

# Zeitgeist Literature

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Accepted: 27 October 2023 / Published online: 30 November 2023

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**Abstract** Zeitgeist Literature is offered here as a term with great potential as a conceptual tool for analyzing literature that responds to the moment in which it was written. Such literature chronicles the social and political life of the current moment, its trends and moods, and the mysterious forces that dictate tastes, manners, feelings, and actions of the collective.

## Zeitgeist-Literatur

**Zusammenfassung** Der Begriff »Zeitgeist-Literatur« wird hier als ein konzeptionelles Werkzeug entwickelt, mit dem diejenige Sorte von Literatur analysiert werden kann, die auf den Moment reagiert. Diese Literatur hält das soziale und politische Leben des gegenwärtigen Augenblicks fest, seine Trends und Stimmungen, sowie die oftmals undurchdringlichen und gar mysteriösen Kräfte, die die Geschmäcker, die Umgangsformen, die Gefühle und die Handlungen von Kollektiven bestimmen.

»I say we had best look our times and lands  
searchingly in the face, like a physician  
diagnosing some deep disease.«

– Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days and Collect*, New York 1995, 210

The widely used but not very helpful category of »contemporary literature« is unsatisfying for reasons we all know. The contemporary, a moving target, always dodges our sweaty-handed, nervous-hearted aiming. We have an impossible time holding

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on to the slickly lubricated present, the one Steve Miller sang about: »Time keeps on slippin', slippin', slippin' into the future.« *The now*, sadly, has already become *the then* by the time you've finished reading the word. To make matters worse, when does the contemporary even begin? Ten years ago? Twenty? We've been spinning our wheels trying to find a convincing answer, but maybe we're pursuing the wrong object. I think we're all after something a bit more specific.

The primary reason one would be concerned with the contemporary as a literary category is because one hopes that the literature of a given era can be a diagnostic tool, offering insight in real time on what is currently happening. Are we really so interested in recently published literature that is technically »contemporary« due to its birthdate but that simply repeats conventions and formulas of the past – a western novel, say, or a contemporary romance novel that recycles old tropes or composts familiar plotlines or character types into something slightly new? Or is the true ambition to identify and scrutinize the our-time literature that does something that, in the future, will have been uniquely *of its time*? If the thing that actually interests us is the work of writers who capture »the moral and aesthetic feeling of their time,«<sup>1</sup> as Baudelaire put it, then the term »contemporary literature« is too imprecise. There is a term better suited for describing such writing: *Zeitgeist Literature*.

*Zeitgeist Literature* makes a pact with the future, promising to deliver a sense of what it was like to have inhabited a particular slice of time. Since the Enlightenment, the urgency to generate knowledge about one's own era has only intensified. This appetite for a full account of the present coincided with the development of fields such as journalism and the social sciences, which try to make sense of events and social patterns in real time. But there is another important way to give an account of the present. Literature, too, can bear witness to things lived and felt in the author's life. This mode of writing prioritizes the *aesthetic* aspects in its process of telling the present, producing both knowledge and art simultaneously. *Zeitgeist Literature* is a form of sociological literature that records not just the trends and novelties of a given age but the collective response to them, the mood produced by this singular constellation of social facts. Its special relation to the real is one of its most remarkable qualities.

In his famous essay »Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast. A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel« (1989), Tom Wolfe made an appeal to other American novelists not to yield »the rude beast, the material, also known as life around us« to the journalists. Instead, he argued, novelists should investigate and document all the goings-on of the social world and fill their pages with them, much as the 19th-century French novelist Émile Zola had done. Zola, who was both a writer of fiction and a journalist, was known for his meticulous note-taking and documentation of the minutiae of the present, a necessary step before the act of writing could begin. Wolfe, an advocate of this kind of documentation and of writers who used the present as the main source of their literary creations, exhorted: »At this weak, pale, tabescent moment in the history of American literature, we need a battalion, a brigade, of Zolas to head out in this wild, bizarre, unpredictable, Hog-stomping Baroque country of

<sup>1</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne, London 1995, 2.



ours and reclaim it as literary property.«<sup>2</sup> The new social novel Wolfe wished for is the most obvious kind of Zeitgeist Literature: It seeks to confiscate certain scenes and moods and social realities and store them for the years ahead as evidence of how it felt to be alive at a certain place and a certain time. In addition to the novel, other literatures have proven themselves more than capable of channeling the Zeitgeist: theater that puts the tumultuous now on the stage, reflecting the audience's world right back at it; poetry that describes current social or political happenings or that channels the mood of the collective; literary non-fiction that takes up themes of contemporary urgency. It might be time to sift through contemporary literature, looking for those books that shine particularly brightly with singular newness and nowness.

The concept of Zeitgeist, which emerged most energetically from a tradition of German (mostly Protestant) thought in the 18th and 19th centuries in response to the tumult of the French Revolution, suggested that an invisible force had the power to exert strong influence on the actions and mood of people in a given era. The ambiguities of the word *Geist*, which can mean spirit, attitude, intellect, mind, and ghost, made it an especially malleable term. Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), one of the first thinkers to engage with the term in a sustained way, defined it thus: »What *spirit* [*Geist*] is, my friend, cannot be described, drawn, painted – but it can be felt, it expresses itself through thoughts, movements, through striving, force, and effect. [...] [*Spirit of the times* means the sum of thoughts, dispositions, strivings, and living forces which express themselves in a particular progression of things with given causes and effects.«<sup>3</sup> In Herder's work and in that of others in his age, the spirit – or, perhaps more fitting, the *ghost* – of the times was sometimes imagined not as a composite picture of the era's »thoughts, dispositions, strivings, and living forces« but rather as an active agent *responsible* for generating these. Herder wondered about the relationship between the people of a given time and the ghost that hovered in their midst. Was the ghost controlling their actions and moods? Or could people – especially certain charismatic leaders like Napoleon, whose later reign was prone to Zeitgeist-oriented readings – bend the spirit of the times to their will? Zeitgeist Literature, I claim, confronts humanity's relation to this ghost, with the question of agency very much at the center of this confrontation. It seeks to understand why humans behave and feel the way they do in a particular era.<sup>4</sup>

Over time, Zeitgeist has lost much of its original meaning. In its widely accepted current use – found often in pop music or literature criticism and fashion, film, and

<sup>2</sup> Tom Wolfe, »Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast. A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel,« *Harper's Magazine* (November 1989), 45–56, here: 55.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, trans. Michael N. Forster, Cambridge 2002.

<sup>4</sup> For hungrier minds, this vulgar simplification can be supplemented by the Zeitgeist entries in the *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm* and the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* and by several useful guides: Michael Gamper and Peter Schnyder (Eds.), *Kollektive Gespenster: die Masse, der Zeitgeist und andere unfassbare Körper*, Freiburg im Breisgau 2006, Theo Jung, »The Politics of Time: Zeitgeist in Early Nineteenth-Century Political Discourse,« *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 9/1 (Summer 2014), 24-49, and Maïke Oergel, *Zeitgeist: How Ideas Travel*, Berlin 2019.



product reviews<sup>5</sup> – *Zeitgeist* is simply the characteristic spirit or mood of a particular historical era, reflected in the trends, styles, neologisms, pop culture, and merchandise of the time. In its earlier renderings in philosophical and political writing, the *Zeitgeist* was far more active and enigmatic, an irresistible and disruptive force capable of stirring passions, launching revolutions, and demolishing old ways of life. The more popular uses of the term generally miss this element. Asked to reflect on the *Zeitgeist* of the American 1960s, your mind will likely produce an array of images: hippies, flower power, anti-war protests, civil rights, assassinations, the Cold War, Jimi Hendrix, the space race, Vietnam, LSD, Charles Manson, The Doors. The French 1960s will conjure different pictures: There will be the swirling energies of May 68, there will be decolonization, *yéyé* music, New Wave cinema, an economy in the middle of its *Trente glorieuses* (its thirty glorious years). In each case, the popular understanding of *Zeitgeist* calls upon observers of the now to interpret this medley of events and trends and extrapolate from them the collective mood, prevailing values, and the attitudes unique to the time, but little attention is paid to the unseen wraith modulating everyone's senses and sensibilities in time. There are thus at least two ways of thinking about the *Zeitgeist*: either as an invisible force, a ghostly figure that asserts its will on people of a particular age *or* as the effects of this ghost's efforts, the mood, attitudes, and trends it produces. It is similar to gravity: There is the force of gravity itself, this invisible physical principle, and then there are the objects that fall to the floor when they're dropped, a manifestation of this force. Good *Zeitgeist* writers are attentive to both.

Now back to *Zeitgeist* Literature. Casual mentions of literature and *Zeitgeist* exist in various books and academic articles,<sup>6</sup> but to my knowledge, no one has framed the question quite this way nor engaged with it in a sustained way. In contrast, a rich array of academic and non-academic titles explores the problem of the contemporary. These include analyses of contemporary literature, focusing on the common motifs and formal patterns in recent writing;<sup>7</sup> studies on what »contemporary« means for philosophers and humanities scholars;<sup>8</sup> and books about how contemporary writing has adjusted or should adjust to major upheavals like

<sup>5</sup> For example, in 2017, *Harper's Bazaar* magazine ran an article titled »What Makes a Fashion Trend: The Secret to Capturing the *Zeitgeist*.« <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/fashion/fashion-news/news/a40346/what-makes-a-fashion-trend-the-secret-to-capturing-the-zeitgeist/>.

<sup>6</sup> See Fazel Asadi Amjad, »Representing the *Zeitgeist*. A Foucauldian Reading of Jack Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*.« *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Translation* 3/10 (2020), 148–154, Emma Natasha Octoveria, »Capturing *Zeitgeist* on Cyber Literature. A Case of @NKCTHI on Instagram.« *Poetika* 7/2 (2019), 158–170, Helena Sheehan, »Writing and the »*Zeitgeist*.« Reflections on the Dublin Festival of Literature, 1991.« *Irish University Review* 21/2 (1991), 295–306. The only existing book I've found that puts the two words in relation is *Zeitgeist und Literatur. Gebundenheit und Freiheit der Kunst (Zeitgeist and Literature. The Constraint and Freedom of Art)*, a 1964 book on socialist and capitalist art by the Austrian journalist, politician, and writer Ernst Fischer.

<sup>7</sup> See Lionel Ruffel, *Brouhaha. Worlds of the Contemporary*, Minneapolis 2016 and Lukas Hoffmann, *Postirony. The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers*, Bielefeld 2017.

<sup>8</sup> See Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift. Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*, New York 2017, Paul Rabinow, *Marking Time. On the Anthropology of the Contemporary*, Princeton 2008, Giorgio Agamben, »What Is the Contemporary?«, *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik, Stefan Pedatella, Stanford, CA 2009.

climate change<sup>9</sup> or identity politics.<sup>10</sup> Various book series (such as the *Literature Now* series at Columbia University Press) and scholarly collaborations (such as Yale's *Post45* initiative for specialists of literature written since 1945 or the DFG-Projekt *Schreibweisen der Gegenwart* at Universität Greifswald) have created space for a rich discussion about the timeliest of literatures. But given that contemporary literature has already been so diligently poked, prodded, and autopsied (though the corpse keeps changing with the times), perhaps it is time to turn our attentions toward this other thing – Zeitgeist Literature – which, I think, more accurately describes what really interests us about our-now literature.

Zeitgeist Literature should, directly or obliquely, give an account of the now, of the present during which it was written. Using a variety of techniques, it freezes in time a particular mood or atmosphere. The vocabularies, rhythms, trends, technologies, and human types of an age are important elements, but it is their particular configuration and the connective tissue between them that show an author's talents at portraying the Zeitgeist. Zeitgeist Literature is inherently sociological, seizing upon the spirit not of a single person but of the age and the people who populate it. It is also innately psychosocial in that it describes not only what is going on between individuals at a particular time but also how people feel and think about these social facts.

If I am going to persuade you that this thing I'm calling Zeitgeist Literature really does exist and that it has certain consistent features, I will also need to offer some examples of literature that should *not* wear this designation. Many types of literature – most, I would guess – are not particularly interested in capturing the current Zeitgeist. Given that they have only a tenuous relationship to the real, most fairy tales, fables, fantasy, and horror fall into this category. Included also are other popular genres with fixed thematic or formal conventions that are constraining enough to prevent too much dwelling on the mood and manners of the contemporary moment. These might include westerns (often set in the 19th century and deploying familiar plotlines, character types, and settings), romance (an escapist genre that traffics more in fantasy than in reality), or science fiction and other forms of speculative writing that take more interest in what *could be* than what is. The bulk of historical fiction sets its sights on portraying the Zeitgeist of an earlier period but not the one in which the author lives. There are also certain centripetal genres that turn inward – I have in mind certain kinds of lyric poetry, diaries, or *pensées* – eschewing the social world for the rich inner life of the individual. Writers of such literatures often withdraw from the world and descend into the self, a place of respite from the social frictions

<sup>9</sup> See Martin Puchner, *Literature for a Changing Planet*, Princeton 2022, Heather Houser, *Infowhelm. Environmental Art and Literature in the Age of Data*, New York 2020, Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Chicago, London 2016, and Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction. Environment and Affect*, New York 2014.

<sup>10</sup> See Christopher Chen, *Literature of Race in the Democracy of Goods. Reading Contemporary Black and Asian North American Poetry*, London 2022, Jessica Ortner, *Transcultural Memory and European Identity in Contemporary German-Jewish Migrant Literature*, Rochester 2022, Katarzyna Ostalska, Tomasz Fisiak (Ed.), *The Postworld In-Between Utopia and Dystopia. Intersectional, Feminist, and Non-Binary Approaches in 21st-Century Speculative Literature and Culture*, Abingdon, New York 2021, Sara Upstone, *Rethinking Race and Identity in Contemporary British Fiction*, New York 2017, and Len Platt, Sara Upstone (Ed.), *Postmodern Literature and Race*, New York 2015.



of one's time. Other forms of pedagogical literature – some children's books or young adult fiction – are more preoccupied with delivering veiled lessons about how to behave than with describing the current world and its peculiarities. There is also the allegorical mode or other kinds of writing that privileges the symbolic mode over the mimetic mode. Finally, literary forms that dispense universal truths or bits of wisdom for the ages – so-called wisdom literature, which might take the form of a holy book or a set of aphorisms or proverbs – seek to achieve timelessness rather than timeliness. These types of writing are *not* Zeitgeist Literature.

To give a fuller sense of what Zeitgeist Literature *is*, a few unambiguous examples from various genres should suffice. Let's begin with a straightforward one from Joan Didion's essay »Slouching Toward Bethlehem,« published in a book of the same name in 1968:

The center was not holding. It was a country of bankruptcy notices and public-auction announcements and commonplace reports of casual killings and misplaced children and abandoned homes and vandals who misspelled even the four-letter words they scrawled. It was a country in which families routinely disappeared, trailing bad checks and repossession papers. Adolescents drifted from city to torn city, sloughing off both the past and the future as snakes shed their skin, children who were never taught and would never now learn the games that had held society together. People were missing. Children were missing. Parents were missing. Those left behind filed desultory missing-persons reports, then moved on themselves.

It was not a country in open revolution. It was not a country under enemy siege. It was the United States of America in the cold late spring of 1967, and the market was steady and the G.N.P high and a great many articulate people seemed to have a sense of high social purpose and it might have been a spring of brave hopes and national promise, but it was not, and more and more people had the uneasy apprehension that it was not. All that seemed clear was that at some point we had aborted ourselves and butchered the job, and because nothing else seemed so relevant I decided to go to San Francisco. San Francisco was where the social hemorrhaging was showing up. San Francisco was where the missing children were gathering and calling themselves »hippies.«<sup>11</sup>

Like all Zeitgeist Literature, Didion's excerpt tells the tale of broad swaths of the population. She mentions adolescents, missing people, children, and parents. Even when later in the narrative, she begins to interview individuals about their experiences – the most memorable is perhaps Susan, the five-year-old whose mother regularly feeds her acid and peyote – we can take these individuals as parts of the whole of a larger social phenomenon. Didion isn't just writing about Susan and the chaotic scene of her home life; she's writing about American drug culture of the 60s, about the varieties of irresponsibility and abuse that were at the time seen as special new forms of freedom, about new kinds of rebellion whose tragic repercussions stretch even into our present, about a frayed social fabric that prefigured generations of addiction and dysfunction to follow.

<sup>11</sup> Joan Didion, »Slouching Toward Bethlehem,« *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, New York 1968, 84–85.



This is one of the techniques of Zeitgeist Literature. It often relies on the logic of synecdoche (the part for the whole) or metonymy (an attribute of a thing standing in for the thing itself). This literature uses a certain person or a scene or a trend as a stand-in for a whole community, a set of social practices, or the aggregation of new fashions. Didion's »vandals who misspelled even the four-letter words they scrawled« is shorthand for a failed education system unable to save the faceless legion of unsupervised youths whose empty, powerless gestures of rebellion can only generate pathos.

There is a spirit of passivity to the passage above, not produced by passive grammatical constructions but rather by the overwhelming sense that things are happening to people and they cannot explain why. Statistics and cheery media reports tell them they are thriving, but lived experience tells them otherwise. The spirit of the times is picking them off one by one, victims of the social hemorrhaging. A sense of helplessness in the face of change: This, I think, was essential to the Zeitgeist Didion sought to describe.

This example shows the extent to which Zeitgeist Literature is a literature of intuition. It deals in feelings and hunches and premonitions and impressions and forebodings. These intuitions contradict official accounts: the reassuring market, the high gross national product, bright messages from the generation's sharp minds. Didion writes that »the people had the uneasy apprehension« that this was all wrong, that the world did not match the reassuring landscapes painted by various institutions. The people's intuitions about their present circumstances constitute an important kind of affective truth and are central to the aesthetic of Zeitgeist Literature. Is the truth of an age what the statistics tell us about it or how the people perceive it?

There are two verbs – one in French, one in German – that best capture what a good author of Zeitgeist Literature is able to do. These verbs point toward a special form of detection: The first is the French verb *flairer*, which can mean to pick up a scent or to sense something. *Flairer le danger* means »to sense danger.« The word is often applied to dogs, wolves, or other animals capable of sensing what goes unnoticed by humans. In German, the verb *spüren* can mean to sense, detect, or perceive: *Ich spüre Gefahr* means »I sense danger.« These verbs are good at conveying this special perceptive talent of the Zeitgeist writer, who picks up on subtle patterns in social life. Recall that Giorgio Agamben's very definition of the true contemporary – the person more capable than others of seeing the now – alludes to a special kind of perception: »The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. [...] The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present.«<sup>12</sup> Zeitgeist Literature gravitates toward the darkness of a given age and away from its light.

Zeitgeist Literature also has a strong documentary impulse. It tries to provide evidence for future generations of how the time was, telling what more clinical types of evidence can't get across. It documents the world in a way that the historian might (but in real time), or the way a journalist might (a journalist is a sort of historian of the present), or the way an ethnographer or anthropologist might. Didion's essay

<sup>12</sup> Agamben (note 8), 44.





does precisely that. She is a writer of literature but also an investigative journalist, an ethnographer, a painter of social scenes.

Our second example requires us to fast-forward a few decades and leap from San Francisco to Europe. I came across it as I was doing research for my book *Degenerative Realism. Novel and Nation in 21st-Century France* (2020), about narratives of decline in contemporary French fiction. This single sentence from Michel Houellebecq's novel *The Elementary Particles* (1998) offers a sociopolitical snapshot of France not long before the new millennium: »The train wound its way through Nice's northern suburbs of housing projects full of Arabs, billboards for Minitel sex sites and a sixty percent National Front majority.«<sup>13</sup> In this one tableau, glimpsed quickly from a train window, we have demographic angst, sexual angst, political angst. We also have an implied causal chain. It is not difficult to connect the dots between the high numbers of the National Front, France's far-right party, and two social novelties: the increasingly visible presence of impoverished Muslim immigrants mostly from North Africa (in the French context, this is an obvious connotation of »housing projects full of Arabs«) and loosened sexual ethics – always a threat to the family – signified by the Minitel sex sites. A sixty percent National Front majority shows quite clearly what many people are feeling in response to demographic, sexual, and technological change. They are afraid, and their skittishness translates into reactionary politics. As mentioned above, *Zeitgeist* writers get at their true subject matter metonymically. They deputize a character or group of characters, a setting, or an exchange of words to stand in for larger social sets, milieux, or discourses. Here, the »housing projects full of Arabs« are metonyms for a long, painful history of colonization and immigration. The »billboards for Minitel sex sites« are metonyms for the French state (the Minitel was the state-funded proto-Internet in operation from the early 1980s until 2012 when the service was shut down), the technologization of sex, and the solitude brought about by the disintegration of older traditional forms of courtship and couplehood. Finally, the »sixty percent National Front majority« is a metonym for white anxiety, expressed through reactionary politics. *Zeitgeist* novelists needn't make all of this explicit. Using an iceberg approach, they show only its tip.

Portraying a national mood, however unobjective, is the task Houellebecq has taken on in many of his novels. References to his own context – the names of real French journalists and politicians, television shows, and brands – are commonly mixed in his pages with fictional characters who often express strong opinions about what they see as civilizational decline. His nihilistic vision has not gone unchallenged by those who see his books as little more than the paranoid fantasies of a white man afraid of losing status. But for our purposes, Houellebecq is quite a useful example of *Zeitgeist* Literature, a literature of *feelings*. His books have had enormous success in part because he draws on the feelings of large segments of the population who have (selectively) noticed and been alarmed by certain sociological facts. This is the paradox of *Zeitgeist* Literature: On the one hand, it tries to offer objective evidence

<sup>13</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, trans. Frank Wynne, New York 2000, 207. »Le train traversa la banlieue nord de Nice avec ses HLM d'Arabes, ses affiches de Minitel rose et ses scores de 60% au Front national« (Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires*, Paris 1998, 251).



about what was going on at a particular time and place. On the other hand, what is going on must include people's emotional (and thus non-objective) response to these very goings-on. Naturally, different people will have different emotional responses to the world's complexities. In re-reading Houellebecq's sentence above, one wonders what the scene might have looked like not from the window of the train but from the window of one of the housing projects. The concept of Zeitgeist Literature impels the asking of several difficult questions: Who has the right (or authority) to represent the Zeitgeist? What happens when there are two or more contradictory accounts of the same time-space conjunction? How do certain depictions of the Zeitgeist lose or gain currency over time, as future readers with different tastes and agendas assess them, without the luxury of first-hand knowledge about that particular historical context to use as a gauge of the accuracy of the portrayal? Like the notion of »contemporary literature,« Zeitgeist Literature has its own thorns.

Our most recent example returns us to the United States, to the year 2014. Claudia Rankine's *Citizen. An American Lyric*, which became an instant classic upon its publication, is a multi-genre, lyrical rendering of an atmosphere produced by a range of events – from microaggressions through macroaggressions to murder – whose impact is felt most intensely by one group in particular: Black Americans. The book's sections toggle between modes and moods: the anecdotal, the lyrical, the scholarly, the elegiac, the experimental, the mournful, the angry, the confused, and the resolute. The effect of this multifacetedness is disorientation, mimicking what it is like to be on the receiving end of an irrational, often self-veiling hatred. Depending on who is reading it, Rankine's book offers racial pedagogy (to those who've never been on the receiving end of such slights or injuries) or therapy (by reflecting back painful experiences the reader might, too, have suffered). One of the more powerful aspects of *Citizen* is the atmospherics it builds, not through one single scene but through their accumulation. Here are a few examples of such scenes, the first unfolding at a conference, the second at a bar, and the third at a sandwich shop:

Standing outside the conference room, unseen by the two men waiting for the others to arrive, you hear one say that being around black people is like watching a foreign film without subtitles. Because you will spend the next two hours around the round table that makes conversing easier, you consider waiting a few minutes before entering the room.<sup>14</sup>

You wait at the bar of the restaurant for a friend, and a man, wanting to make conversation, nursing something, takes out his phone to show you a picture of his wife. You say, bridge that she is, that she is beautiful. She is, he says, beautiful and black, like you. (78)

The man at the cash register wants to know if you think your card will work. If this is his routine, he didn't use it on the friend who went before you. As she picks up her bag, she looks to see what you will say. She says nothing. You want her to say something – both as witness and as a friend. She is not you; her silence says so. Because you are watching all this take place even as you participate in it, you say nothing as well. Come over here with me, your

<sup>14</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Citizen. An American Lyric*, Minneapolis 2014, 50.



eyes say. Why on earth would she? The man behind the register returns your card and places the sandwich and Pellegrino in a bag, which you take from the counter. What is wrong with you? This question gets stuck in your dreams. (54)

Among friends or strangers, at sites of work or recreation: In Rankine's book, there is no context in which race doesn't – or might not eventually – play a pernicious role. This, she shows, might be the most insidious part about racism. It has consistently disrupted so many everyday scenes, interactions, and relationships that one begins to anticipate it and to interpret every slight as a racially motivated one. It is a wounding filter, one that forces constant self-doubt and second-guessing, another theme of the book. She writes, »Each moment is like this – before it can be known, categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it has to be experienced, it has to be seen. What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth?« (9). With its physical and psychological violence, racism generates bewilderment, corrupts the lines of communication, and debases social life.

The string of anecdotes Rankine unfurls and the book's many lyrical interludes constitute the *personal* aspect of the story, but she also offers cultural reference points, those front-page horror stories that captured the public's imagination: Rodney King's beating, Hurricane Katrina, the constant racially motivated dehumanization of Serena Williams, and the murders of Trayvon Martin, James Craig Anderson, and countless others. Her focus is not just on the events but on their mediatization. Each took on new meanings as it was processed and circulated across television, print, radio, and the internet. The book also offers other evidentiary exhibits in the form of photographs. Because ours is an age of images (moving and still), one wonders if text alone can truly convey what it is like to live in the now. One must entertain the possibility that literature is no longer a sufficient means by which to capture the Zeitgeist or that it must be enhanced with other media to get at the true experience of the present. A text-only representation risks flattening and thus misrepresenting the early 21st century for future generations.

Rankine's *Citizen* is an ideal example of Zeitgeist Literature because it uses visceral tableaux drawn from personal experience and from well-known headlines to generate a very specific ambience. The testimonial nature of this book is perhaps its most compelling aspect. The many awards and vast acclaim the book received suggest that *Citizen* may be one of those books destined from the moment of its publication to be part of the future canon. The enduring recognition it is likely to enjoy is almost certainly due to its success at capturing a prevalent feeling among so many Americans in the first decades of the 21st century.

There we have it: Three examples from three different genres – essay, novel, multi-genre lyrical experiment – but with one goal: to register something of the author's contemporary moment and its collective mood. It may be obvious by now that I am considering writing a book on Zeitgeist Literature and am using this occasion to think aloud as I puzzle out its properties, snares, and promise before committing to such a big assignment. Part of this process involves thinking like a writer who wants to catch the Zeitgeist on the page. I've been asking myself: Which writerly techniques best capture the present? Why are some genres more

suitable for the task than others? How do Zeitgeist writers of fiction, poetry, theater, or literary non-fiction use the tools unique to those types of literature to portray the present? This book that doesn't exist yet would draw examples from a wide variety of centuries and geographies, exploring the craft of Zeitgeist writing and the unique challenges it poses as a documentary form. I would probably argue that while there is no magical recipe for producing persuasive, enduring Zeitgeist Literature, authors who have done so successfully tend to use a reliable set of techniques, customizing them for their purposes. The book would do a deep dive into these techniques.

Another chapter would need to confess my hesitations, dwelling on those specific literary cases that challenge or complicate the concept of Zeitgeist Literature. For example, what should one do with science fiction set in the future or on another planet that can also be read as a commentary on its author's own time? Or what about historical fiction, set in the past but with clues that the author might be writing obliquely about the present? Are these forms of Zeitgeist Literature? Where do genres like satire (which mocks reality) or the manifesto (which tries to alter it) fit into the paradigm? What about prophetic literature, written in the distant past but which speaks to our own moment? How uniform is the Zeitgeist across varying geographies or social groups at a given moment? If one were to compare the Zeitgeist of Argentina of the 1970s to the Zeitgeist of China in the same period, is the illusion of a spirit that guides the times swiftly dissolved? During the American Civil War, were blacks and whites or people of the North and South under the influence of the same Zeitgeist? Can Zeitgeist Literature be trusted to offer a true and full account of an era? How much can historians rely on the evidence it provides? There are many questions to answer.

Still, as you can see, a lot of mileage can be gotten out of the notion of Zeitgeist Literature. Whether I'll be the one driving the car remains to be seen.

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