

# David Anderson: THE 'END OF HISTORY' REVISITED: Christa Wolf's 'Kassandra' and Jeanette Winterson's 'Sexing the Cherry'

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In his article 'The End of History?', originally published in the journal *The National Interest* in Summer 1989, Frances Fukuyama argued that 'the triumph of the West, of the Western *idea*, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systemic alternatives to Western liberalism.' [1] It was in this respect that history had reached its 'end': the course of history in the sense of 'mankind's logical evolution' had arrived at 'the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government' (Fukuyama, p. 4). Despite all the suggestion of apocalypse in its title, Fukuyama's essay is actually quite upbeat. The answer to all our problems *is already here*. And yet, in his final paragraph, he strikes a melancholy note:

The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history. I can feel it in myself, and see in others around me, a powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed. Such nostalgia, in fact, will continue to fuel competition and conflict even in the post-historical world for some time to come. Even though I recognize its inevitability, I have the most ambivalent feelings for the civilization that has been created in Europe since 1945, with its north Atlantic and Asian offshoots. Perhaps this very prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started once again. (Fukuyama, p. 18)

In light of Russia's attack on Ukraine, Fukuyama's extraordinary anticipation of a bland technocratic future seems more premature than ever. His own confession of an emergent nostalgia for history as such, conceived in the face of 'centuries of boredom' – which sounds remarkably akin to the popular narrative of Vladimir Putin's toxic immersion in Russian history across just two years of boredom during the COVID-19 pandemic – might well have been replaced by a new nostalgia for a time when a prognosis like 'The End of History' seemed possible. If the period since 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022 has seen history get 'started once again', the effect on 'art and philosophy' remains to be seen. The rapid reassertion of Cold War narratives has hardly been invigorating for the historical imagination. The idea of the 'iron curtain' being lowered once again has appeared to mean that the story has already been written: we are just re-living it.

A look at some of the historical fiction written in the 1980s might suggest ways out of this potential imaginative impasse, offering up alternative possibilities, or *Gegenwelten*,<sup>[2]</sup> in place of the dispiriting spectacle of history-on-repeat. Fukuyama himself does not mention literature – the ‘ineluctable spread of consumerist Western culture’ he describes is confined to the presence of colour television sets in China, Beethoven in Japanese department stores and rock music ‘enjoyed alike in Prague, Rangoon and Tehran’ (Fukuyama, p. 3). In fact, the historical fiction of the 1980s reveals a space in which the meaning of ‘history’ is still very much contested and where the threat of the ‘end of history’ in its more obvious sense – in the form of nuclear war or climate apocalypse – emerges as a force that speaks powerfully to the anxiety of our present moment. Two evocative novels that have much to tell us in these respects are Christa Wolf’s *Kassandra* and Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry*. Published in 1984 and 1989, these two texts challenged the idea of rational progress and ‘mankind’s logical evolution’ (my emphasis) by raising the prospect of a distinctive feminist poetics – of *écriture féminine* and ‘what it will do’ as Hélène Cixous had put it in her 1975 essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*.<sup>[3]</sup> The *Gegenwelten* they propose suggest ways out of the macho strait jacket of violence, destruction and impending nuclear war.

In 1979, echoing the future-oriented slant of Cixous’s essay, Wolf wrote of her search for a language capable of recording the trauma of her daily experience of surveillance by the Stasi. *Was bleibt*, which was not published until 1991, opens with a meditation on the possibility of a language ‘which, as of yet, is in my ear but not on my tongue’: the language in which ‘I would think back on this day, still new and not yet lived out, in ten or twenty years’ time.’<sup>[4]</sup> In 1984’s *Kassandra*, Wolf retrospectively reconstructs the experience of a character on the cusp of history and myth, a figure both admired and persecuted within her own society. The result is an account of the Trojan War that reads like an allegory of the Cold War, where the false logics of power and heroism, and the fear of ‘loss of face’, offer a parallel to those of endless investment in weapons and the prospect of mutually assured destruction or – as the acronym appropriately has it – MAD.

In her research for *Kassandra*, Wolf drew on the English writer Robert Graves’s 1955 compendium *The Greek Myths*. She seems to have been inspired by Graves’s description of a matriarchal ancient society. At first glance, her ambition to represent Cassandra as she was ‘before anyone wrote about her’ seems to mirror the sentiment of Graves’s great-uncle, the historian Leopold von Ranke, that historical writing should strive to represent the past ‘the way it really was’.<sup>[5]</sup> Yet her recognition of Cassandra as a human, *humane* individual has far more in common with Walter Benjamin’s sixth thesis on the concept of history, where ‘articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it “the way it really was.” It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger’.<sup>[6]</sup>

For Wolf, this ‘moment of danger’ was clear enough. As she put it in the third of her lectures on poetics which she delivered in 1982, ‘the thing the anonymous nuclear planning staffs have in mind for us is unsayable; the language which would reach them seems not to exist’ (Wolf, *Cassandra*, p. 226). In her novel, the narrative itself is figured

as a kind of death sentence. As Cassandra puts it, 'keeping step with the story, I make my way into death' (Wolf, p. 3 – Jan van Heurck's translation of Wolf's more direct 'mit der Erzählung gehe ich in den Tod'). Yet the note of optimism that resonates through the ebb and flow of Cassandra's 'Angst' is based on the possibility of a distinctive women's writing, so that Wolf's restitution of Cassandra, 'one of the first women figures handed down to us whose fate prefigures what was to be the fate of women for three thousand years: to be turned into an object' is grounded in the possibility of a new language, a new tradition, to be passed from mother to daughter, 'so that alongside the river of heroic songs this tiny rivulet, too, may reach those faraway, perhaps happier people who will live in times to come' (Wolf, p. 227, p. 81).

*Kassandra* was published in an English translation by Virago press in 1984. A year later Pandora, another of London's handful of feminist publishing houses, released British author Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. The novel's stylised account of Winterson's childhood as the adopted daughter of an evangelical Christian mother in Lancashire is filled with reflections on time as 'a string full of knots' and the idea that the protagonist's multiple selves 'have not gone forward or back in time, but across in time'. [Z] Although she does not explain the title within the novel, Winterson wrote in a 2014 introduction that it was 'attributed by me to Nell Gwynn, raunchy mistress of Charles 1st, possessor of fabulous breasts, and famously painted as an orange-seller' (Winterson, *Oranges*, p. xi).

Charles would resurface in 1989's *Sexing the Cherry*, where Winterson depicts his trial and execution while also revisiting the idea of time as an illusory construct. The novel is set partly during the English Revolution and partly in a present threatened by nuclear weapons and environmental catastrophe, a time governed by the false logic that the only way 'to eliminate the nuclear threat is by ordering more weapons' and that there is no alternative to the 'endless stream of plastic' being thrown into 'gouged out craters in the countryside.' [8] It blurs the lines between past and present, and even the idea of a linear temporality as such. Its central characters, 'the Dog Woman' and 'Jordan', appear in both the seventeenth century and in the form of twentieth-century analogues, the former appearing to the latter in strange dreamlike visions. The pleasure-denying asceticism of the Puritans in the seventeenth century – all men, in the novel – holds up an unflattering mirror to the present, while the enormous, violent Dog Woman fulfils the role of a Gravesian mother goddess, operating as Cassandra's opposite number. Wolf's idea of narrative as a 'fabric' (Wolf, p. 141) or a 'narrative network' (Wolf, p. 262) is likewise analogous to Winterson's idea of reality and narrative as merely 'empty space and points of light', of positions in time as mere 'coordinates' and of lives running in parallel, erupting across temporal thresholds.

Winterson's preoccupation with the ideas of a 'conspiracy of women' and a 'private language' (Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, p. 29), which emerge in various ways across her text, match up with Cassandra's desire to be heard by 'a young slave' who might pass on her story, as well as with the symbols left by Cassandra and the other women in the 'Gegenwelt' constituted by the caves at Mount Ida: 'We called that immortalizing our

memory, and laughed' (Wolf, p. 133). Winterson's own reference to 'the Greeks' early in *Sexing the Cherry* establishes a similar idea, appearing to allude to Benjamin's sixth thesis as well as to Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa*, with its idea of countering the 'phallogocentric tradition' – according to which 'the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason' – with a 'white ink' (Cixous, p. 164, p. 166). 'They wrote an ordinary letter', Winterson asserts, 'and in between the lines set out another letter, written in milk. The document looked innocent enough until one who knew better sprinkled coal-dust over it. What the letter had been no longer mattered, what mattered was the life flaring up undetected ... till now' (Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*, p. 2). The idea of the 'world turned upside down' – the title of a song from the revolutionary period, and of a 1972 history of it written by Christopher Hill – is reimagined in this text along gender lines, and thus becomes the key to the future.

The self-styled 'Leseland' of the DDR and the condition of literature as 'Weltersatz' guaranteed Wolf's position as a public author.[9] As she put it in an essay from 1968, the author was 'ein wichtiger Mensch', an important person whose role in the social fabric was acknowledged partly by virtue of the extreme level of oversight and censorship organised by the state. *Kassandra* sold half a million copies in the Bundesrepublik within four years. 200,000 copies were sold in the DDR by the fall of the wall. In the UK, Winterson's position in the cultural marketplace was far from guaranteed. For her part, as outlined in the 1995 text entitled *Art Objects*, she asserted that literature must hold its own in the cultural marketplace by offering the reader 'an invitation to believe', satisfying the voyeuristic curiosity of readers who 'like to be in on a secret' and 'can be taken in by someone who offers truth with a wink and says "I'm telling you stories. Trust me."' Winterson's faith in the power of art – and literature as art – is that it will set the static into motion. 'Art objects', she insists, shifting the word 'objects' from what seemed to be a noun into a verb.[10] The movement is the same as that attempted by Wolf, whose interest in *Cassandra* as one of the first female figures 'handed down to us' to have suffered being 'turned into an object' extends, in her third lecture, to men as well. Women's situation is so lamentable partly because they 'are second-degree objects, frequently the objects of men who are objects themselves' (Wolf, p. 259).

Deploying a similar rhetorical technique, Winterson argues for constant innovation in literature: if the novel is not '*novel* [...] then we can only *museum it*' (Winterson, *Art Objects*, p. 176). The transformation of 'museum' from noun to verb marks an opposite movement to that of 'object', involving a freezing of history into a static image, and the negative sense of the 'museum' here has much in common with Fukuyama's despondent vision of 'the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history'. Yet it is precisely by confronting the very real threat of an end to human life, in the sense of nuclear or climate apocalypse, that Wolf and Winterson suggest ways of reinvigorating the historical imagination. Invoking diverse contexts and reading 'between the lines' of the historical record, they illuminate the present 'moment of danger' and reinstate a positive sense of futurity – with a feminist perspective. 'Shouldn't an experiment be made', Wolf asks, 'to see what would happen if the great male heroes of world literature were replaced by women? Achilles, Hercules, Odysseus, Oedipus, Agamemnon, Jesus, King Lear, Faust,

Julien Sorel, Wilhelm Meister' (Wolf, p. 260). *Cassandra* and its accompanying lectures are the working out of that experiment at full scale, and the same might be said of Winterson's ambition in *Sexing the Cherry*.

In the context of Fukuyama's depiction of culture as mere elevator music, it is all the more striking that *Cassandra* and *Sexing the Cherry* aspire to be both art *and* philosophy. At the same time, their connection to high cultural traditions does not preclude the possibility of intervention in the space of the popular. Reading them today – particularly Wolf's depiction of the accretive false logic of war in *Kassandra* – is sometimes an uncanny experience. Three decades after Fukuyama's article, it seems that we find ourselves further than ever from the prospect of a 'nostalgia for the time when history existed' and the replacement of 'risking one's life for an abstract goal' with the 'endless solving of technical problems' – let alone 'centuries of boredom'. And yet the renewed actuality of these texts not only makes them more understandable to us, forging connections through history in just the same way they themselves sought to do – it also shows us how re-imagining the past might help revive the prospect of a liveable future.

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[1] Frances Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989), p. 3.

[2] 'Gegenwelten' is the ZfL's annual theme 2022/2023. The term might be literally translated as 'counter-worlds'. In its current usage it can refer to the confected parallel realities of those who deny the existence of COVID-19 or climate change, but it also encompasses a profounder history of utopian projects, dystopian nightmares and their cultural representation. 'Gegenwelten' may be completely fanciful or, as in the case of many historical utopian or dystopian imaginaries, they may exert an active shaping force on the reality from which they apparently depart.

[3] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975), in Lucy Burke, Tony Crowley and Alan Girvin (eds.), *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 161.

[4] Christa Wolf, 'What Remains', in *What Remains and Other Stories*, trans. Heike Schwarzbauer and Rick Takvorian (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1993), p. 231.

[5] Christa Wolf, *Cassandra: a novel and four essays*, trans. Jan van Heurck (London: Virago, 1984), p. 273.

[6] Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (eds.), *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940*, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, Mass./London: Belknap, 2003), p. 391.

[7] Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (London: Vintage, 2014), p. 119, p. 218, p. 216.

[8] Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (London: Vintage, 2014), p. 141, p. 147.

[9] See Yvonne Delhey, 'Das Leseland DDR und die Autorin Christa Wolf', in Carola Ilmes and Ilse Nagelschmidt (eds.), *Christa Wolf-Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2016), p. 322.

[10] Winterson, *Art Objects: essays on ecstasy and effrontery* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 176.

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