
A Past That Never Was and a Future That Never Will Be. Alternate History Science Fiction and World War II

Andrea Rodríguez*
Escuela de Lenguas Modernas
Universidad del Salvador

Imagining what could have been has often concerned narrative. The tendency of speculating with new realities, has increased in the verge or after major historical turning points. In the present work we will look at speculative narrative produced within the realms of science fiction but which also interacts and constructs history. The purpose of this work is to introduce alternate history and its features. We will illustrate such features with Katherine Burdekin's novel *Swastika Night*. Through this text, we will see how speculative fiction can play with the conventions of its own genre. This will allow us in time to reflect on the possible objectives of speculative fiction centered in history and its consequences.

A first step in venturing any conclusions would be defining our object of study. Alternate history science fiction narratives explore divergent timelines that arise as a product of the non-occurrence of certain historical events. In other words, authors hypothesize realities in which specific World History turning points have not taken place. These hypotheses then try to answer the question "what if...?" applying tools that find their roots in history and historiography.

Asking "what if?", however, has not been a prerogative of literature only. Over the years, alternate reality stories have found a plethora of expressions through different artistic means. In the late 1970s, Marvel Comics released *What If?*, a comic book series which presented an alternative universe to that established by the canon. The series imagined answers for questions such as "What if Spider-Man had joined the Fantastic Four?" (Volume 1, Issue 1) and "What if Captain America had been elected president?" (Volume 1, Issue 26), among others. DC Comics had its own take on alternate realities when it released in the year 1998 *JLA: The Nail*, a comic book mini-series in which the Kents, after getting a flat tire, do not make it on time to find baby Kal-El in his Kryptonian spaceship altering then the original formation of the Justice League. In *What If?* the result of the transgression is always catastrophic for the planet while in *JLA: The Nail*, the divergence only delays the events that bring Superman into existence. Also TV shows have explored alternate realities as is the case of *Friends* in its sixth season with the episode "The One That Could Have Been" (2000) in which the characters wonder whether their friendship would have taken place had some things been different in the course of their individual lives. In "Time and Punishment", a segment from *The Simpsons'* Halloween special *Treehouse of Horror V* (1994), Homer travels back and forth in time visiting several realities caused by minor alterations in his own. Perhaps the closest example for an actual alternate history in film is Quentin Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) and its new take on

* Licenciada en Lengua Inglesa por la Universidad del Salvador. Maestranda en Historia en la Universidad Nacional de San Martín. Correo electrónico: rodriguez.andrea@usal.edu.ar
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the events that provoke the known outcome of WWII.

Features and Classification

Whether alternate history is a stylistic resource, a genre or a subgenre is a debate which exceeds the scope of our work. We will consider alternate history though, as part of science fiction supported in the fact that the means of achieving a new outcome for our historical chronology come from such genre (time travelling and parallel universes, for instance). In addition, the novel chosen to illustrate our points, is sci-fi as well.

All alternate histories (AH) will introduce an *alternate time line* (ATL) which will differ from our time line as we know it. To achieve this, it is necessary to have a clear turning point that provokes reality to unfold differently. The event that triggers the divergence receives the name of *Jonbar hinge*.¹ After the Jonbar hinge occurs, our time line is no longer possible and the alternate history per se is then constructed.

Two authors have attempted a classification of alternate history narratives. William

Joseph Collins distinguishes four types: “pure uchronia”, a pure alternate history which exists in isolation; “plural uchronia”, featuring two co-existing realities; “infinite presents”, or parallel worlds; and “time-travel alteration” in which a time traveler provokes the changes (Collins, 1990, p. 85). Karen Hellekson classifies AH in three types: the nexus story, which occurs at the moment of the break;² the true alternate history, occurring after the break of our time line; and the parallel world that for the author implies no Jonbar hinge whatsoever (Hellekson, 2001, p.5). While Collins seems to pay attention to the place and time of the protagonist, and the reader in the case of the pure uchronia, Hellekson focuses on the Jonbar hinge and its place in the narrative.

Out of the features and possible classifications is that another element becomes of utmost importance in AH: the agent through which the actual history of the alternate world is explained. We have decided to name this element the “revealer” and we will expand on its relevance in the following pages.

Alternate History and Wars

Following the end of World War II, alternate history works proliferated out of the need to make sense of a historical process that seemed to have challenged all rational explanations. The 21st century, although lacking of major military conflicts of the importance of WWII, did not witness a decrease in allohistorical fiction. Moreover, past wars are constantly being revisited by science fiction AH with the most popular novels of the genre being those proposing realities after new war outcomes.

Because of its recurrent addressing of armed conflicts as divergence points, AH has been accused of “suffer[ing] from militarism” and of being “right wing” (Duncan, 2003, p.216,217). We consider these arguments debatable as we believe is not so much about a fixation with war but a recognition of an event that affects many and whose effects linger for decades. Catherine Gallagher explains that “wars are believed to be full of unpredictable turning points, meeting the criteria of both contingency and plausibility; wars have long-range and wide-spread ramifications that affect all citizens in the nation, meeting the criterion of self-evident significance; and military histories themselves often stress not only the importance of contingency but also the vastness of the catalogue of alternatives

1. The term comes from the 1938 science fiction series *Legion of Time* by Jack Williamson and has been adopted as a convention. Karen Hellekson, however, will prefer the term *nexus*.

2. An example of this type is Kim Stanley Robinson’s short story “The Lucky Strike” which takes place at the precise moment in which the Enola Gay is about to drop the first atomic bomb over Japan.

used in planning.” (Gallagher, 2007, p. 57), wars themselves involve a great deal of speculation which is the point of AH.

One more consideration is to be made in regards AH and wars. For an alternate history narrative to succeed in its purpose, the reader must be acquainted with the real outcome of a specific event in our timeline so as to be able to spot the divergences in the ATL. Major wars are known by the majority of the public thus permitting the AH narrative to be accessible to more readers. **The revealer and history**

As was introduced in the previous section, a great part of the experience of reading alternate history is discovering how the ATL came to existence. Katherine Singles recognizes that AH “require a specific kind of competency from the reader, who must be able to identify the alternative version of history as alternative and reason about the variance between that alternative and history” (Singles, 2013, p.9). This demands that both author and reader share a code built of historical contexts. While everyone can approach alternate history, not everyone may be able to understand it in full. The more the reader knows about actual history, the more enjoyable the alternate universe created around it will be.

How is the ATL revealed to the reader? In the case of the stories that use the divergence point also as a starting point for the narration (nexus stories in Hellekson), the answer is presented right from the beginning. The events then occur simultaneously to the reader’s engagement with the narrative. In the rest of the AH, where the divergence point is long gone by the time the plot takes flight, the “revealer” is most of the times a text of various origins and genres. At times it is a history book, or “official” documents and even fiction.

In addition, AH conveys a position towards history as a science that is worth looking at. So as literature has experienced different periods with different styles and aesthetics, history has evolved into different schools that propose different methods to reconstruct the past in what is called historiography. Moreover, with the implementation of the “linguistic turn” to history in the late 1960s, the line between history and story is blurred.

Alternate history participates inevitably, one could argue instinctively, in historiography. The AH author constructs history using all sorts of fictional sources that are introduced throughout the narrative. What is included and what is left out and who can become a historical agent are problems of historiography that are also tackled by AH.

Case study

Swastika Night by Katharine Burdekin³ was published in 1937, before WWII came to an end, reason why it is a “retroactive alternate history” that acquires meaning as it is read post Germany’s defeat. This novel can be classified as a “true alternate story” in which a world 700 years after the victory of Germany in WWII is depicted. The Europe of this alternate reality is now called Hitlerdom and it has replaced all religious practice with the cult to an idealized Adolf Hitler now named “God The Thunderer”. Citizens of the German empire meet at Swastika churches to engage in politics turned into dogma.

What is the role of women in this society? Burdekin introduces the question of gender in the fact that women have been reduced to the sole role of breeders. They live in *ghettos* with almost no interaction with men more than in the sexual act reduced to pure utilitarianism. In addition to being excluded for all types of social and political participation, women are deprived of all means of aesthetic embellishment: they are forced to wear rags, to shave their heads and furthermore forced

3. *Swastika Night* was originally published under Burdekin’s pseudonym Murray Constatine.

into subsistence diet with the minimum food needed to carry a pregnancy to term. Women attend church services and this allows men to see their impurity and ugliness further accentuating gender hatred.

One of the most interesting moments in the narrative, is the thorough description of the religious service at one the Swastika churches in which the prayers have a story to tell: "And I believe that when all things are accomplished and the last heathen man is enlisted in his Holy Army, that Adolf Hitler our God will come again in martial glory to the sound of guns and airplanes, to the sound of trumpets and drums" (Burdekin, 1937, p.6). Of these fragment we learn that Hitler has been transformed into a messiah whose return is expected when the infidels are finally defeated. The final lines of the prayer introduce the reader to the overall character of the German society: "And I believe in pride, in courage, in violence, in brutality, in bloodshed, in ruthlessness, and all other soldierly and heroic virtues." (Burdekin, 1937, p.6). The society the author imagines is a militaristic one in which war values have become the rule and in which men are numbed intellectually but trained physically to become perfect Aryan soldiers who will never question the authority. There is an absolute polarization with Germany-Hitlerdom as the villain and a few freethinking individuals who represent the outcast. Of these, the most important subject, and possible agent of historical change, is Alfred, a British young man. With him at the other end of the story, the polarization has been achieved.

Although the aforementioned prayers function as a revealer for the reader to discover the alternate world, the novel contains yet another revealer that also defines the course of the journey of the protagonist. A vast and rudimentary manuscript written by members of an aristocratic German family through different generations is given to Alfred by the last living member of such family. This text contains the truth on Hitler's human nature and women's original beauty as well as accounts of events from the very beginning of the history of civilization itself. The purpose of such a magnificent book is to prevent history from being erased. The mission of our British protagonist will be then to spread historical truth.

A historiographical view on *Swastika Night* will permit us to perceive two attitudes towards historical agency: on the one hand, the manuscript reveals a vision in which the construction of history is in the hands of few important men, coinciding with 19th views and in some points with Leopold von Ranke and the history of great men and great events. On the other hand, however, the role Alfred is given speaks of an awareness of the potential of subjects in subaltern positions to alter the course of history introducing notions of what is known as history from below.

Conclusions

Alternate history has warned at times of the dangers of a passive approach to certain conflicts. It has also included a great deal of social criticism in questioning both gender roles and religious practices. Finally, AH narratives produced after WWII have sought many times to bring some justice to those most damaged by the war.

Moreover, these narratives present themselves as incredibly complex introducing tools from social sciences but also notions from various historiographical schools. It is in alternate history science fiction that the historical imagination is put to the service of fiction to create a world where history and story meet.

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