles." Clearly, deMille believed that the dual roles would go unnoticed. For deMille, in other words, Strode's visibility as a performer was subordinate to his invisibility as a black.

Another anecdote about *The Ten Commandments* provides a contrast to this one. During the production, when star Charlton Heston's wife became pregnant, deMille decided that if the child was a boy, it could play the role of the infant Moses. When Heston's wife did deliver a boy, deMille sent her a telegram that said, "Congratulations. He's got the part." For deMille, in other words, the gender of the swaddled infant was far more visible than the face of the adult black actor. This hierarchy of visibility could be written off as one of deMille's eccentricities, were it not true that deMille was a master at gauging American taste, and that *The Ten Commandments* was his coup de grace. In this light, these anecdotes suggest some informing narratives through which deMille and significant portions of his American audience

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read performances in the public, private, social, and political arenas, during the 1950s.

By the 1960s, many readers and writers had begun to interpret the social text in terms of new narratives, narratives they received from fictions like *Catch-22* and, equally, narratives that made possible an audience able to read *Catch-22*. Consider Michael Miller's description of the state of mind of the Berkeley student in 1964:

To many students, there is something ineffectual and a little slippery about the new liberal-bureaucrat with his tools of mediation and compromise. He reminds them too closely of Peter Sellers playing the U.S. President in *Dr. Strangelove*, who tries unsuccessfully to juggle forces in a society gone mad; or of Major Major Major, the squadron commander in *Catch-22*, who signs his daily allotment of papers but leaps out of his office window whenever anyone shows up with a problem.

Furthermore, the more militant students regard modern liberalism as a whole with something less than pleasure. They feel it is somehow implicated, if only by default, in the heritage of nightmares that compose recent history: Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Cold War, McCarthy. They consider liberalism far too cumbersome an instrument for altering evils like the nuclear stalemate, U.S. support for tyrannical rule in foreign lands, the exclusion of the Negro from his fair share of society's rewards. (60)

Miller's summary identifies a cultural topography of the atomic age—virtually an aerial photograph of containment culture—as sites in two fictional narratives, *Dr. Strangelove* and *Catch-22*. A. H. Raskin, writing for the *New York Times Magazine*, described his interview with the leaders of the Free Speech Movement as “a somewhat formless encounter, a blend of a graduate seminar in political science and *Catch-22*. . . . It was an engaging group—lucid in exposition, quick in rebuttal, manifesting no unease at differences in interpretation or emphasis within their own circle” (79).

It is not surprising that Miller and Raskin, in describing aspects of discourse in the mid-1960s, elevate fictions such as *Catch-22* and *Dr. Strangelove* to paradigmatic status, for both Miller and Raskin are marking a breakdown in containment culture. Containment was the name of a privileged American narrative during the cold war. Although technically referring to U.S. foreign policy from 1948 until at least the mid-1960s, it also describes American life in numerous venues and under sundry rubrics during that

period: to the extent that corporate production and biological reproduction, military deployment and industrial technology, televised hearings and filmed teleplays, the cult of domesticity and the fetishizing of domestic security, the arms race and atoms for peace all contributed to the containment of communism, the disparate acts performed in the name of these practices joined the legible agenda of American history as aspects of containment culture.

The story of containment had derived its logic from the rigid major premise that the world was divided into two monolithic camps, one dedicated to promoting the inextricable combination of capitalism, democracy, and (Judeo-Christian) religion, and one seeking to destroy that ideological amalgamation by any means. By the mid-1960s, the problems with the logic of containment—its blindness, its contradictions, and its duplicities—had started to be manifest in a public discourse displaying many traits that would later be associated with “postmodernism.” Those traits included not only the assertion that history depended on fictional representation but also that frames and roles were arbitrary, and that centered meaning and authority was a myth. The discourse was also characterized by a self-referential awareness of historicity and artificiality and a cognizance of the fissure between “history” and “event.”

In personal experience, as it is in culture, the fissure between event and history is broached by narrative. Individuals construct a “self,” according to psychologist Jerome Bruner, out of disparate activity valorized by narratives that turn that activity into what he calls “acts of meaning.” A life devoid of such acts, I think, can be best exemplified by the very advanced Alzheimer sufferer. Without narratives of the role actions perform in time, advanced Alzheimer sufferers lack knowledge of the roles they perform in their own lives. Alzheimer sufferers who cannot retain the actions of their immediate or derivative environment cannot organize the sequences or perceive the patterns that permit events to become recognizable *qua* events. This is the uneventful life taken to its logical limits, “writing degree zero” or escape from the “myth of presence.”

There are a few points that I want to emphasize from this example. The first is that narratives are not the opposite of facts, but rather their source and their condition of possibility. The second is that personal narration is required for any form of historical narrative and also, necessarily, disrupts it. While the more pervasive, cultural narratives are echoed and reiterated—in

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the forms of national narratives, religious dogma, class signifiers, courtship rituals—with a contagion that resembles viral epidemics, personal narration oscillates, situationally, between identification with and alienation from a historical order.

In this regard the American cold war is a particularly useful example of the power of large cultural narratives to unify, codify, and contain—perhaps *intimidate* is the best word—the personal narratives of its population. Supported as it was by the technological mandate (often treated as a theological one) ascribed first to nuclear monopoly and subsequently to nuclear supremacy, cold war America asserted the claim to global authority in a narrative that permeated most aspects of American culture. Because of the United States' unprecedented capacity in the decades following World War II to deploy arms and images, to construct alliances and markets, to dominate global entertainment, capitalize global production, and epitomize global power, containment was perhaps one of the most powerfully deployed national narratives in recorded history.

What differentiates peak cold war America (1946–1964) from contemporary America, in this light, was the general acceptance during the cold war of a relatively small set of narratives by a relatively large portion of the population. It was a period, as many prominent studies indicated, when “conformity” became a positive value in and of itself. The virtue of conformity—to some idea of religion, to “middle-class” values, to distinct gender roles and rigid courtship rituals—became a form of public knowledge through the pervasive performances of and allusions to containment narratives. In the contemporary world, however, Lyotard has shown, the power to produce knowledge exceeds the power to comprehend it. Political power thus resides in containing the resulting surplus, and the name that Lyotard gives to the strategies of containment is *metanarratives*. However, because the scientific status of knowledge in the contemporary world makes impossible the representation of a totality, he argues that metanarratives have lost their authority and hence their strategic efficacy. Denuded in this way, metanarratives become particularly legible as discourses that function to separate “substance” from “waste,” to select events that will be represented as history, and to effect the repetition of privileged narratives.

One of my goals, therefore, will be to describe the selection process of containment culture. My analysis of this process places great importance on the duality—concealed by containment—that is located in attitudes toward

the atomic bomb and the United States' ascent and assent to atomic power. Of particular interest, therefore, is John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. Written less than a year after the dropping of the bomb, the book calls into question not only the ethics and efficacy of the bombing but also the rhetoric of history itself, the relationship of "fact" to verification, and the role of time and space as the creators both of "fact" and of "uncertainty." In the third section of his book, for example, Hersey uses the rhetoric of documentary realism—the indifferent voice of anonymous authority—to recount events retold in the fourth section as part of a letter steeped in the rhetoric of "biased" nationalism. The problem of historical discourse arises when we realize that Hersey's source for the "accurate" reportage in the third section, Mr. Tanimoto, also wrote the "biased" letter in the fourth. Why does Hersey sound more credible than the eyewitness whose account he reports? Why does Hersey include the letter? Whose authority is he discrediting? Tanimoto's? His own? Both?

In the first section of this book, I take a detailed look at the ways in which *Hiroshima's* attempts at containment—manifest in its genre and rhetoric—appropriate the victims' experience as a special, nonfiction form of fiction. This nonfiction novel makes the bombing of Hiroshima knowable through a narrative that validates Christian humanism by privileging the bourgeois sensibility of what has been called the classical style of Hollywood cinema. In so doing, I think, *Hiroshima* raises formal and epistemological questions about the relationship between writing and experience foregrounded in postmodern aesthetics, as it attempts to construct a narrative of atomic warfare legible within the codes of containment culture.

My discussion of *Hiroshima* is framed by a more general examination of the relation between fiction and history manifest in the rhetoric of George Kennan's "containment" essay, which embeds the cold war in a sexual narrative of courtship and rivalry: the Other and the Same, the virile and the impotent, the satisfied and the frustrated. The unspoken source of potency in this narrative, I argue, is atomic power, which is also the source of its incoherence, an incoherence closeted by containment in the same way that sexual and political roles were. In attempts to keep the narrative straight, containment equated containment of communism with containment of atomic secrets, of sexual license, of gender roles, of nuclear energy, and of artistic expression. Read through the fracture between "history" and "event," and in light of the early figurings of the cold war and the Soviets

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on the one hand and the conventions of postmodernism on the other hand, *Hiroshima*, in its failure to contain the implications of its topic, anticipates postmodernism, I believe, by metonymically suggesting characteristics that will be broadly manifest in many aspects of American culture a quarter of a century later. What makes *Hiroshima* so interesting, therefore, is that its attempts to comprehend the bombing in a way that will not substantially undermine the ideological assumptions of the book's American audience requires Hersey to adopt fictional rhetoric. In so doing, he makes the book, on the one hand, an early symptom of problems in the strategies of containment and on the other a subtle but uncanny anticipation of postmodern writing.

From the initial period of America's nuclear supremacy—what Paul Boyer calls “the bomb's early light”—I move to discussions of high cold war culture. Focused primarily on the 1950s and early 1960s, I delineate containment narratives as manifest in such works as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Lady and the Tramp*, *Playboy* magazine, *What's New*, *Pussycat?*, *What's Up*, *Tiger Lily?*, and the early James Bond movies. These works repeat or modify the narrative that unifies the sexual, political, and economic aspects of containment, lodging the cold war in a gendered courtship narrative that is constantly trying to make impossible distinctions between Other and Same, partner and rival, for the purpose of acquiring or excluding, proliferating or containing proliferation.

Against the background of these examples, the third section of the book focuses on the emergence of postmodernism in the early 1960s, when the failures of containment become publicly visible as forms of duplicity. The first of its two chapters deals with JFK's affection for James Bond, who combined sexual and political double agency, and JFK's initial affection for the CIA. The Bay of Pigs fiasco not only ended that romance but laid bare its impossible premises, because—like *Catch-22* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*—the fiasco manifested a national narrative whose singular authority depended on uncontrollable doubling, a gendered narrative whose couplings depended on unstable distinctions, a historical narrative that functioned independently of events, a form of writing that undermined the authority of its referents. The second chapter of the section examines how the Free Speech movement at Berkeley, similarly, laid bare the impossibility of distinguishing free speech from political speech, in the same way

that Derrida demonstrated the impossibility of speech act theory's containing the implications of speech. Finally, by considering the fluid remapping of territoriality manifest in the fictional, political, and philosophical works in this section, I think we can see ways in which they mark the narratives that would reread the Vietnam era in a postnational context.

Moving from the centered discourse of containment to a discussion of marginalized discourse, in the fourth section of the book I focus on the work of two African American writers, John A. Williams and Alice Walker, in such a way as to distinguish it from the mainstream of American post-modern fiction. At stake in this section of the book is, among other things, the importance of avoiding the tacit suggestion that American culture during the cold war—as is sometimes suggested by a 1950s revival mentality—was, for all *significant* purposes, white. Equally to be avoided, I think, is the assumption, tacit or active, that black Americans shared in the burdens and assumptions about power of those who controlled the nation's financial, military, and political discourse. Despite the levels of experimentation, therefore, it is hard to classify specific African American texts as “post-modernist,” because writing from a marginalized position makes it more difficult, and *less desirable*—both epistemologically and politically—to deny the status of hierarchies.

As a coda, I discuss Joan Didion's *Democracy*, a metafictional novel written in 1984 that examines the relationship between literary form and national narrative by constructing an elegy for both, effected by the failure of containment. The novel challenges the work of all narratives—by indicating that they purchase survival at a political price. “We live entirely,” Didion states in *White Album*, “especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the ‘ideas’ with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience” (11). In *Democracy*, the narrator explains that “first looks are widely believed instructive . . . meant to be remembered later, recalled not only by novelists but by survivors of accidents and by witnesses to murders; recalled in fact by anyone at all forced to resort to the narrative method” (31). The authority invested in narrative breaks down the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, a point emphasized by *Democracy's* equation between a novel's necessarily hegemonic use of narrative and American use of the story of “democracy” to extend global hegemony. From the first

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atomic bomb tests to Vietnam, “democracy” has named stories produced under the rubric of containment.

Throughout this book, I trace themes in narratives that have been performed in an array of cultural venues. Against the background of the political and economic history of the twentieth century, I have undertaken to examine some of the ways in which large, multifarious, national policies become part of the cultural agenda of a citizenry. To rephrase that problem, I am suggesting some of the ways tropes performed the ideological task of constructing narratives that allowed a significant portion of the population to link its sense of self—the story of its life—to national history. We know such a process occurred, and I believe that its means was the rampant performance of narratives, in such a variety of sites and forms as to create the illusion that national narratives were knowable and unquestionable realities. In some ways this book could be seen as contributing to a tropology of the American cold war that identifies disparate activities within a common and apparently reciprocal network. If so, then it is important to underscore my belief that a *trope* should not be mistaken for a *cause*. The repetition of tropes, however, facilitates narratives that by virtue of their repetition seem “natural,” like clichés, and, like “common sense,” refer to what everyone “knows” is true.

There is no way, therefore, to escape the anecdotal quality of this book. Of the thousands of films and novels produced between 1945 and 1965, I discuss only a handful. For every privileged political event or trend examined in detail, I ignore countless more: the Bay of Pigs invasion, but not the Cuban missile crisis; the Hollywood HUAC hearings, but not the Kefauver Senate hearings on organized crime; Alger Hiss briefly, but Sherman Adams not at all; Philadelphia, Mississippi, but not Little Rock, Arkansas. Nothing about the integration of professional baseball, Frances Gary Powers, the 1956 Hungarian Revolution; television shows only in passing reference. November 22, 1963, in this book, is a day just like any other day.

These omissions were not simply caused by space constraints, although given my topic I certainly could never escape those. More significantly, from the perspective that situates this book, even infinite space would not provide enough space. History is a cipher for omission, and the process of representation is never one of proportionality but of narrativity. We all offer narratives in the hope that they will be repeated in ways that make

some activity recognizable. One could counter, of course, that a narrative identifying CIA-trained mass murderers in Nicaragua as “freedom fighters” made their performance *unrecognizable*. I would reply that that example of misrecognition is the reason for analyzing cultural narratives, however partial and suggestive the resulting analysis must necessarily be.